INFORMATION TO USERS

This reproduction was made from a copy of a document sent to us for microfilming. While the most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this document, the quality of the reproduction is heavily dependent upon the quality of the material submitted.

The following explanation of techniques is provided to help clarify markings or notations which may appear on this reproduction.

1. The sign or "target" for pages apparently lacking from the document photographed is "Missing Page(s)". If it was possible to obtain the missing page(s) or section, they are spliced into the film along with adjacent pages. This may have necessitated cutting through an image and duplicating adjacent pages to assure complete continuity.

2. When an image on the film is obliterated with a round black mark, it is an indication of either blurred copy because of movement during exposure, duplicate copy, or copyrighted materials that should not have been filmed. For blurred pages, a good image of the page can be found in the adjacent frame. If copyrighted materials were deleted, a target note will appear listing the pages in the adjacent frame.

3. When a map, drawing or chart, etc., is part of the material being photographed, a definite method of "sectioning" the material has been followed. It is customary to begin filming at the upper left hand corner of a large sheet and to continue from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. If necessary, sectioning is continued again—beginning below the first row and continuing on until complete.

4. For illustrations that cannot be satisfactorily reproduced by xerographic means, photographic prints can be purchased at additional cost and inserted into your xerographic copy. These prints are available upon request from the Dissertations Customer Services Department.

5. Some pages in any document may have indistinct print. In all cases the best available copy has been filmed.

University Microfilms International
300 N. Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48106

8222987

Weisstuch, Mark Wolf

THE THEATRE UNION, 1933 - 1937: A HISTORY

City University of New York PH.D. 1982

University
Microfilms
International 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106

Copyright 1982

by

Weisstuch, Mark Wolf

All Rights Reserved

THE THEATRE UNION, 1933 - 1937:

A HISTORY

by

MARK W. WEISSTUCH

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1982

© COPYRIGHT BY

MARK W. WEISSTUCH

1982

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

4/30/82
date

Stanley G. Ware
Chairman of Examining Committee

April 30, 1982
date

Daniel C. Gerould
Executive Officer

Daniel C. Gerould

Supervisory Committee

The City University of New York

DEDICATED TO

DIANE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people assisted me in the research and writing of this dissertation, too many to name individually. A few though were enormously helpful and deserve recognition. First, I am deeply indebted to my interviewees -- the people who created the Theatre Union. Their candid recollections and observations were an invaluable resource. Also, many of them graciously agreed to lend me important material otherwise unavailable. I am also grateful to Stanley Waren, my Advisor who suggested this subject, and to Vera Roberts and Daniel Gerould who served on my Supervisory Committee. Their suggestions and their sensitivity helped me to refine my thinking and clarify my writing. I would also like to thank Inge Buerger who assisted me with the translations of Brecht and Wolf, and to express my gratitude to my typists Tina Davis, Patsy Wood, and Laurie West without whose dexterity and perseverance this paper would not have been concluded. Finally, I wish to thank my family -- my wife Diane, my children Liza and Joshua, and my parents Victor and Rachela Weisstuch -- for their support, patience, and encouragement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. BACKGROUND AND HISTORY 9

III. ORGANIZING THE THEATRE UNION: PEACE ON EARTH 38

IV. THE FIRST SUCCESS: STEVEDORE 172

V. THE SECOND SEASON: THE SAILORS OF CATTARO AND BLACK PIT 280

VI. THE THIRD SEASON: MOTHER, LET FREEDOM RING, AND BITTER STREAM 401

VII. THE FOURTH SEASON: MARCHING SONG 529

VIII. THE DEMISE OF THE THEATRE UNION: SOME ASSESSMENTS 579

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY 619

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to record and document the work of the Theatre Union, a left-wing, workers' theatre which produced eight full-length plays in New York City during its four year existence. The study will include an examination of the origins of the group, its organization and development, the reasons for its dissolution, and an assessment of its accomplishments and influences. Why and how did the Theatre Union come into being? How did it operate? What artistic and managerial policies did it establish and how were these executed? How was the work received by the public and the press? Why did the Theatre Union come to such an early end? And what did its existence signify? Since the eight plays produced by the Theatre Union are significant examples of didactic drama, the study will also analyze the nature of this species of drama through a critical evaluation of the plays.

The Theatre Union produced its first play, Peace on Earth, on 29 November 1933 and its last play, Marching Song, on 17 February 1937. Its operations, therefore, coincided with a turbulent period in American history. The period was characterized by economic dislocation, political restiveness, and social disorientation. Because of the sustained hardships they engendered, the after-shocks of Black Thursday were far more devastating than the original cataclysm itself. The nation was seized by collective anxiety and pervasive dispair. The theatre's response to these stormy conditions was, at best, weak. Of the 1,540 productions profes-

sionally produced in New York during the decade, a mere 177 significantly alluded to the social and political problems confronting most of the spectators when they left the theatre.[1] The Theatre Union, however, not only consistently presented dramas that dealt with the social issues at hand, but the spirit and mood of the enterprise was imbued with a political fervor unparalleled in the history of professional theatre in America. The Theatre Union was "engaged," in Jean-Paul Sartre's use of the word. Its aim, indeed, its raison d'etre, was to present in theatrical terms the central problems of the day--unemployment and economic exploitation, poverty, racial discrimination, the threat of war, and political corruption. Its mission was threefold: to inform its audience of political, social and economic injustices, to persuade its audience that ameliorative action must be taken, and to help direct and shape such action.

The principal organizers of the Theatre Union were Charles and Adelaide Walker, labor activists involved in amateur theatre; Michael Blankfort, a teacher, actor, and neophyte producer; and three young playwrights, Albert Maltz, George Sklar, and Paul Peters. In 1935 they published a manifesto which contained a clear enunciation of their purpose and working methods:

> 1) We produce plays that deal boldly with the deep-going social conflicts, the economic, emotional and cultural problems that confront the majority of the people. Our plays speak directly to this majority, whose lives usually are caricatured or ignored on the stage. We do not expect that these plays will fall into the accepted social patterns. This is a new kind of professional theatre, based on the interests and hopes of the great mass of working people.
>
> 2) We have established a low price scale so that masses of peo-

---

[1]Sam Smiley, The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972), p. 26.

> ple who have been barred by high prices can attend this theatre. A scale of thirty cents to a dollar and a half (no tax), with more than half the seats priced under a dollar is bringing thousands of people into the theatre who have never seen a professional play, or who have not gone to the theatre for years.
>
> 3) In order to exist we organize our own audience through benefit theatre parties and subscribing members.[1]

This brief statement propounds the three basic tenets of the Theatre Union. It suggests why, whom, and how the new organization intended to operate.

The underlying cause for the inception of the Theatre Union was the dearth of challenging social plays in the professional theatre and the disinclination of commercial producers to present such works. The founders of the Theatre Union believed that there was a vacuum on Broadway. There were no plays produced there which addressed themselves to or spoke for the "one-third of a nation" which was "ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." The Theatre Union intended to fill that vacuum by dedicating itself to the workers of America, the vast majority of the populace which was silent in its suffering, leaderless in its struggles, and frustrated by the indifference of the world. The Theatre Union was resolved to speak to and for the common man, to mirror the real, practical problems that confronted him in his efforts to survive in a laissez faire society. More importantly, the Theatre Union would not merely diagnose the ills of society. "We do not expect that these plays will fall into the accepted social patterns," they proclaimed. In addition to describing present conditions, their program of social consciousness raising involved prescriptions for the future—concrete recommendations, often radical,

---

[1]Margaret Larkin, "Building a Social Theatre: The History of the Theatre Union," p. 2, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, New York.

which they believed would help cure society's diseases. In the young, but brash, tradition of the various workers' theatre groups, the Theatre Union was a theatre of protest, a theatre of outrage and indignation, a theatre which urged reform.

The Theatre Union aimed its message at essentially three groups: first, the workers and the unemployed, the American proletariat; second, progressive liberals and left-wing, non-Communist intellectuals; and third, of course, American Communists. The first group presented a unique problem: how to get those people into the theatre who have customarily shunned the theatre because of the intimidating nature of theatre-going. To overcome this resistance, the Theatre Union formulated and perfected several novel promotional policies. Aside from low admission prices and free tickets for the unemployed, it recruited its audience by sending speakers to labor union meetings, workers' clubs, and political groups to explain what the Theatre Union stood for. Still more important, because it provided an advance guarantee of sold seats, was the benefit theatre party system which the Theatre Union vigorously developed.

The other two groups which composed the remainder of the Theatre Union's audience also posed a singular problem. The Communists would have preferred more aggressively doctrinaire dramas. They often chastised the Theatre Union, sometimes mildly, sometimes severely, for not fully subscribing to the party line. To do so, however, would have meant alienating the non-Communist left. Although frankly Marxist in orientation, the Theatre Union's "united front" policies were sufficiently broad to admit the support of the latter. Therefore, as regards the theatre, Communists, Socialists, liberals, and trade-unionists were united in an uneasy alliance for four years.

The assertion in the manifesto that "This is a new kind of professional theatre" has a dual emphasis. Aside from the newness of the venture's intent, the key word is "professional." Following several by then defunct radical workers' theatre groups, such as the short-lived Workers' Drama League, the dilletantish New Playwrights' Theatre, and the intentionally amateurish, agit-prop Prolet-Buehne, the Theatre Union was determined to survive by mounting productions that would match Broadway's professional standards. They believed that their efficacy as a didactic theatre was in direct proportion to their professional competency; the more polished their productions, the wider would be their appeal. Although operating on a shoestring budget, the Executive Board of the Theatre Union managed to engage many of the leading actors, directors, and designers of the Broadway stage. Furthermore, to strengthen their productions, they hoped to establish a permanent acting company (which they did only in a very limited way) and, modeling themselves on a likewise socially inclined, but decidedly less politically radical Group Theatre, they organized an experimental acting studio to train their actors.

No study fully records the work of the Theatre Union. General histories of American theatre refer to it only in passing and only six books (most of which are recent) discuss it to any extent. Each, however, treats only a particular aspect of the organization which supports the thesis of their work. Of the six, the most thorough account of the Theatre Union is contained in Malcolm Goldstein's comprehensive survey of the theatre of the 1930s, The Political Stage (1974). Morgan Himelstein in Drama was a Weapon (1963) and Gerald Rabkin in Drama and Commitment (1964) each included a chapter on the Theatre Union. The former attempts to demonstrate the Communists' efforts and failure to dominate and control

the leftist theatre of the thirties and the latter investigates the meaning and nature of commitment in the drama and theatre of the same period. Karen Malpede Taylor's People's Theatre in Amerika (1972) examines through critical commentary and the presentation of documentary material the evolution of people's theatre in America from the 1920s to the present. In The Drama of Attack (1972), Sam Smiley trenchantly analyzes four of the dramas produced by the Theatre Union along with thirty-seven other plays from the era of the Great Depression in his attempt to establish the structural principles which govern the construction of didactic drama. Finally, Stage Left (1974) by Jay Williams covers much of the same ground as The Political Stage, but it is punctuated by the author's colorful and illuminating reminiscences of his personal experiences as a participant in the theatre between the wars.

Why do an extensive study of the Theatre Union? The simplest, most spontaneous reply is that the Theatre Union was in the vanguard of the left-wing theatre movement, a movement which although limited in appeal and duration, was substantial enough to influence the drama and theatre which followed. Understanding the Theatre Union helps bring the theatre of the thirties into focus. Quickly, it grew to a pre-eminence which recognized and applauded by the leading contemporary critics of the theatre. Reviewing the Theatre Union's third production, Brooks Atkinson stated:

> By now it must be generally apparent that the Theatre Union, with its policy of labor and social dramas, is not only one of the liveliest organizations in town but one of the most talented. It has a coherent program and theatrical common sense; it has courage and human resources. What it accomplishes from now on will be of genuine importance to people who are interested in the progress of the theatre.[1]

---

[1]Brooks Atkinson, "'Sailors of Cattaro' by the Theatre Union", New York Times, 11 December 1934, p. 28.

More substantive reasons, however, can also be noted which indicate that the Theatre Union merits scrutiny: 1) as the first successful, professional labor theatre, it introduced a new type of audience to the theatre; 2) it produced several noteworthy examples of "proletarian drama"; 3) it demonstrated that didactic or propaganda drama can be effective within a certain context; 4) it was the supplier of good drama to workers' theatres nationwide; 5) it brought professional theatre personnel into the service of the workers' theatre movement; 6) for a time it was a against political, social, and economic injustice; 7) although a commercial failure, it introduced Brecht's concepts of the "epic theatre" to American audiences; and 8) it fostered the development of new playwrights and actors.

Although some elements of critical research will be incorporated, this study is essentially historical and utilizes the methodology and procedures of historical research. The study relies on five types of source materials: 1) the Theatre Union's plays; 2) unpublished letters, press releases, programs, and other documents contained in the special collections of several libraries; 3) personal interviews with members of the Theatre Union; 4) reviews, articles, essays, and interviews published in contemporary newspapers and periodicals; 5) various books and journals which refer to the Theatre Union as well as to drama and theatre between the wars.

The approach of the study is chronological. The second chapter provides the historical context for the Theatre Union, describing the theatrical and social milieu which led to its inception. The third chapter describes the founding of the Theatre Union by examining who its founders were, their purpose in establishing the company, and how the company was organized. To describe the operational methods of the Theatre

pany was organized. To describe the operational methods of the Theatre Union, especially its efforts to develop a workers' audience, this chapter also contains a consideration of the first production. The fourth chapter examines the Theatre Union's activities for the balance of the first season. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven examine the work of the theatre's second, third and fourth seasons, respectively. For each production there is a consideration of how and why the play was selected, an analysis of it, a description of the production and of the artists involved, an assessment of the critical reception received by the play and of the response of the audience. The last chapter concludes with an evaluation of the Theatre Union: the reason for its demise and analysis of its accomplishments.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

To understand how the Theatre Union came into being we must first examine some preconditions. Among these are the American workers' theatre movement; the experience of workers' theatres in Europe, particularly in Soviet Russia and pre-Hitler Germany, and their influence on Americans; the depression of the thirties and the increased social consciousness it brought to many artists; and Broadway's apparent immunity to things political.

The American workers' theatre movement began casually, almost obliquely, in the 1920s. Its chief manifestations were the small, largely unprofessional dramatic groups of the many foreign language workers' organizations in New York and across the country. Germans, Finns, Hungarians, Ukranians, Russians, and Jews who immigrated to the New Land brought with them their own cultural heritage. They had a fondness for the theatre and they put on plays by Ibsen, Gorky, and Shakespeare and other modern classics. The plays were staged with a vigorous amateurishness in a realistic manner.[1]

The first English-language workers' theatre was the Workers' Drama League. This group was organized in New York in 1926 by Ida

---

[1]Ben Blake, The Awakening of the American Theatre, (New York Tomorrow Publishers, 1935), pp. 810; Bernard Reines, "Our Widening Front," Workers Theatre, September-October 1932, p. 3.

Rauh, John Howard Lawson, Jasper Deeter, and Mike Gold. Their purpose was to produce plays concerned, "primarily with the lives and problems of the workers themselves, their hardships, their strikes, their aspirations."[1] Their most noteworthy production, one of only two on record, was Karl Wittfogel's satire The Biggest Boob in the World, translated from the German by Upton Sinclair and adapted by Mike Gold. The Workers' Drama League persisted irregularly until 1928, but its work was clouded by vagueness and differences as to policy and direction.[2]

The League was superseded by the more formidable, though no more coherent, New Playwrights Theatre. This group was founded by five writers: John Howard Lawson, Michael Gold, John Dos Passos, Emjo Basshe, and Francis Faragoh, all of whom had some degree of dramatic and literary repute.[3] Endowed with a magnanimous "loan" from Otto Kahn, the wealthy benefactor of such organizations as the Provincetown Theatre, the Theatre Guild, the Civic Repertory Theatre, and the Metropolitan Opera Company (and a personal friend of Basshe's and Gold's), the New Playwrights began producing in March 1927. In an

---

[1]Blake, Awakening, p. 11.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Lawson had attracted attention with Processional; Gold had three of his one-act plays produced by the Provincetown; Das Passos's play The Garbage Man was done at Harvard (under the title The Moon is a Gong) and he had written several novels; Basshe's play Adam Solitaire had also been done by the Provincetown; and Faragoh translated a Molnar play for the Theatre Guild and had written Pinwheel which was slated for the Neighborhood Playhouse (Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage [New York: Oxford University Press, 1974], pp. 13-14.)

article entitled "The Revolt on Fifty-second Street," the location of their first theatre, Basshe set forth the aims of this company in a language that gives a sense of their spirit:

> We visualize a theatre where the spirit, the movement, the music of this age is carried on, accentuated, amplified, crystalized. A theatre which shocks, terrifies, matches wits with its audience; whose emotion runs parallel with those of the flapper, the tabloids, the steam shovel, the radio, the screeching advertisements, the Candy Kid's escapades . . . In all, a theatre which is as drunken, as barbaric, as clangorous as our age, withal permitting a sense of irony to dull the too sharp edges even when the shades are up.[1]

In other words, the purpose of the New Playwrights was to liberate the theatre from the stale conventions in dramatic form and subject-matter that were fixed by the profit-inspired Broadway theatre. Though not, strictly speaking, a workers' theatre, the proclivities of its founders and the nature of its repertory made the New Playwrights a forerunner of the workers' theatre movement. The company existed for three seasons, producing eight plays. As a rebellious, experimental group they created some critical sensation, but as workers' theatre they were a failure.

The company's opening gambit was Lawson's Loud Speaker, a satirical harlequinade on the American political system. The production, designed by Mordecai Gorelik, borrowed stylistic elements from Russian Constructivism, American jazz, and vaudeville. Subsequent plays continued to treat social issues: the trauma suffered by blacks in America in Gold's Hoboken Blues and Basshe's Earth; the plight of Jewish immigrants in Basshe's Centuries; world imperialism in Lawson's International; the saga of the International Workers of the World in Upton Sinclair's

---

[1] New York Times, 27 February 1927, sec. 7, p. 4.

Singing Jailbirds; the horror for assembly plant workers of the speed-up in Paul and Claire Sifton's The Belt; and the sham of the American success myth in Dos Passos's Airways, Inc.

According to Ben Blake, the coeval chronicler of the workers' theatre movement, the New Playwrights were "the first to show unreserved sympathy for the labor movement." But they failed because they were "vague and blurred in their presentation of living social forces."[1] Others were more severe in criticizing them, insisting that their failure was due to their misguided approach:

> Unfortunately, the New Playwrights were more revolutionary in attacking the theatre of the status quo than the status quo itself, the bourgeois theatre rather than bourgeois society. What they lacked in political and sociological clarity, they made up in theatric devices and novel forms.[2]

Because of their unrealized and bewildered political posture, the New Playwrights failed to receive support from workers' audiences. Blake states that the venture's failure was due mainly to its lack of any "vital conception of an organized audience as an integral part of the theatre."[3] But the problem went deeper than that. The experimentations of the authors and the exotic style of their productions were not conducive to creating a workers' audience. The New Playwrights appealed to the liberal and left of center intelligentsia and to theatrical cognescenti. As John Gassner succinctly put it, the company

---

[1]Blake, Awakening, p. 12.

[2]Michael Blankfort and Nathaniel Buchwald, "Social Trends in Modern Drama," in American Writers' Congress, ed. Henry Hart (New York: International Publishing Co., 1935), p. 131.

[3]Blake, Awakening, p. 12.

"was for the workers but hardly of them."[1] Lawson himself later admitted that the New Playwrights' excessive investigations of new forms diverted the group from "a full realization of the revolution, a correct understanding of the role of the working class." In the late twenties when the "prosperity myth" was at its zenith, he rationalizes, it was natural that discontent should be individualistic, lacking in political clarity and tentative.[2]

The significance of the New Playwrights with regard to the workers' theatre movement is that it was a ground breaker. "I think the New Playwrights Theatre failed," said Dos Passos, ". . . But the fact that it existed makes the next attempt in the same direction that much easier."[3] Ben Blake, in fact, posits a linkage between the New Playwrights and the Theatre Union:

> It was this pioneering work that contributed largely to the conception of the organization that has taken up where they left off, and is today working to carry forward the best traditions of the modern social theatre in the professional field--the Theatre Union.[4]

In a manner of speaking, the Theatre Union was a descendant of the New Playwrights. They owed them a debt because their experience taught the Theatre Union a lesson, albeit a negative one. George Sklar, commenting

---

[1]John Gassner, "The One-Act Play in the Revolutionary Theater," in The One-Act Play Today, ed. William Kozlenko (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938), p. 250.

[2]"Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," New Theatre, 1 June 1934, p.7.

[3]"Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?" New Masses, August 1929, p. 13.

[4]Blake, Awakening, p. 12.

on the relationship of the two groups, notes:

> I think we were influenced, certainly, by the fact that the New Playwrights did exist for the short time it did. We read their plays. But we know that we wanted to avoid what we thought were their faults which were that they were not speaking to an audience with a definite social point of view. They were too random and too disparate in their points of view as individuals. There was no direct linkage, there was an influence, of course. We wanted to do what they didn't do.[1]

The workers' theatre movement gained momentum in 1930 through the work of the Prolet-Buehne and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre. Beginning almost simultaneously and initially working independently, the former in German, the latter in English, these two groups set the tone and style of the early workers' theatres. Their work was a radical departure from that of the New Playwrights. The New Playwrights had been spearheaded by rebellious, discontented, middle-class intellectuals who toyed with needling the status quo and occasionally upset the proverbial applecart. The members of the Prolet-Buehne and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre were no-nonsense revolutionaries intent on political change. At the outset, they were composed of amateur actors who came from the working class and both organizations began as affiliates of workers' groups, the Arbeiterbund and the Workers' International Relief, respectively. Other differences between the New Playwrights and the Prolet-Buehne and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre were that where the New Playwrights was a stationary, professional theatre producing full-length plays, the Prolet-Buehne and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre were mobile

---

[1]Interview with George Sklar, Los Angeles, California, 18 July 1978.

troups of amateurs doing short agit-prop sketches.

Agit-prop, short for Agitation and Propaganda, originated in Soviet Russia during and after the Revolution, though a similar brand of political theatre was developing concurrently in Germany. In form and practice it is the precursor of the guerrilla street theatre of the 1960s. Basically, the agitprop is a combination of the techniques and methods of the medieval cycle plays and the Commedia dell'arte. Like the cycle plays, they are short, crude sketches, relying heavily on symbolic devices to achieve their didactic purpose. Like the Commedia, they are vigorous and aggressive, using chants and slogans and broadly sketched, cartoon-like characters who often speak directly to the audience. Like both, the agit-prop dispensed with elaborate scenery and costumes and brought its performance to the audience rather than having the audience come to it.

In Russia, roving bands of hastily organized players performed agit-prop sketches for workers and peasants at mass meetings, demonstrations, and street corners. The purpose was twofold: the dissemination of information and propaganda and indoctrination--the stimulation of a revolutionary consciousness. The most basic way of spreading information was the "spoken newspaper" in which the news was loudly read to an illiterate audience. Soon this transformed into a "living newspaper," the dramatization of news events. This involved the use of visual aides--diagrams, posters, charts, statistics--and musicalizations--mass chants and songs. It was not uncommon either that after they finished performing, company members would lead political discussions with the

spectators, elaborating on and reinforcing the exhortations of the play. Between 1923 and 1928 one leading exponent of Soviet agit-prop was the Blue Blouses movement, traveling groups of players that combined speech, song, dance, and gymnastics to dramatize news headlines. They took their name from the uniform they wore--a blue worker's blouse and pants.[1]

In Germany, striking workers were given performances of agit-prop sketches by similar groups. In 1919 the Workers' Theatre League was created to foster the growth of amateur proletarian acting groups which presented propaganda sketches at workers' clubs, street corners, union halls, and on picket lines. That same year, Karlheinz Martin, the godfather of Piscator's theatre theories, founded Die Tribuene as a professional working class theatre. He declared his intentions to politicize the theatre in the new theatre's program: "The urgent revolution of the theatre must start with a transformation of the stage. . . . We do not ask an audience, but a community, not a stage but a pulpit."[2] True to his word, he brought his pulpit to the community of workers by sending groups of his actors to perform for workers at

---

[1]Frantisek Deak, "Blue Blouse," The Drama Review 17 (March 1973): 35-46 passim.

[2]Cited by Mordecai Gorelik, New Theatres for Old (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1962), p. 381.

strike meetings. At this time, too, Erwin Piscator directed a group of semi-professionals--the Prolitarisches Theater--which played in beer halls and assembly rooms for workers of the General Workers Union, the Communist Workers Party, and the Syndicalists.[1]

In 1930, at the International Workers' Theatre Union Conference in Moscow, the agit-prop style was officially endorsed and encouraged as the modus operandus for all workers' theatres. Delegates from ten countries participated in evolving the resolution which proclaimed that agit-prop and cabaret theatre were the most effective weapons in the proletariat's propaganda armory, theatre division. In contrast to the realistic stage, these demanded little in resources and training, were versatile, and could be brought directly to the workers. Thus, they were excellent vehicles for leading workers in the class struggle. Tom Thomas, a British correspondent who filed a report on the Congress's findings in the New Masses, noting the absence of American representation in Moscow, queried, "Are there any groups in America who are developing along these lines?"[2]

The answer, of course, was yes. The Prolet-Buehne, founded in 1925 as the dramatic component of the Arbeiterbund, became an independent company in 1928 under the direction of John Bonn and Anne Howe. Bonn, a recent immigrant from Germany, fashioned the Prolet-Buehne in the

---

[1]Erwin Piscator, The Political Theatre, trans. Hugh Rorrison (New York: Avon Books, 1978), pp. 48-52.

[2]"World Congress of Workers' Theatre Groups," New Masses, November 1930, p. 22.

image of the German workers' theatres, some of which he had directed in Berlin and Leipzig. The Prolet-Buehne became an itinerant group playing militant agit-prop pieces composed by its own members. They are described by Ben Blake:

> No theatre housed them. They would turn up at labor meetings, rallies of the unemployed, and the like, give one or two of their agit-prop plays for fifteen or twenty minutes on the stage if there was one, or on the speakers' platform, or even on the floor if there was no platform. This group . . . staged plays and mass recitations with very little scenery and simple symbolical costumes, deliberately calculated for mobility and adaptibility to the environment. The plays themselves, like all the scripts of the early years, were crude in plot and characterization and full of revolutionary labor "cliches." Yet they had a hard-hitting directness of statement that would often strike off flaming sparks of emotion in the beholder. Satirical rhymed verse and powerful rhythmic refrains characterized most of their work.[1]

Two of their most famous early pieces were "Scottsboro" and "Tempo, Tempo!" The first, was a mass chant which began with the performers running through the audience area shouting for attention. The rest was an emotianally evocative choral ode describing the notorious injustice then being perpetrated on the nine Black Scottsboro boys. The second, was a balletic piece contrasting assembly line workers in America and in the Soviet Union.[2]

In the fall of 1930, the Workers' Laboratory Theatre appeared with a program that followed the principles and methods of the Prolet-Buehne. Working separately, this English speaking group, headed by

---

[1]Blake, Awakening, pp. 15-16.

[2]Ibid., pp. 16-17.

Alfred Saxe, Harry Elion, Will Lee, and Jack and Hiam Shapiro, worked on a fraternal, collective basis to present boldly conceived agit-prop pieces for worker audiences. In sketches like "Unemployed" the Workers Laboratory Theatre forged a style of presentation that was frankly primitive and starkly didactic. Characters were boldly splashed out through the use of stock symbols--workers wore open work shirts, capitalists, high silk hats.

Together, these two groups established the characteristics of the agit-prop sketch for American workers' theatre groups: short pieces on definite social and political issues; characters seen as distillations of class types and portrayed as cartoon figures; terse, pungent dialogue delivered in rapid-fire, machine gun fashion; direct address to the audience; mass chants; and a climax that brought the piece to a fervid emotional conclusion.[1]

In April 1931, with the purpose of reporting on the work of workers' theatres and thereby enlarging the scope of the movement, the Workers' Laboratory Theatre began publication of Workers Theatre. This magazine, starting out as a bulletin, was designed to proselytize the tenets of the new movement. It contained articles inspiring workers' theatres to organize along the lines of the intrepid European revolutionary theatres.[2] The example of the Russian and the German

---

[1]Gassner, "One-Act Play," p. 252; Hallie Flanagan, "A Theatre is Born," Theatre Arts Monthly, November 1931, p. 914.

[2]"The 'Red Builder' at Work, A Report From Germany, "Workers Theatre, October 1931, pp. 3a-3b.

workers' theatre movements--the Russian Blue Blouses and the German Red Blouse groups--were often alluded to.[1] There was also abundant advice on how to write, direct, and act radical plays. There were, too, reports on the activities of the myriad workers' groups as well as reviews of socially oriented plays on Broadway. A specialty of the magazine was publishing scripts of newly composed agit-prop pieces.[2]

One of the most important functions of Workers Theatre was to serve as the forum for working out the basic principles of the new theatre's program. There was no disagreement on the purpose of workers' theatre. The theater was a weapon to be used in the class struggle. Its funcion was to awaken the masses to an awareness of the widening social schism and to mobilize them for the upcoming battle for superiority. Albert Prentis, the editor of Workers Theatre, announced,

> That it may be at its maximum usefulness, a workers theatre must be based upon three principles. First, it must awaken to class consciousness leading to organization; second, it must go to the masses rather than wait for the masses to come to it; third, it must have a mass appeal.[3]

---

[1]S. Roberts, "Consolidation of the English-speaking Theatre Movement," Workers Theatre, June 1931, p. 2.

[2]For a more extended examination of the role of Workers Theatre in developing the Workers' Theatre movement see Felicia N. Liss Frank, "The Magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film As Documents of the American Left-Wing Theatre Movement of the Nineteen-Thirties," (Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, 1976).

[3]"Basic Principles," Workers' Theatre, May 1931, p. 1.

Theatre, in other words, was to be judged not by the theories of conventional theatre, but by its degree of revolutionary effectiveness.

There was considerable disagreement, though, on the methods to be used. The chief debate revolved around the issue of the relationship of the workers' theatre to the bourgeois theatre it intended to supplant. The question was whether the workers' theatre should allow any influence from the heritage and conventions of the bourgeois theatre. John Bonn advocated wiping the slate clean and starting afresh. There was a fundamental difference he said, in orientation between the two theatres: "Workers' theatre (as a matter of propaganda) approaches the masses of exploited proletarians. Bourgeois theatre (as a matter of business) approaches the few rich." Therefore the workers' theatre would have nothing to gain from studying the bourgeois theatre: "We cannot learn from the bourgeois theatre. We have to build up the workers' theatre from the bottom. Learning from experience and self-criticism."[1] The feeling was that the bourgeois theatre was a decadent wasteland which ought to be ignored. Not only did it have nothing to offer workers' theatre, but borrowing elements from if might contaminate the purity and virility of the new movement.

Nathaniel Buchwald was the leading proponent of the dissenting voices in this debate. He asserted that to ignore the bourgeois theatre and to focus exclusively on agit-prop theatre "makes a virtue of primitivism." Not only was this wrong aesthetically it was impolitic

---

[1]John Bonn, "Workers' Theatre," Workers Theatre, August 1931 p. 1.

and dangerous from a revolutionary standpoint. He urged that the bourgeois theatre be viewed not as art on a pedestal, but as an effective medium of bourgeois propaganda which seeks to imbue the masses with the standards of the ruling class. "In every struggle," he observes, "it is the first step in wisdom to learn all about the enemy and to adopt his superior methods of combat." Therefore, Buchwald concludes, "I think we must do the very opposite; examine the bourgeois theatre very closely, learn the methods it employs in its propaganda, learn and--as far as possible--adopt the technique it uses to make its propaganda effective."[1]

It is interesting to note, because it suggests the scope of the movement and the cross fertilization between the arts at that time, that the very same controversy was raging amongst proletarian writers. In July 1930, a debate was scheduled to focus on the question "Can We Learn Anything From the Bourgeois Artist?" Joshua Kunitz, presenting the opinion of the Partisan Review, took the following position: "Are we forever doomed to relish the flat, grey stuff dished out to us by so many of our writers. We must learn from the bourgeoisie just as the bourgeoisie had once learned from the aristocracy." Michael Gold, espousing the view advanced by the New Masses, disagreed: "Nothing but academic banalism. There is no 'style'--there is only clarity, force, truth in writing. If a man has something new to say, as all proletarian writers have, he will learn to say it clearly in

---

[1]"Narrowing the Field of the Workers' Theatre," Workers Theatre, October 1931, pp. 6-9.

time, if he writes long enough."[1]

Eventually, Bonn realized the validity of Buchwald's argument and recanted his former rigid attitude toward the bourgeois theatre.[2] There were still other questions, not as hotly debated as this one, that were addressed from time to time in the pages of Workers Theatre. Among them were the following: Should the workers' theatre be composed of mobile troupes (going to the workers) or stationary troupes (inviting the workers to it)? Should symbolic agit-prop plays be used exclusively or could realistic plays become part of the repertory? Should plays be full-length or one-act? Should scenery, costumes, and makeup be used?[3]

Questions of this sort were considered in April 1932 at the first National Workers' Theatre Festival and Conference in New York. Twelve theatre groups, coming from as far as west as Chicago, participated and fifty-three other groups from across the country sent delegations.[4] This was not the first attempt at coordinating the activities of workers' theatres. A Workers' Dramatic Council had been organized in 1929, composed largely of foreign language groups. A Workers' Cultural Conference organized by the Prolet-Buehne had been held on

---

[1]Cited by Walter Rideout, The Radical Novel in the United States: 1900-1954 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), p. 229.

[2]John Bonn, "Dram Buro Report," Workers Theatre, May 1923, p.8.

[3]Ibid,. pp. 7-10.

[4]Blake, Awakening, p. 25.

14 June 1931.[1] From it grew the Dram Buro, an agency which periodically reported the activities of workers' theatres in the New York metropolitan area in the pages of Workers Theatre.

The 1932 conference was the most significant. Its purpose was to establish a central organization which would coordinate the work of the new movement. Its chief accomplishment was the creation of the League of Workers' Theatres. It voted, too, to affiliate this national body with the International Workers' Dramatic Union. The tasks of the new organization were concisely promulgated in two sections of its charter:

> 2. The aim of the organization is to make the workers theatre movement an efficient cultural weapon for the toiling masses in the class struggle.
>
> 3. In order to reach this aim the organization has to perform the following tasks:
>
> a) To support and to improve the work of the existing workers theatre groups by giving organizational, artistic and political assistance and guidance such as repertory service
>
> exchange of ideas, forces, materials
> political information
> training of forces
> theoretical clarification
>
> b) To coordinate the work of the existing groups on all occasions where joint activities are necessary
>
> c) To spread the idea of the workers' theatre
>
> by making the workers conscious of the importance and possibilities of the workers' theatres
> by exposing the class character of the bourgeois theater
>
> d) To develop new groups where and when it is necessary
>
> e) To establish contracts with all sympathetic elements in the bourgeois theatre and to make it possible for them to participate in the workers' theatre movement.[2]

---

[1] John Bonn, "Situations and Tasks of the Workers' Theatre in the U.S.A.," Workers Theatre, June-July 1932, p. 8.

[2] "Constitution of the League of Workers' Theatres of the U.S.A.," Workers Theatre, May 1932, p. 14.

Thus the League was created to maintain and propagate the notion of the theatre as a weapon. It assumed the editorship of Workers Theatre and in September 1933 changed the magazine's title to New Theatre. Through this publication it stimulated the growth of new social plays, it sponsored play contests and "New Theatre Nights" and it arranged symposia and subsequent national conferences. According to Ben Blake, the activities of the League paved the way for the Theatre Union: "The total result was a large if prospective workers-theatre-minded public.[1] A few years later, John Gassner voiced the same view.[2]

By 1933, workers' theatre was indeed a movement. It had precise goals, a pragmatic, functional philosophy, a definite political platform. It had theatre groups which were spreading rapidly, growing in proficiency, and becoming more self-confident.[3] It had a national organization, affiliated with an international one, and it had its own organ for disseminating information. As early as 193], it had gained the recognition of the American Theatre world with a birth announcement written by Hallie Flanagan.[4] Four years later its status

---

[1]Blake, Awakening, p. 40.

[2]"One-Act Play," p. 257.

[3]In 1933, there were an estimated 250 workers' theatres in operation. A year later, at the League sponsored second National Theatre Festival, officials estimated that this number had grown to 400. (Douglas McDermott, "The Theatre Nobody Knows: Workers' Theatre in America, 1926-1942, "Theatre Survey 6 (May 1965): 71.)

[4]"A Theatre is Born," Theatre Arts Monthly, November 1931, pp. 908-15.

was established as the New York Times published a history of the movement.[1] Its potential was infinite and Ben Blake envisioned a theatre which would forever change the character of the American Theatre:

> A mighty idea took shape--the idea of a theatre, including amateur and professional, far broader than the labor movement yet drawing sustenance from this great force, a theatre whose repertory would reflect the important social questions of the times, would mirror the clash of social forces, would side with masses of American people against the forces of reaction and repression. The idea of such a theatre, a theatre with a new social outlook, a fundamentally new theatre, as the only hope for a theatre already in an advanced condition of decay, furnished an intellectual meeting ground to which more and more people repaired.[2]

As it embarked on this mission, the workers' theatre movement changed its methods. The emphasis began to shift from mobile theatres to permanent theatres and from the production of agit-prop sketches to realistic full-length plays. The movement inclined toward bourgeois methods. In January 1933, the Theatre Collective was born, founded by the Shapiro brothers, Mordecai Gorelik, and Mary Virginia Farmer. The purpose of the group was to produce full-length plays. The Collective was the first of the workers' theatres to make this the cornerstone of its program. In May, it did a revival of the Siftons' 1931. The production style the Collective fostered was realism, the kind of realism developed by the Group Theatre. Mary Farmer had been a member of the Group from its inception and it was she who headed the training studio the Collective organized. The

---

[1]Bosley Crowther, "Theatre of the Left," New York Times, 14 April 1935, sec. 9. pp. 1-2.

[2]Blake, Awakening, p. 27.

technical principles she taught were based on Stanislavski's system of actor training, the same as those practiced at the Group's studio.[1] At about this time, too, the Workers' Laboratory Theatre reorganized as the Theatre of Action with its main purpose becoming the production of realistic, full-length plays at a permanent location.[2]

Historians of the left theatre movement interpreted the change, specifically the shift from agit-prop to realism, as a step forward, as successfully mastering another rung in the maturation process of the movement. "Gradually the agit-prop theatre grew out of its infancy and began to show a decent respect for competent acting, staging, writing, etc., "said Michael Blankfort and Nathaniel Buchwald.[3] The Theatre Union was both the product of this changing policy, in that it sensed the changing winds and fitted its repertory to them, and the engineer of this new policy, in that its repertory and methods became the model and standard for other workers' theatres.

Another precondition for the creation of the Theatre Union was the Great Depression. From that fateful Thursday in October 1929 conditions--political, economic, and social--began deteriorating rapidly. As each page was ripped from the calendar a dazed populace thought that it had reached the end of the catastrophe, that it could not get any worse--but it did. In 1929 the national income had been

---

[1]Jack Shapiro, "Theatre Collective," New Theatre, October 1934, p. 15.

[2]Blake, Awakening, pp. 47-49.

[3]"Social Trends," p. 132. Similar assessments were made by Blake, Awakening, pp. 26-27, 47-50; Gassner, "One-Act Play," pp. 256-57; and (Paul Peters), Preface to section on drame in Proletarian Literature in the United Stated: An Antology, eds. Granville Hicks, et. al. (New York: International Publishers Co., 1935), p. 263.

eighty-one billion dollars; by 1931 it had plummeted to fifty-one billion, and in 1932 it descended still further to a dismal forty-one billion. In that same three-year period an incredible total of eighty-six thousand businesses became insolvent and closed their doors. In 1932 alone there were 31,822 business failures representing $928 million in outstanding liabilities. Farm income dropped to a record low of $1.9 billion--a fifty percent decline in three years! Of all statistics in those years of acturial abundance, the most painful were the figures on unemployment: 4,340,000 in 1930, 8,020,000 in 1931, 12,060,000 in 1932.[1]

These figures are harsh yet impersonal. They stand as an icy monolith commemorating the end of the age of rugged individualism and the beginning of the disintegration of the idealistic American dream. Such titanic statistics encourage sweeping statements which often lead us to overlook the repercussions of history's convulsions on the individual citizen. When twelve million people were unemployed in 1932 it meant that one out of five persons in the labor force, or one out of seven adults in the population, had no source of income. The calamity of the Great Depression seeped into every household. Although it did not consign every one in five to sleeping under "Hoover blankets" in the thousands of "Hoovervilles" that grew like a moldy fungus on the abandoned lots in the bowels of the cities, it nevertheless wrought incalculable damage, and spiritual as well as monetary misfortune for the vast majority.

---

[1]Cabell Phillips, From the Crash to the Blitz, 1929-1939 (New York: MacMillan Co., 1969), pp. 34-35.

Protracted unemployment, of course, jeopardized the basic necessities of shelter, food, and clothing. At first when the head of the household could no longer bring home a paycheck, a resourceful family would turn adversity into an adventure. Dad would recycle his used razors by resharpening them, Mom might remake her old dresses for her daughter, and the children would collect pop bottles and return then for the two-cent deposit before standing in line at the neighborhood bakery to buy day-old bread.[1]

Soon, even such ingenious efforts at frugality were abandoned as the initial make-do attitude gave way to an implacable bitterness, despair, and apathy. While wives brashly tried to maintain the pretense of normality with the next door neighbor--poverty was considered immoral and therefore opprobrious--their husbands limped from place to place and even went on "business trips" to other cities vainly searching for the ever-scarcer job.

The abasement of a long, fruitless job hunt and the accumulation of rejections took their toll on the former breadwinner's self-esteem. Many men fell victim to what sociologists called "unemployment shock" syndrome which was characterized by slow, sluggish gait, dropping shoulders, unkempt hair, and a perpetually stubby beard.[2] Dejection, and despondency were the rule. Indicative of the change in the nation's

---

[1]William Manchester, The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972 (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 35.

[2]Dixon Wecter, The Age of the Great Depression, 1929-1941 (New York: MacMillan Co., 1952), p. 32.

mood between 1931 and 1932 was the change in tone of the two popular songs of those years. Where "Life is Just a Bowl of Cherries" epitomized the guarded optimism and the fey spirit of the first shock of the depression, the lyrics of "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" voiced the hopelessness that was rampant.[1]

The depression ignited the workers' theater movement. It was after the crash that a program began to coalesce and assume vigor. Prior to 1929 the movement had been well-intentioned but amorphous.[2] Primarily, it lacked the interest and support of workers. Prior to 1929 the union movement itself was paralyzed. In 1929 union membership had fallen to 3,442,600 from a peak of 5,047,800 in 1920. Reasons for the failure of organized labor in the 1920s range from the anti-labor hostility of employers and the government to the ineptness of the unions themselves and their internecine battles for dominance.

Most important in the stagnation of organized labor was the indifference of the workers. First, Americans, proud of their heritage of rugged individualism, were suspicious of organizations which diminished their sense of individuality, preferring to improve their lot on their own. Second, American industry, through a congeries of policies loosely labeled welfare capitalism, devised a paternalistic program hoping to keep workers satisfied. Prompted by self-interest, the captains of American business adopted changes in personnel management, improved wages and fringe benefits, and provided better working

---

[1]Ibid., p. 19.

[2]Gassner, "One-Act Play," p. 251; Reines, "Widening Front," p. 3.

conditions. To placate those employees clamoring for unions, big business even supplied company unions. These improvement were, to be sure, grudgingly made and were often less than they seemed, but they were sufficient to keep workers docile and busy at their machines rather than passing out leaflets and organizing picket lines.[1]

When the bottom fell out of the economy, workers began asking themselves questions, challenging the ersatz palliatives of welfare capitalism, the American Plan and the Doctrine of High Wages. Increasingly, they turned to workers' theatres which seemed not only to show an accurate grasp of the situation but to suggest positive, aggressive solutions to their problems.

In the midst of the torpidity and inertia of the depression not only workers but many intellectuals and artists were forced to reassess their values and their work. Conditions in the country were so poor that many artists felt compelled to somehow bridge the gap between the artist as interpreter of the soul and the artist as citizen. In a short span of time many writers turned from passive observer to active participant.[2] Men of letters banded together in committees to investigate and report on conditions in particularly depressed regions of the country like Kentucky and West Virginia.

---

[1]Irving Bernstein, The Lean Years (Baltimore: Penquin Books (1966), pp. 84-90.

[2]Observation by Edwin Seaver cited by Daniel Aaron, Writers in the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism (New York: Harcourt, Bracet & World, Inc., 1961), p. 173.

Some of the new generation of writers, whom Edward Newhouse termed the "crisis generation" as distinct from the "lost generation" of the previous decade, traversed the country in proletarian mufti to see the depression from the laborers' perspective and thereby gain inspiration for his work.[1] Writers and artists also signed political petitions and joined the Socialist or the Communist Parties.

Literature of the thirties began to take on the spirit of the Internationale. Writers like Robert Cantwell, Mary Heaton Vorse, Grace Lumpkin, and Jack Conroy apostrophized the resilience of the ordinary workman and condemned the society that left him out of its bounty. Writers were turning with greater frequency to themes dealing with immediate topical social issues: strikes and unemployment, anti-war, race relations and discrimination, the decline of the middle class, and the social and economic (and moral) superiority of the Soviet Union.

Early in the thirties, Michael Gold, the impassioned, self-appointed guiding light of radical writing, called for a wave of proletarian literature. This, as he describes it, "will reflect the struggle of the workers in their fight for the world. It portrays the life of the workers: not as do the vulgar French populists and American jazzmaniacs, but with a clear revolutionary point." In nine pithy points he adumbrated the attributes of this new literary form: it should have technical precision; it must deal with the "real

---

[1] Ibid., p. 152.

conflicts of men and women who work for a living"; it should serve a social function; it should not distract the reader with verbal acrobatics; it should have the "courage of the proletarian experience"; it should be clear and direct; it must show the "revolutionary elan" of the masses as well as the horror of the worker's life; it should be honest in its characterizations; and it must not be strained or melodramatic.[1] In promulgating his new aesthetic, Gold was daying, in effect, that artists cannot ignore man as a social being. Indeed, the artist's first commitment must be to examine man's relationship to his social, economic, and political environment.

If there was a perceived leftward bent to the literature of the early thirties there was a lack of real political thinking on Broadway. In the 1920s American theatre enjoyed an unprecedented prosperity. There were, of course, the Abie's Irish Rose's and the No, No Nanette's, but American audiences also learned about Ibsen, Pirandello, and, thanks to the Theatre Guild, Shaw. Serious playwrights, preeimently O'Neill, were fascinated with Freud. A host of new playwrights, among them Sidney Howard, George Kaufman, Robert Sherwood, Elmer Rice, George Kelly, S. N. Behrman, Phillip Barry, and Maxwell Anderson, come to mind as the most distinguished authors of a theatre that was maturing in style and form as well as in content.

Theatre of the prosperity decade made only sporadic and glancing reference to social issues. Of the over two thousand plays produced

---

[1]Mike Gold, "Proletarian Realism," New Masses, September 1930, pp. 4-5.

during the twenties, only a handful sought to raise the social consciousness of their viewers. One of the strongest pictures of the working man appears in O'Neill's The Hairy Ape. The play is bold in depicting the isolated, weak, insecure, ignorant laborer, but it is vague in the crude socialism it limns. The Wobblies, which make a brief appearance in O'Neill's play, are somewhere in the background of Sidney Howard's anti-romantic fable They Knew What They Wanted. Wholesale animadversions of man's dehumanization as the result of either obsessive materialism or excessive mechanization are part of such plays as Lawson's Roger Bloomer, Rice's The Adding Machine and Streetscene, and Sophie Treadwell's Machinal. The hopelessness of American Blacks was the subject of a few poignant dramas like O'Neill's All God's Chillun' Got Wings, and Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom and Dorothy and DuBose Heyward's Porgy. Finally, the most overtly political play of the decade was a dramatization of the controversial Sacco and Vanzetti case, Maxwell Anderson and Harold Hickerson's Gods of the Lightning. This pseudo-documentary is an uncompromising indictment of the perversions of social justice.

The major impact of the crash on the theatre was at the box office. With the onset of the depression there began a steady contraction of the number of offerings each season. The plays themselves, except for a small minority, took little cognizance of the social and economic turmoil in the streets. The legal system was scored in I. J. Golden's Precedent, an account of the mistreatment of a labor organizer modeled on Tom Mooney. George Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind received the Pulitzer Prize for their zesty musical satire on political campaigning, Of Thee I Sing. The following year the prize went to Maxwell Anderson for his scathing attack on Congressional corruption, Both Your Houses. Probably

the most direct treatment in the early thirties of the effects of the depression was Elmer Rice's We, The People. This panoramic drama sought refuge from the grip of the depression by urging audiences to remember the noble principles on which the country was founded and developed.

Rice, a liberal-thinking, socially-oriented playwright, believed that the theatre could not remain aloof from social questions. In 1933, seven weeks before the Theatre Union opened, Rice proposed the creation of a People's Art Theatre which would produce plays of social significance. Such a theatre would "attempt not only to set the leaven of art at work in the masses but to drag the artist into the forum, face to face with his time."[1]

One theatre organization was attempting to do something of what Rice advocated. This was the Group Theatre, founded by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford. The Group Theatre, as stepchild of the Theatre Guild, was basically an off-shoot of the Little Theatre movement. Its aims were twofold. First, and probably foremost, it saw itself as a collective of artists seeking to develop and realize a consistent theatrical style through the establishment of a permanent company. Second, it wanted to produce plays which were relevant to the social and moral state of the time. The two goals were interdependent as Clurman explains:

> The whole bent of our theatre, I reiterated time and again, would be to combine a study of theatre craft with a creative

---

[1]Elmer Rice, "Project for a New Theatre," New York Times, 8 October 1933, sec. 10, p. 1.

> content which that craft was to express. To put it another way, our interest in the life of our time must lead us to the discovery of those methods that would most truly convey this life through the theatre.[1]

In intent, the Group Theatre was singularly apolitical. If some of its plays did have a political sting, it was accidental. Clurman himself admits that for personal reasons politics was submerged in the Group's activities:

> It might be asked why, for all my talk about the need for facing our times and of finding affirmative answers to the moral and social problems of our day, politics received so little of our attention. One answer may be that my education and inclinations had been chiefly aesthetic. Besides this, however, I have always had a reluctance to delve into problems while they still remained outside the range of my actual experience. I am troubled only by those questions to which I can see an immediate reference in the lives of people close to me.
>
> . . . More curious is the fact that not only I but none of my colleagues ever spoke of the crash at this time. None of us apparently was directly involved.[2]

This insularity suggests that the Group Theatre would have come into being and existed even without the depression. It was not, as were the workers' theatres, committed to social amelioration. Its appeal was to the middle class not to the working class. It was an art theatre which found the artistry of the Broadway stage deplorable and endeavored to rectify it in the form and content of their productions.

By 1933, conditions were ripe for the founding of the Theatre Union. The workers' theatre movement had established itself as a significant instrument for political change. It had absorbed the

---

[1] The Fervent Years, (New York: Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace, Jovanich, 1975), p. 34.

[2] Ibid., pp. 50-51.

the influence of European radical theatre and distilled those into methods and techniques which would work best for American audiences. The movement itself was on the threshold of expansion and growth. The depression, which accelerated the development of workers' theatres, also fostered an intellectual ambience which made artists acutely aware of their socio-political responsibilities. Lastly, there was a virtual vacuum of social and political plays in the professional theatre.

CHAPTER III

ORGANIZING THE THEATRE UNION:

PEACE ON EARTH

Though the curtain did not rise on the Theatre Union's first production until 29 November 1933, work on what was to become America's most successful professional workers' theatre began some time in 1931. One man, Charles Rumford Walker, earnestly believing in the need to make art reflect the urgency of the times, cast a critical eye over the contemporary Broadway fare and found it pathetically wanting and blithely insouciant about the tragic realities of American life. In the fall of that year (a year William Manchester dubbed the "cruelest year of the Depression"[1]) Walker began talking with several acquaintances about the creation of a popularly priced theatre which would present plays that forthrightly dealt with the real concerns of America's workers.

Sometime before the New Year, a meeting was held at the Greenwich Village apartment of Margaret Larkin and Liston Oak, to discuss the prospects for such a theatre and the shape it would take.[2] Among the writers and artists attending the meeting were Edmund Wilson, two veterans of the New Playwrights Theatre—John Dos Passos and Mike Gold—Walker's young, wealthy friend and neighbor, John Henry Hammond Jr., Mary Heaton Vorse, (one of the original founders of The Masses and an astute labor reporter

---

[1]Manchester, Glory and a Dream, p. 32.

[2]"The Theatre Union," The Stage, June 1934, p. 26.

and novelist), and Paul Peters, a young free-lance writer with several social plays in his knapsack.[1]

The meeting, though no doubt stimulating, did not build any momentum for the idea. Perhaps the abortive effort of the New Playwrights Theater dampened their plans, perhaps a theatre which would rely primarily on the support of the workers was deemed financially unfeasible at that time, or perhaps they wished to wait and see the direction such socially-oriented theatres like the newly organized, professional Group Theatre or the amateur, radical Worker's Laboratory Theatre would take. Nevertheless, for the moment, Walker's notion of a workers' theatre was held in abeyance.

Charles Rumford Walker was not a man to be stopped. He had fortitude and the means to realize his plans. Born in 1893 in Concord, New Hampshire, the son of a well-to-do physician, he was a scion of one of the founders of Concord and he could trace his ancestry to one of the passengers on the Mayflower. After finishing at the prestigious Philips Exeter Academy he went on to graduate with the class of 1917 at Yale University. After commencement he did additional work in economics and philosophy at Harvard and Columbia. Later on he became a Washington correspondent for the New Republic. In the last year of World War I, Walker received a commission in the regular army, but enroute to France, he contracted influenza and was sent to an English hospital camp.

After the war his interest in labor economics and the plight of the working man heightened and in an effort to gain a first-hand perspective

---

[1]Madison, Wisconsin, Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research, Albert Maltz Paper, U. S. Mss. 17AN. Material from this collection which is relevant to the present study consists largely of press releases and other promotional papers used to publicize the plays and theatre. Very few of the papers are signed or dated.

about working conditions, he worked for several months in the steel and brass mills of Pittsburgh. Beginning as the cleanup man in the pit of the open hearth, and then as the hotblast man, and finally graduating to the blast furnace, he would work the ten-hour day shift or the fourteen-hour night shift. It was grueling and arduous work, but for Walker it was a way not only of learning and understanding the hardships and austerities of the American laborer, but of becoming his brother in sweat so that when he spoke out in the name of the laborer he did not speak vicariously.

In 1921, he synthesized his experiences in Pittsburgh into a moving novel, Steel: The Diary of a Furnace Worker, which gives a minute by minute account of twenty-four hours in the life of a steel worker. Portions of the novel were serialized in The Atlantic Monthly which led to his appointment as Associate Editor there, a position which he retained for two years before becoming literary editor of The Independent.

A second novel, Bread and Fire, his first published work, came out in the spring of 1927. The book is a veiled autobiography to the extent that its protagonist, an idealistic young editor of a socialist paper in New York, goes to work in a Pennsylvania steel mill. The story revolves around the writer's efforts to explain to his fiancee his work at the mills and his commitment to the cause of the steel workers. The vivid accounts of mill life in the narration prompted one critic to remark, "'Bread and Fire' is an exciting, a disturbing book. It is singularly free from bunk and bias. Steadily keeping his eye on the material before him, Mr. Walker builds up to a climatic anti-climax so stunning as to be all but melodramatic, so inevitable as to be akin to destiny."[1]

---

[1]"'Bread and Fire' and Other Recent Works of Fiction," New York Times, 15 May 1927, sec. 3, p. 8.

By 1931, Walker had gained an impressive reputation as a spokesman for the common worker. He was an activist liberal who in his two novels and in his numerous articles and essays published in socially-oriented literary magazines like Outlook, Survey Graphic, Forum, and The Independent endeavored to stimulate other intellectual liberals and make them aware of the deprivations and hardships experienced by the working class. His aim was to prod them out of their indifference toward the rumbling discontent that was growing in the nation. As the depression aggravated the already desperate lives of the workers, Walker was in the vanguard of artists and writers who proclaimed their rage and disgust at the injustices and exploitation wrought on the most vulnerable portion of society. In the spring of 1931, for example, the coal fields of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania were stained with the blood that ran from violent strikes that were prompted by severe curtailments of both wage rates and employment. To publicize the reasons for the strike and to document its abysmal repercussions for the miners, Theodore Dreiser led a group of writers in November on a fact-finding expedition to Harlan County, the large coal region in Eastern Kentucky which had been catapulted to national prominence by the pitched battles between striking miners and the National Guard and by the Communist Party's work to supplant the United Miner's Union.[1] The "Dreiser Committee," as it came to be known, was itself organized under the auspices of the Communist led National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners. In addition to Dreiser and Walker, other writers who participated in the trip included John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Samuel Ornitz, and Melvin

---

[1]Bernstein, Lean Years, pp. 377-81.

Levy.[1] They filed a preliminary report of their findings in a censorious article in the New Masses entitled "We Went to Harlan." Walker introduces the article with a statement describing the miscarriage of justice in Harlan where the murderer of a union organizer is released with impunity. He follows this with an account of the appalling destitution of the miners who live in cattle shacks and feed their children wild greens.[2] An expanded report was published a while later in the book Harlan Miners Speak. Walker's story of the obstacles and frustrations that confront miners who try to organize into unions in Harlan County is one of the most compelling chapters of the book.[3] The visit to Harlan by the Dreiser Committee and by subsequent groups of concerned writers—one committee was led by Waldo Frank and Edmund Wilson—eventually forced Congressional investigation of the situation in the coal mining industry in the spring of 1932. Writers it appeared, could have some effect on political events.

Early in 1932, Walker was still discussing the idea of a theatre devoted to producing plays for workers. By this time though the group still interested in developing this idea had dwindled to a small cluster consisting of Walker, his wife Adelaide, Liston Oak, Margaret Larkin and Paul Peters. The other writers who had been invited to the Greenwich Village meeting were interested in the project and could, no doubt, be counted upon to lend their support, but they were too busy to devote the

---

[1] Aaron, Writers of Left, pp. 177-78.

[2] Charles R. Walker, "We Went to Harlan," New Masses, December 1931, pp. 3-4.

[3] Charles R. Walker, "Organizing a Union in Kentucky," in Harlan Miners Speak, report prepared by Members of the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, n.d.) pp. 38-49.

the time and energy necessary to building a theatre. More committed people were needed, preferably people with some theatre background, for that was a scarce commodity among the five mentioned above. Walker, though an aspiring playwright, had no direct theatre experience. His wife, born Adelaide George in Wyoming, had been an actress in a theatre in Ilitch Gardens, Denver, and, when she came to New York, had performed in some minor roles for the Theatre Guild. Liston Oak had been a high school teacher in New Hampshire and later became the editor of Soviet Russia Today. He was a member of the Communist Party and he was familiar with people in the unions. In college, Margaret Larkin had written some prize-winning little theatre plays but her forte was singing cowboy songs. She had been born in New Mexico. She worked as a newspaper reporter on the Denver Post while continuing her avocation of collecting and singing cowboy songs. Wearing a ten gallon hat and carrying a guitar, she came to New York in the mid-twenties driving a battered second-hand car. Her first job was singing her repertoire of cowboy songs in a Yiddish cafe on Second Avenue. While working as Albert Weisbord's secretary and as publicist in the Passaic textile strike of 1926 (as well as volunteering her services to other labor causes), she continued to sing her songs at parties. Alfred Knopf heard her and suggested she compile her songs into an anthology.[1] She did, and in 1931 Knopf published her book Singing Cowboy: A Book of Western Songs with piano arrangements by Helen Black, a friend from Santa Fe. Though the book provided the foundation for the careers of several singing cowbows like Tex Ritter, Margaret Larkin's actual theatre experience was limited to her early one-act plays and to

---

[1]Interview with Albert Maltz, Los Angeles, California, 15 July 1978.

singing her folk ballads in the Theatre Guild's production of Lynn Rigg's pleasant prairie drama, Green Grow the Lilacs.

The man with probably the keenest sense of the theatre within the small coterie Walker gathered was Paul Peters. His first play, Mr. God is Not In, a satirical one-acter, was published in the New Masses in December 1926 and was presented by several amateur workers' theater groups thereafter. For a short time he did some public relations work for the New Playwrights and they even considered doing one of his full-length plays.[1] After a five year hegira through the country soaking up the spirit of proletarian life, working on farms, construction gangs, in steel mills, and on loading docks, Peters returned to New York and was one of the organizers of the Suitcase Theatre, a mobile workers' theatre project which never got past the discussion phase.[2] By 1932, he had written five plays all of which attracted much attention but none of which (except Wharf Nigger) interested any producers. Scenes from the play were published in the New Masses[3] and the manuscript floated from office to office within the New York theatre community in 1929-30.[4] "I had had quite a lot of letters about the play and some conferences with producers," recalls Peters, "but, of course, this was all talk. The script was then

---

[1]Paul Peters, Letter to author, 20 August 1978.

[2]"'Stevedore' is Based on Paul Peters' Work as Dockwalloper," Post, 14 April 1934.

[3]"'Wharf Nigger,'" New Masses, November 1929, pp. 6-10 and "'On the Wharf,'" New Masses, April 1930, pp. 12-14.

[4]Walker probably got to know Peters through John Hammond who was then a novice producer and, according to Peters (letter to author, 10 August 1978), had read Wharf Nigger when it was doing the rounds and considered it for production. Hammond and Walker were close friends so it would be safe to assume that Hammond showed him the script and maybe introduced him to the author.

considered terribly far-out and nobody would touch it. At that time there was no off-Broadway theatre."[1]

One evening in mid-March 1932, Peters and Oak paid a visit to the home of Manuel Gomez. They discussed their plans for the future theatre and invited Gomez and his wife Sylvia Feningston to join the organizing group. That evening Sylvia Feningston, an actress with the Group Theatre, was performing in the Group's third presentation, Maxwell Anderson's ill-conceived political morality play set in the New Mexico of 1947, Night over Taos. Gomez accepted the invitation for himself and for his wife.[2] They were asked to join because as a pair they possessed a strong interest in both the theatre and political activism.

Sylvia Feningston was the real theatre person of the pair. The daughter of a hardware merchant, she had taken up her acting career after leaving Cornell University. On the west coast she was a member of the Telegraph Hill Players and other California stock companies such as the Los Angeles Pot Boilers. Coming east again she was attracted by the idealism and commitment of the incipient Group Theatre. She joined this assemblage of visionary theatre artists in the summer of 1931 at their retreat in Brookfield Center, Connecticut. While there she immersed herself in the tenets of Stanislavsky's system of acting under the tutelage of Lee Strasberg and Harold Clurman. Later she appeared in two of the Group's first season of plays, Clair and Paul Sifton's 1931- and Night over Taos. She was also politically active as a publicist for labor organizations that defended political prisoners and as a volunteer for the International

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2]Interview with Manuel Gomez, Redding, Connecticut, 8 October 1978.

Labor Defense.[1]

Sylvia Feningston could give the Theatre Union organizers valuable advice on matters of theatrical practice. Her husband, however, had only a tangential involvement with the theatre. By his own admission he was "more a revolutionist than a writer, and more a writer than a dramatist. But I always did love the theatre."[2] At that time he ran a column for the Wall Street Journal called "The Inquiring Investor" under the pseudonym of Charles Shipman. Simultaneously, under the name Manuel Gomez, he was editor of Workers' Monthly and wrote occasional articles for the New Masses. Several years earlier he had dabbled with playwriting when he collaborated with Mike Gold on a political musical, so it was not unusual for one of his New Masses articles to be a review of 1931-. After a trenchant exegesis of the strengths and weaknesses of the play and its production, Gomez identifies the primary reason for the play's brief run--only twelve performances:

> It was a bold thing to produce 1931- in a commercial playhouse of the Broadway district. The natural audience for this play is not to be found among "the theatre-going public" and the relationship that it calls for between audience and actors is not that of the commercial theatre. When we have a Workers' Theatre movement in America such a presentation as this will not be at the mercy of hostile bourgeois critics. It will be given again and again, as a valuable instrumentality of the class strugle.[3]

This was the very same thesis promulgated by Walker and his coworkers. Proletarian plays depicting the predicaments of the worker and written from the Marxist perspective of warring classes needed to be written and produced. If they were not viable on Broadway, even under the

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[3]"A Proletarian Play on Broadway," New Masses, January 1932, p. 28.

patronage of the Group Theatre, then a new institution must be created to sponsor them. Despite being a dilettante in the theatre, Gomez's beliefs made him a natural choice for participating in the new venture.

Manuel Gomez, like the sobriquet Charles Shipman, is an assumed name. Gomez shifted names with the alacrity and facility of the bank thief who changes his alias as he crosses the stateline. But unlike the bank thief, Gomez did not change his identity. Throughout his career he was faithful to his political convictions. At the outset of World War I, Gomez, who was an ardent pacifist, left college and fled to Mexico along with some friends in order to avoid the draft. He was in Mexico when the Russian Revolution occurred, and swept up by the promise of a new social order he quickly joined the Communist Party. It was in this new role as a Communist Party functionary that he adopted the name Manuel Gomez. He advanced rapidly in the ranks of the Party, representing the Communist Party of Mexico at the International in Moscow; he was photographed with Lenin. It was during his sojourn in Mexico that he collaborated with Mike Gold on a Marxist musical, The Last Revolution. Gold and Gomez, now using the cognomen Jesus Ramirez, were teaching English in Guadalajara. They wrote the play while they were living together at the hacienda of one of their wealthier students. The piece was later produced in Chicago by the Workers Party, at that time the American voice of Communism, with Gomez himself taking a small role.

When he returned to America in the mid-twenties, he continued his work for the Party, directing its anti-imperialist section. He again went Moscow as a delegate to the Sixth Congress, this time representing the American Party. In 1929, Gomez was caught in the cross fire of the internecine factional disputes of the American Communist Party. From 1927 on, with the move of the Party's headquarters from Chicago to New

York's Union Square, the Lovestoneites (a Stalinist faction) were consolidating their control and syphoning away the power of the Foster-Canon group (a Trotskyist faction) with whom Gomez was associated. The Lovestoneites placed Bert Wolf in command of their anti-imperialist campaign and Gomez was out of a job. More significant than that, however, was that by 1929 Stalin had tightened his grip over the Comintern and the Russian Party, and the fledgling American wing of the Party danced to the tunes emanating from Moscow. Gomez became disillusioned with Stalin's decrees and his unconditional control. He believed, along with others, that Stalinism was a corruption of Leninism which was destroying the essential meaning and quality of Communism. He ceased to be a functioning member of the Party, but having spent his entire adult life working full-time to advance the cause of Communism it was difficult for him to divorse himself entirely from his beliefs. Furthermore, he was confident that Stalinism was only a temporary aberration and that eventually it would be replaced by a healthier mode of Communism. In order to maintain peripheral contact with the Party, Gomez joined the nascent John Reed Club of New York. This demarche into what was then referred to as the "cultural field" was to become for Gomez the road to the Theatre Union.

An ironic sidelight in Gomez's checkered conduct as a Communist also occurred in 1929. When his function within the Party was removed, he was not only deprived of his purpose in life but he was relieved of his source of income. Wall Street, however, was in full blossom and Gomez, having worked on the Chicago Economist, considered searching for work among the barons of commerce. Having doubts about the wisdom of working for the enemy, he asked his mentor William Foster for his opinion. Foster assured him that his work could be purely technical and that he would not be making any propaganda for capitalism. Aware that the name Gomez

was well-known on the left, he turned to Foster's secretary, asked what her name was—Shipman—and he descended into the canyons of downtown Manhattan as Charles Shipman. He landed a job with the Wall Street News, a competitor of the Wall Street Journal, writing a column called "Advice to Investors." Not knowing much about the vagaries and permutations of the stock market, he simply filled his column with the Marxist line. He warned investors not to invest because a collapse of the market was imminent. The Party had been saying this for years, but this was 1929. So when "Black Thursday" came, Charles Shipman overnight became one of the seers of Wall Street. When the Journal took over the News he was the only former News man they asked to join their staff. He continued to work on the Journal, now becoming a more sophisticated financial wizard, until 1934 when he was hired by the New York Post as its financial editor.[1]

On 22 April 1932 a play opened at the Provincetown Playhouse which fascinated Charles Walker. The play was Merry-Go-Round and its authors were two bright, talented graduates of George Pierce Baker's 47 Workshop at Yale, George Sklar and Albert Maltz. The two young dramatists were as much surprised as pleased by the swiftness and velocity of having their first work produced simultaneously at Yale and in New York. Merry-Go-Round is a broadside attack on the venality of municipal racketeering, being conducted in New York at that time with a smug elan by Mayor Jimmy Walker. Ed Martin, the bellboy at the Capitol Hotel, is the sole witness to the gangland murder of Stransky. Jig Zelli, the murderer, eludes an indictment by talking with some of his polital acquaintances. Forced to find a perpetrator by the Governor's call for an investigation, the police subject Martin to a bloody third degree and elicit a "con-

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

fession." To put the final nail on the casket and to conceal their treachery, they then hang the hapless bellhop in his jail cell and announce that he had committed suicide. The vast unscrupulous machinery of corrupt city politics is activated to protect itself. Graft paying gangsters call the shots and avaricious politicos pull the trigger to extirpate any threat to the vitiated system.

The production was greeted with praise by the critics and with a barrage of offers from uptown producers to transfer it to a larger Broadway house. Mayor Walker, however, had other plans. Afraid that furthur exposure of the play might taint his Tammany Hall regime, he mounted an almost effective clandestine effort to sabotage the move. As the excited authors responded to the offers, they found that one by one the producers turned cold to the play and reneged. Somehow and very quickly, too, "they had been reached." Maltz and Sklar, like the protagonist of their play, had become victims of power politics. Only the owner of the Avon Theatre, a courageous independent, still wanted the play. On opening night, as patrons were filing into the Theatre, a corps of mounted police trotted over to the theatre, evacuated and put a padlock on the door, and presented the owner with a summons detailing several fire violations. Several seats in the front rows of the orchestra had suddenly become a fire hazard.[1] After editorials in the newspaper and a controversy that involved The American Civil Liberties Union, the Dramatists Guild, and the Producers Association the play eventually reopened and played for a total of fifty-nine performances.[2] In the end, it succumbed as much to the summer heat as to the political heat.

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]Jay Williams, Stage Left (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974) p. 109.

The play itself, however, was well wrought and deftly constructed and attracted a great deal of attention on its artistic merits. It was optioned by Universal Studios and made into the film Afraid to Talk. Sklar and Maltz themselves were hired by Hollywood and given a short option contract by Paramount. Before they left for the west coast, Sklar paid a visit to his literary agent, Miriam Howell. Coincidentally, she was Charles Walker's agent as well and he happened to be there that day, too. Walker was delighted to meet Sklar whose play had the kind of vigor and freshness he wanted for his group.

He broached the plans for a socially-oriented theatre to Sklar and invited Sklar and Maltz to write a play for them. Sklar and Maltz had already been approached by Harold Clurman, who was also impressed with their work and tried to persuade them to go away with the Group Theatre to their summer camp and write for them.[1] But the young authors decided to accept Walker's offer. The Group Theatre, they felt, was not as committed to doing social plays as Walker's theatre would be. Moreover, the current attitude was that with Clurman and Strasberg, the company came first and the acting counted for more than the play. Walker, however, envisioned a theatre where primacy would remain with the playwright.[2]

Before leaving for the coast, Maltz and Sklar met with several other Theatre Union organizers who fired their enthusiasm for the new theatre. In Hollywood, working under the supervision of Oscar Serlin in an autonomous unit with the director Walter Hart, who had staged Merry-Go-Round, they were given great latitude by the front office to create a film story. They came up with an original piece dealing again with

---

[1]Clurman, Fervent Years, p. 83; Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

political corruption. The front office found it wanting, "What's the theme?" asked the dismayed producer. "Theme??" inquired Sklar, a bit stunned by the ingenuous question. "Yea," retorted the producer, "like 'pals'!" Sklar and Maltz were miserable. They were fed up with the insufferable transparency of the film industry and longed for their three-month contract to end. At this time Japan's bellicose designs on Manchuria were becoming clearer and Sklar and Maltz decided to do an anti-war play. They corresponded with Walker's group and communicated their plans.[1]

Momentum for the new theatre was building. Aside from Maltz and Sklar, Michael Blankfort had become interested in the concept of a professional theatre producing plays of social content. Blankfort, who was interested in writing plays, co-produced Merry-Go-Round with Walter Hart by investing $2,800 he had recently received in wedding gifts. Blankfort and Hart had known one another since their experiences as college thespians for the Philomanthean Society at the University of Pennsylvania.[2] They planned to join together as a writing-directing team so Hart suggested that Blankfort might learn more about the theatre by helping to produce the play. Through his friendship with Maltz and Sklar he met Walker and the others and got caught up in their aspirations.[3]

In mid-May 1932, another event occurred which obliquely contributed to the impetus for organizing the theatre. Three hundred unemployed war

---

[1] Ibid.

[2] Boston, Massachusetts, Mugar Memorial Library Special Collections, Blankfort Papers. Blankfort had performed a minor role (a Gentleman) in Andreyev's He Who Gets Slapped in May 1927. Hart appeared in the play as well. Later in April 1928, Blankfort was cast in two small roles in From Morn to Midnight.

[3] Interview with Michael Blankfort, Los Angleles, California, 17 July 1978.

veterans set out on a march from Portland, Oregon, to Washington, D. C. Their purpose was to gather more down and out vets along the way and to come to the nation's capital to lobby for the passage of the Patman bill. The Texas congressman had introduced a bill providing for the immediate payment of an exserviceman's bonus benefit which was originally not supposed to be paid until 1945. Patman's intention was to provide some of the indigent victims of the depression with a modicum of federal relief, albeit on a limited scale. For many of the erstwhile soldiers, bonus certificates were their only asset. About 23,000 jobless, homeless, idle vets converged on Washington. They came from every section of the country and from a diversity of backgrounds. The Bonus Expeditionary Force, as this spontaneous and unprecedented mass movement referred to itself, became the symbol of the nation's mounting resentment and unmitigated frustration. To the residents of Washington this flood of transients was an eyesore and for the Hoover administration it was a colossal embarrassment, evidence of an utterly mismanaged financial policy.

On 17 June, the Senate rejected the bonus bill by an overwhelming vote. But the bonus army did not leave Washington. They had no homes and no place else to go. The "invasion" of the Capitol persisted. Tension mounted. Hoover was determined to rid his doorstep of this mob of, in his view, Communist-led insurrectionists. On 28 July, despite promises to the contrary, he unleashed the army. With General Douglas MacArthur at the helm, dressed in full military regalia, four companies of infantry charged through the impoverished, defenseless encampments like hordes of attacking Mongols. At first the vets thought the army was preparing a dress parade in their honor. But as the tear gas swept down Pennsylvania Avenue, they were stunned. Resistance was futile. Their "homes" were razed and they were all physically evacuated across the

state line, some being driven as far west as Indianapolis.[1]

Paul Peters had been to Washington and had spoken with many of the soldiers in the bonus army.[2] And Walker saw in the government's callous treatment of the veterans another example of the dispiriting indifference generally reserved for the working class. The two writers decided to dramatize the events of the bonus march from its beginnings right through to its calamitous rout. Throughout the summer they worked hastily at Peters's home in Ancram, New York, to prepare a first draft. The play, The Third Parade, rallied Walker and the others to concentrate their efforts on creating the new theatre.[3]

That fall, the group gathered in New York and planning meetings began to be held on a regular basis. The people dedicated to the establishment of the theatre for workers now included Charles and Adelaide Walker, Liston Oak, Margaret Larkin, Manuel Gomez, Sylvia Feningston, Paul Peters, George Sklar, Albert Maltz, and Michael Blankfort. There were others, of course, who contributed to the planning from time to time, but these ten zealous individuals carried the torch. On 23 December a short item appeared in the New York Times declaring that a new theatre enterprise had been formed and that it would open with an original play about the bonus army. An office was rented at 104 Fifth Avenue and the Theatre Union was officially in business.[4]

---

[1]Manchester, Glory and Dream, pp. 3-4, 10-18; Bernstein, Lean Years, pp. 437-55; Don Congdon, ed., The Thirties: A Time to Remember (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1962), pp. 115-122.

[2]Peters, 10 August 1978.

[3]Interview with Adelaide Walker, Wellfleet, Massachusetts, 9 September 1978.

[4]"New Stage Group Formed: Theatre Union Plans to Open with a Bonus Army Play," New York Times, 23 December 1932.

The Theatre Union would not present its first production, however, for another year. During this gestation period the organizers met often to work out a platform for the theatre, to establish procedural policies and to resolve such pragmatic problems as raising money, locating a theatre, and finding additional plays.

The first, most fundamental issue that was addressed, and in some respects the simplest since they were all agreed, was what the objectives and goals of the Theatre Union were to be. Before considering this point though it would be instructive to summarize what motivated the organizers. As one may expect with any organization, the Theatre Union meant different things to different people. First, for someone like Manuel Gomez, the theatre could become the instrument for forging a new cultural identity:

> We were a totalitarian world as far as the Communist outlook was concerned. Communism embraced all aspects of life, had to, that was our view of things and that's, of course, why we had to have the cultural movement. . . . "Art is a Weapon" was very important to us. It was almost our guiding star. We also were interested in a joint cultural experience of workers and others to replace a culture which we felt had lost true value.[1]

Gomez wanted not simply a theatre, nor even a theatre specializing in social plays, but a theatre which would mandate a new cultural movement. His conviction that the theatre should engender a "cultural union" between the audience and the theatre itself evolved much later into talk of making the Theatre Union the locus of a workers' cultural center which would incorporate a workers' dance and music component, contests for workers' plays, a radio series, a play library, and a free acting studio.[2] The plan for a cultural center on the grand scale Gomez envisioned never took root but some of these activities were tried.

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Various Press Releases, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

A more practical reason for founding the theatre was to have an outlet for the plays. Half of the organizers were playwrights or wanted to become such and they were keenly aware of Broadway's dismal track record when it came to producing plays which dealt with current social issues. Within the group itself Peters had attempted in vain to interest producers in Wharf Nigger; Sklar, Maltz, and Blankfort had the frustrating Merry-Go-Round episode to look back upon; and Walker had made the rounds trying to get Crazy American produced. "We were playwrights," observed Walker, "and we wanted our plays—which were leftist—produced."[1]

Another motivating factor was the desire to make concrete their commitment to the working class. Though they came from diverse backgrounds and held differnt political beliefs they were agreed that "the trade unions were the rock-bottom base for any kind of future society."[2] They wanted a theatre which would speak for this segment of the population.

The Theatre Union according to Michael Blankfort, was "based on a philosophy"; had a touchstone.[3] That philosophy, which remained virtually unchanged from the time Walker and some of the others first conceived it, was articulated in the theatre's first prospects:

> To have vigor the theatre must stir emotions and ideas that are vital in the society in which it exists. Our is a society of want in the midst of plenty, of deep going social conflicts, of men and women struggling to overcome demoralization and crisis. The Theatre Union will try to dramatize the significant aspects of contemporary life in this perspective. . . .

---

[1]Karen Malpede Taylor, People's Theatre in Amerika (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972), p. 68.

[2]Charles R. Walker to Karen Melpede Taylor, 12 May 1970, cited by Karen Malpede Taylor, "Plays for Revolution: The Theatre Union 1933-1937" (Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1970), p. 3.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

> The Theatre Union will not be guided by reigning social standards. Neither will it affect an unreal Olympian detachment. Its point of view is that there is but one constructive guide in the prevailing situation: the interests of the great masses of the people, the working people, the workers as a class.
>
> The Theatre Union is cooperative and non-profit making. It is setting out to build a permanent theatrical organization on the lowest budget consistent with producing plays in a competent professional manner. To insure the attendance of persons barred from the Broadway theatre by high admission prices there will be a large proportion of twenty-five and fifty-cents seats.[1]

Thus, the Theatre Union thrust itself into the maelstrom of current affairs. The organizers insisted, as radical theatre did in the sixties, upon making their theatre "relevant." The subject matter of the plays they hoped to present would document the turbulent events of contemporary life, dissect the causes of these events, and, most important, lead the march that would change the ordinary worker's life for the better.

They claimed repeatedly that they would represent "the interests of the workers." What that meant was defined in an early press release:

> What do we mean when we say that we represent the interests of the workers as a class? We see the workers not only as unfortunate indivuals but as a part of a definite social group with a revitalizing role to play. Our attitude has nothing in common with the "social service" approach, as exemplified by the plays of Galsworthy. We see ourselves as part of the workers' challenge to the present order.[2]

The liberal and left-wing intellectuals who founded the Theatre Union were not simply interested in diagnosing the effects of America's socio-economic disease. Their purpose was political. They believed that Marxism offered the only palliative for the ills of the times. They aligned themselves with the Marxist view of class war and wanted to use their theatre

---

[1]Theatre Union prospectus, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center. These prospectuses were a series of pamphlets periodically issued by the Theatre Union to describe its work, solicit donations, and give membership information.

[2]Press Release, 10 October 1933, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

as a weapon. The battle lines, they maintained, were clearly demarcated. Capitalism, though on its deathbed, tenaciously fought to preserve the status quo. The workers had to concentrate their energies to assert their natural and inevitable dominance. The theatre was one front in the cultural battle. Broadway, with its blanched, eviscerated offerings, reflected the decline of the present order and it evinced the natural bias of the bourgeois against the proletariat. It excluded any meaningful participation by the working class because a) it charged unaffordably high prices and b) it remained aloof from the concerns of the workers by setting its plays in the alien turf of the parlor instead of the more familiar terrain of the streets, the factories, and the meeting halls. It was inflexibly the cultural voice of the upper class seeking to maintain and perpetuate its hegemony. The Theatre Union would give the workers their hour in the limelight.

> The Broadway theatre of today is a class theatre, a theatre existing solely for the amusement of the upperclasses—a parlor theatre dealing with parlor problems—an escape theatre—a sterile theatre. It's time we had another theatre—a worker's theatre! It's time we has a theatre which will reflect the fact that we're living in a certain type of society, a society gripped with the most severe ecomonic crisis that capitialism has ever known. It is the purpose of the Theatre Union to be such a theatre.[1]

The Theatre Union wanted to bring people into the theatre who had never been to a play. To achieve this they decided early that the top price would be well below the current Broadway ticket scale and the minimum admission would be comparable to the cost of a movie. In aiming their plays at a workers' audience they modeled themselves not on any American precedent but on the European people's theatre movement which

---

[1]George Sklar and Albert Maltz, "The Need for a Workers' Theatre," Daily Worker, 16 December 1933, p. 7.

had developed in Paris and Berlin in the 1890s and manifested its strength and significance in the artistically provocative Volksbuehne of Berlin, which by 1932 had two million subscribers. Walker acknowledged Piscator, the innovative spokesman for the German people's-theatre-movement, and the Volksbuehne as the prototype of the Theatre Union, but he stated that where the German enterprise bore the stamp of a single artist, the Theatre Union would be a cooperative undertaking.[1] Another source of inspiration was, of course, the tremendously vital, classless Soviet theatre which was often analyzed, lauded, and envied in the pages of New Theatre magazine.

However laudable the aims, the question of the moment was the size of the target audience which needed to be raised. Afterall, as Piscator ordained, "A revolutionary theatre without its most living element, the revolutionary public, is a contradiction which has no meaning."[2] Walker, in fact, recalls the admonition he got from one Broadway producer after sharing with him his plans for a workers' theatre: "He warned me gravely that the fallacy of the left theatre lay 'in the proved indifference of the great mass of Americans, and especially workingmen, for social themes.' 'There simply is no audience.' he added, 'for plays about unemployment, lynching, housing problems or strikes.'"[3] But Walker, following his instincts, thought otherwise.

The success and growth of the Prolet-Buehne, the Artef, and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre reinforced his belief. These groups survived on the intense interest of audiences who had never heard of Philip Barry,

---

[1]Malpede, "Plays for Revolution," p. 9.

[2]Erwin Piscator, "The Social Theatre," New Masses, July 1929 p. 14.

[3]Charles R. Walker, "Theatre on the Left," Nation, 24 June 1939, p. 730.

S. N. Behrman, or even Eugene O'Neill. In one instance, this audience surfaced tentatively and briefly on Broadway. By most criteria 1931- was a failure. Yet at each of its twelve performances at the Mansfield Theatre it was loudly and fervently cheered by the packed occupants of the balcony. When the Group Theatre announced the closing of the show, they were besieged with requests to continue the run.

> Strangers came backstage in a peculiar state of determination, asking what they could do for our organization, for the play. The play made them want to do something. Some of these people, we later learned, set up discussion groups, clubs, new little-theatre circles. Unions and other special organizations called us on the phone to tell us they would buy blocks of seats for future performances if we kept the play open. . . . The production of 1931- had made us aware, for the first time, of a new audience.[1]

Harold Clurman's discovery was evidence of an untapped audience hungry for theatre. Here was a new group burgeoning in social awareness and anxiously searching for a theatre which mirrored their lives.

By addressing itself specifically to this audience, the Theatre Union distinguished itself from all other professional theatre groups with similar ideals. The Group Theatre, though leaning favorably toward social plays, charged Broadway prices, thus relegating the blue-collar wage earner to the top balcony. The revolutionary New Playwrights Theatre likewise charged high prices. They did not seek the patronage of workers through their unions or through mass organizations. The audiences they sought, in fact, were liberal and left-wing sophisticated theatre-goers who could appreciate and understand (and tolerate) their iconoclastic approach to theatre. The Theatre Union on the other hand, made the audience the cornerstone of its existence. Low ticket prices would attract the workers to come, and succinct, concrete plays would en-

---

[1]Clurman, Fervent Years, pp. 71-72.

gage their interest.

The Marxist ideas which pervaded the goals of the Theatre Union—their allegiance to the cause of the workers, their insistence on the theme of class war and class exploitation, their Soviet-tropism both in terms of their belief that the Soviets had hit upon the ideal theatre and the utopian society—could very easily have hampered the realization of these goals. It could have made the Theatre Union a narrow, sectarian organization with limited effectiveness and attenuated influence. If workers viewed the Theatre Union as the mouthpiece for the Communists they would shun the theatre. Certainly, no one wanted that. Besides, they were not, with the exception of Liston Oak and formerly Manuel Gomez, members of the Communist Party. At most they appeared to be devoted fellow-travelers, part of the infectious intellectual trend leftward. To prevent the short-circuiting of their aims for the theatre, they made the important decision to become, in terms of their political posture, a broad-based organization drawing support from the entire spectrum of the left. "Talk of United Front was just beginning to be in the air. We wanted definitely to be a United Front."[1] This decision occasionally forced the Theatre Union into performing precarious ideological balancing acts but practically it was the only road to take to get the theatre off the ground and to keep it going.

The Theatre Union's adoption of the United Front or People's Front policy antedated by almost two years the Communist Party's endorsement of this policy. Because the concept of the United Front was integral to the operation of the organization and to its success in attracting a large following despite occasionally disparaging reviews from the critics,

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

it would be illuminating to trace the genesis of this policy.

By 1929, the Stalinist machine was firmly entrenched in the Kremlin. At the Tenth Plenum of the Comintern Executive Committee, Stalin and his henchmen promulgated the doctrine of the Third Period. In brief, it stipulated that post-war Capitalism had entered its last phase of existence—the third period. After the relative prosperity and transitory stabilization of the second phase (1924-1927), capitalism was about to fall victim to a fatal concatination of events—economic hemmorage, uncontrolled employment, violent strikes, etc.—which would cause its surcease. The workers in capitalist states would be radicalized and they would move to supplant the present form of government with Soviet Communism. This was more than a simple prognosis for cataclysmic ecomonic upheaval—the Soviets were perennially prognosticating the demise of the shaky European economies. The Third Period added a new twist. It declared that at this juncture in time capitalism was ripe for a seizure of power. The Third Period called for a militant revolutionary offensive against the last bastions of capitalism. Communist Party groups throughout the world were ordered to hasten the collapse of capitalism by aggressively and unrelentingly combating it at every level.

The adoption of the Third Period policy as party dogma had catastrophic results for the Communist movement in Europe and was a contributory factor in causing the Second World War. In America, however, the effects of the Third Period were not nearly as devastating. The American Communist Party proclaimed itself the wave of the future. Cadres of party members fanatically attempted to manipulate and transform every strike, every ripple of discontent into the (nonexistent) revolutionary tide. The American landscape, dotted as it was with breadlines, apple salesmen,

and evicted families on the streets, allowed the Communists to make some headway in this effort. The Party fervently marshalled a singleminded, vituperative attack on the Socialists. They organized dual unions and urged the notorious 'united front from below,' claiming that the Socialist Party leadership had entered into a clandestine alliance with the ruling bourgeoisie. The price of these retrograde assumptions was the creation of an abiding political and ideological cleavage within the left.

The hard policy of the Third Period led to a parochialism in the arts, as well. Liberal writers and intellectuals, along with Socialists and trade union leaders were virulently condemned as 'social fascists.' Association even with fellow travelers was guarded and marked by vigilant caution. The messianic purity of Communism could not be jeopardized by the insidious heresies such politically unclean undividuals would inevitably bring into the movement—association breeds contamination. This posed a perplexing dilemma for many politicized intellectuals. On the one hand, they were attracted to Communism because, despite its hardnosed policies, it seamed to be the only political party which posited answers to America's crisis. On the other hand, however, they could not swallow all the tenets of the Third Period without choking.

The Communists, eager to capitalize on such nibbling interest and, more importantly, feeling the pinch of their minority status, and perhaps even sensing the incorrectness of their current policies, began cutting chinks in the panoply of the Third Period to make it easier for fellow travelers to wear red. As early as 1930, at the Second World Plenem of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature in Kharkov, motions were passed that would encourage the formulation of policies that would nurture the growth of new proletarian writers and artists. The Third Per-

iod was also recognized to be, in some respects, an aethetic 'straight jacket' and the congress of writers urged flexibility in terms of considering who can associate with the party.[1] The door was opening for the United Front policy. Soon other white flags began to wave in the warm breeze. Witness, for example, the mellowing of Mike Gold, the doyen of American literary Communism, who in the late twenties was a champion of the Third Period, having in one essay dubbed Proust as the "Master masturbator" of the middle class.[2] In 1931, Gold was more pliant in his thinking, "Every door must be opened wide to the fellow travelers. We need them. We must not fear that they will corrupt us with bourgeois ideas."[3] A year later, he exhorted the John Reed Clubs to admit any writer who subscribed to the political platform proposed at Kharkov though his body and sole be not consecrated to the movement. "We cannot afford to have aesthetic quarrels." Even Edmund Wilson who admires Proust, should be welcomed into the movement if his talent and influence can contribute to it.[4] In 1933, as the deficiencies of the Third Period policy became tragically apparent in Europe, Gold called for the concerted fight against Fascism to become the unifying principle of a united left, "Every Anti-Fascist is needed in this United Front. There must be no base factional quarrels."[5]

The so-called 'soft policy' of the United Front was officially ordained by the Comintern in the summer of 1935 at the Seventh World Congress

---

[1]Aaron, Writers on Left, p. 223.

[2]Gold, "Proletatian Realism," p. 4.

[3]Cited by Aaron, Writers on Left, p. 223.

[4]Ibid., p. 226. [5]Ibid., p. 156.

of the Communist International. Its strategies were spelled out by Georgi Dimitroff in the concluding speech to the assembly. In essence, the United Front called for a rapprochement between the Communists and the Socialists and for coexistence with bourgeois symphathizers. The enemy now was unquestionably the Fascists. Every offensive weapon had to be mustered in the fight against this challenge to humanity. In this battle, the Soviet system and democracy could fight side by side. Overnight, the Communist Party was given a face-lift. No longer stern, ascetic, and grimly determined, it became benign, radiant, and downright avuncular. To encourage acceptance of its new dispensation, the Party magnanimously made a succession of good faith gestures. Writers who had been castigated as 'social fascists' like Archibald MacLeish, were now rehabilitated as valuable spokesman for freedom and humanity. The John Reed Clubs were replaced with the more inclusive League for American Writers. In this same spirit of cordiality and indulgence, the League of Workers Theatres was transformed into the New Theatre League. In the realm of labor politics, the Trade Union Unity League ended its six-year campaign to set up alternate revolutionary unions and joined with the Congress of Industrial Organizations to help forge a vigorous workers organization. For a brief period, in actuality less than twenty-four months, the Communists peddled the new 'line' with the same zeal with which they had propagated the Third Period. At first, the Socialists, bruised and battered by the calumnies of 'social fascism,' were skeptical and circumspect. Soon, however, they submerged their suspicions and joined in a patrolled alliance with the Communists.

Thus, as the United Front was becoming the common currency of intellectual thinking within the left, the Theatre Union organizers, in 1933, determined to fashion their theatre in this mold. What they wanted was

neither a Communists theatre not a Socialist theatre but a nonpartisan theatre of the left. The first, and most obvious measure in this direction was to balance the Communist members on the Executive Committee with capable, well-known Socialists. Two people who were sought out were Samuel Friedman and Mary Fox.

Friedman, a graduate of Columbia University, established his reputation as a leading Socialist as the editor of The New Leader. He compiled and edited a collection of worker's songs called The Rebel Song Book. In the area of the arts, Friedman's name became known in New York as the founder of Rebel Arts and the director of its theatre group. Rebel Arts was a rather lame Socialist attempt to reply to the John Reed Clubs. Years later, Friedman ran for mayor of New York on the Socialists Party ticket. Mary Fox, born in New York and an alumnus of Vassar where she specialized in ecomonics and English literature, had been, since 1929, the executive secretary for the League for Industrial Democracy, a Socialist defense group. She was brought to the Theatre Union by Sylvia Feningston who believed her direct line to Norman Thomas would benefit the new theatre's broad coalition.

Among the members of the organizing committee were people friendly with leaders in David Dubinsky's International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and they tried, without success, to persuade some of them to join the Theatre Union executive body. They were, however, able to cultivate connections with the cultural sections of both the ILGWU and Sidney Hillman's rival organization, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America.[1] Eventually, in the person of Tom Tippett they did manage to enlist someone to represent the trade unions. Tippett, a coal miner from

---

[1]Adelaide Walker, 9 September 1978.

Peoria, Illinois, was a labor intellectual and a name to conjure with in labor circles. He was active in coal strikes and, in the mid-twenties, Tippett had been instrumental in developing a program to educate the illiterate miners in their own mining camps. Later he taught at the Brookwood Labor College in Westchester County, New York, a school founded in 1921 specifically for trade unionists which gave two-year courses specializing in the social sciences. While there he developed an interest in cultural activities and in theatre. In March 1932, the students of Brookwood produced his play, Mill Shadows. The play documents with some skill the textile strike at Marion, North Carolina. It is a thorough biography of that bloody strike, although its form is typical of the oft seen strike plays of the decade. It begins with a depiction of the abysmal working conditions in the mills, then shows the workers learning that solidarity and mass power are more effective than individual action. A strike is called but federal troops are brought in and the workers surrender. They are victorious only in the sense that they retain their union which suggests that they will be able to gradually ameliorate conditions in the mills. The play, however, ends with a sense of urgency when the perfidy of a superintendent leads to a sudden walkout and the massacre of six strike leaders. The bosses' tolerance of the union was shortlived; the battle for workers' rights is ceaseless. The play, which was billed in the program as "the most authentic American Labor play," was also performed at the New School for Social Research and the Labor Temple in New York.[1] It was probably this play that brought Tom Tippett's name to the attention of the Theatre Union organizers. Manuel Gomez, however,

---

[1]Malcolm Cowley, "The Biography of a Strike," New Republic, 9 March 1932, pp. 98-99.

dimly remembers Tippett's joining the Theatre Union as somehow connected to Roger Baldwin.[1] It is important to note that Tippett did not become a member of the Theatre Union Executive Board until shortly before the first production. His name does not appear on the roster of the Theatre Union's first prospectus, issued sometime in the summer of 1933, but it does appear in the program of Peace on Earth.

The political disposition of the Executive Board, though mixed, was, in the view of the two Socialists, sharply skewed in favor of the Communists. Manuel Gomez was an erstwhile member of the American Worker's Party, both Liston Oak and John Freeman, the politically astute editor of the New Masses, who was giving so much advise and promotional help to the Theatre Union that he was put of the Executive Board, were members of the Communist Party, and the others were all fervent fellow travelers. Fox and Friedman, mindful of the Communists' excesses during the Third Period, and worried that the United Front would turn into a sham, pressed the group to invite other Socialists to join the Theatre Union trying in a sense, to protect their interests by packing the court. The man they brought in was Victor Wolfson. He was a good choice both because of his politics—he was a strong liberal—and because of his recent theatre experience.

Born on the lower East side of New York in 1910, Wolfson was the son of Russian immigrants with strong socialist beliefs. His father, a handsome and eloquent man, was the proprieter of a newspaper and candy store and later became the operator of a boarding house. Wolfson attended the Ethical Culture School, but spent most of his time working backstage and sometimes even appearing on stage as a spearcarrier at the

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

Neighborhood Playhouse, where his brother Martin was taking acting classes. Pursuing his interest in theatre, he went to the Experimental College of the University of Wisconsin, founded by Alexander Meiklejohn. While there he created a Greek theatre by running a curtain across an abandoned cattle pavilion. In this makeshift theatre he directed several Greek Classics including Electra, The Clouds, and Lysistrata. The latter, raised the ire of the school's deans because it was staged as a mass demonstration. Audience members were given buttons as they entered which read "Women, Unite!" and the program took the form of a political leaflet with the phrase "Come to the mass meeting on the Acropolis tonight" printed in revolutionary, bold black type at the top of the page. Wolfson also tried his hand as a theatrical impressario when he arranged for the Provincetown Players to come to the university with their production of In Abraham's Bosom. The production was a financial flop and Wolfson returned to directing. In his last year at the university he commuted three times a week to Milwaukee to direct plays for the Wisconsin Players.[1]

After obtaining his B.A. in 1931, Wolfson joined the League for Industrial Democracy. He volunteered his services and offered to go wherever he was needed. Mary Fox, whom he had gotton to know, suggested that he go to the Kanawha Valley in West Virginia, There, a dynamic and capable ex-miner (also a Socialist), Frank Kenney, was trying to organize the miners in a new union. Keeney not only faced the usual obstacles confronting union organizers, but he also faced opposition from the conservative and ineffectual United Mine Workers and the Communist National Miner's Union, both of whom sought to undercut his efforts. When Wolfson

---

[1]"'Bitter Stream' Introduces Victor Wolfson as Playwright," Post, 2 May 1936; Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

and his group arrived in West Virginia to show their support, Wolfson remembers asking himself, "How can I help these people?" His heart was in the right place but he knew nothing about miners and organizing methods. His background was in theatre so he hit upon the idea of having miners write plays about their own lives. He schooled them in the elementary techniques of dialogue and plot construction and he edited their rudimentary plays, some written on scraps of wall paper. Then came what was for Wolfson "the greatest theatre experience" of his life. The miners organized a play competition. On the appointed day, they came streaming down the hill, young and old, mothers with babies in arm, to hear and watch plays in an open air theatre which portrayed their lives in the mines. This event, emotionally stirring for its spontaneity was also, coincidentally, Wolfson's entre to professional theatre. In the audience at the play contest was Elmer Rice, who was so impressed with the young man's work that he offered him the position of assistant stage manager for his play Counsellor-At-Law.[1]

Walker met with Wolfson and discussed his plans for the Theatre Union with him. In his ensuing report to the Executive Board he was apparently impressed with Wolfson for on 8 August 1933 Mary Fox was given a letter to deliver to Wolfson which said, "We are all very thrilled by the story of your work with the West Virginia miners as well as interested in the talent for playwrighting [sic] indicated in your play." The letter went on to invite Wolfson to join the Theatre Union Council "to do on it what you can, helping us to blaze new trails. We believe in the use of the theatre as a social weapon; but we believe that it cannot be

---

[1]Interview with Victor Wolfson, Wellfleet, Massachusetts, 22 June 1978.

a weapon or anything else if it not good theatre at the same time." Wolfson was urged to attend the next Executive Board meeting on 24 August.[1] He immediately accepted the offer and began working on administrative details for the Theatre Union. For Peace on Earth he was identified only as production manager, but by the time the second prospectus was issued, nine weeks after Peace on Earth opened, he had become a full fledged member of the Executive Board.

We have seen how the principles of the United Front were the cornerstone of Marxist policies during the early thirties and how these doctrines were absorbed in the organization of the Theatre Union. It is necessary to reemphasize, however, that the impetus for organizing the Theatre Union on a United Front basis was the Theatre Union's firmly entrenched desire to reach the widest possible audience. It was axiomatic in the Executive Board that new members to the Board were elected on the basis of their potential for attracting audiences. "It was a common agreement among the active Board members that if we had a well-known Communist like Freeman, it would help get the support of Communist organizations to be our audiences."[2] The same could be said for well-known Socialists like Fox and Friedman and well-known trade unionists like Tippett. Though many of the Board members may have had individual political reasons for wanting the Theatre Union to exist—Michael Blankfort once said that the Communists on the Board hoped to make sympathizers out of the audience and that the Socialists hoped to induce support for the

---

[1]Sylvia Feningston to Victor Wolfson, 8 August 1933, Victor Wolfson Papers, Mugar Memorial Library Special Collection, Boston University, Massachusetts.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

Socialist Party[1]—they subordinated these objectives to the more vital goal of radicalizing the largest possible audience.

It therefore became imperative that people recognize the Theatre Union not simply as a spin-off of the Communist Party, but as a genuine attempt at a United Front. The responsibility for the theatre's public image devolved on Margaret Larkin, who as the chief publicist painstakingly stressed the organization's political inclusiveness and consistently disclaimed any ties with any one political party. "The Theatre Union is organized on a broad basis and has the support of trade unionists, revolutionary organizations and of many authors, playwrights and directors," an article in the Daily Worker proudly proclaimed prior to the opening of Peace on Earth.[2] In an article describing the methods the Theatre Union was using to build an audience, she flatly states: "The Theatre Union has consistently followed a united front and non-sectarian policy. There are people of differing political affiliations on its Advisory Board, its Executive Board, its business staff, and its audience."[3] That is to say, that the United Front is an organic part of every facet of the Theatre Union. In replying to the many letters that crossed her desk inquiring about the constitution of the Theatre Union, she would describe the composition of the Executive Board and each time emphasize the political neutrality of the organization as a whole:

> Our executive body is composed of two kinds of people—playwrights and theatre technicians compose about half the Board and representatives from the labor movement compose the other half. We have no political

---

[1]Cited by Taylor, People's Theatre, p. 71.

[2]"Theatre Union to Give First Play Here Next Month," Daily Worker, 16 October 1933, p. 5.

[3]"Building an Audience," New Theatre, October 1934, p. 26.

> affiliation, but our Board includes, two Socialists, two Communists, and one member of the American Workers Party.[1]

A question which naturally needs to be asked at this point is did the United Front work? To answer this we need to break the question into sub-questions: a) Did the cohabitation under the same roof of Communists, fellow travelers, Socialists, and liberals create enmity and chaos or did it work to create a novel and productive excitement? b) Was the Theatre Union's United Front accepted on those terms by the general public?

The first question is relatively easy to answer for we have the eyewitness testimony of several Board members. Their conclusion is unanimous. Within the organization, the admixture of the oil and vineger of left politics worked effectively and without discord. The following is a sampling of comments on this question: Charles Walker: "In the theatre's management Socialists, Communists and others—much to everyone's surprise—achieved a working harmony." Albert Maltz : "We had harmony. Harmony was established on a common platform. There was no political fighting. . . . for most of our five-year life there was a lovely harmony there." George Sklar: "I think we were one of the few organizations of any kind in any field that succeeded in having a United Front which really worked. The other attempts at the United Front by a political organization usually ended up by a struggle for power." Michael Blankfort: "The United Front really worked. . . it really worked awfully well for a long time." Manuel Gomez:

> Curiously enough, the Communists on the Board, and in a sense we were all Communists, except for Mary and Sam, although Liston was the only

---

[1]Margaret Larkin to Felicia Shpritzer, 12 December 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

> member of the Party, I had been a member of the Party, as you know my name was Manuel Gomez, well, curiously enough throughout the life of the Theatre Union, we never had a serious dispute with the Socialists and the Communists. . . . It was a big surprise to me that it did work out that way. We got along fine, socially and in every other way.[1]

The question of how others perceived the Theatre Union is less clear. As late as April 1935, after two seasons and four productions, Margaret Larkin was still trying to persuade people that the Theatre Union was indeed not controlled by any single political viewpoint: "Despite contrary opinions, the Theatre Union is unconnected with any political organization. Our only creed is to fight for the underdog. We are trying to improve the life of the working man"[2] Such disavowals were necessary because the view prevailed in certain quarters that the Theatre Union was nothing more than a Communist front agency with a handful of Socialists on its administrative board to pay lip service to the doctrine of United Front, that, in fact, the Theatre Union was an off-shoot of the John Reed Clubs. The stress that the Theatre Union put on drawing a large part of its audience from trade unions gave pause to the American Federation of Labor (AFL), for example, which was at the time locked in a battle for members with the Communist Trade Union Unity League. During the Theatre Union's first season, AFL unions were inhibited from buying blocks of tickets because they felt that Communists dominated the Executive Board and because they saw that the Trade Union Unity League regularly attended the plays. Both these factors made the Theatre Union appear suspect. Later, however, Fox and Friedman, themselves convinced of the credibility of the theatre's United Front stance, helped bring AFL

---

[1]Walker, "Theatre on Left," p. 730; Maltz, 15 July 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978; Blankfort, 17 July 1978; Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]"Decalres Great Playwrights are Propagandists," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 12 April 1935.

unions into the theatre.[1] But their distrust of the Communists lingered and the Theatre Union "never got whole-hearted AFL union support." The AFL, ever vigilant of Communist incursions on the labor front, was never very anxious to enter into a United Front with the Communist Party in any manner or form.

The frequent assertions of the Theatre Union's political independence was directed not only at the doubters in the center but at the extreme left as well. Oddly enough, it was the Communists, still wrestling with the vestiges of Third Period attitudes, who found it hardest to accept the Theatre Union's United Front. "In the very, very beginning," recollects Manuel Gomez, "The Communist Party considered us an off-shoot of theirs. They began to feel, however, that our plays did not hew to the party line enough, so they began to look askance at us, and yet criticize us in a friendly way. The Socialists never did criticize us seriously."[2] The Communists nurtured the view that the Theatre Union was its stepchild on the stage, and like an unruly son it had to be disciplined when it behaved intolerably. The Party was outraged when it learned that the Theatre Union proposed to have Socialists on its Executive Board, that it intended to pay actors and backstage workers Equity regulated salaries (a measure that would have been unthinkable not to adopt for a theatre with a labor orientation, but which annoyed the Communists because in 1933 they were unwilling to cooperate with existing unions), and that the arch bourgeois, reactionary playwright, Sidney Howard, was to be on the Advisory Board. The New York District of the Communist Party summoned two Theatre Union organizers, Charles Walker among them, to its offices to

---

[1]Interview with Sylvia Regan, New York, New York, 28 June 1978.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

answer charges that it was creating a "bourgeois theatre."[1] The Theatre Union remained firm and continued on its solo voyage. But the Communists persisted in their efforts to chart their course albeit by remote control. From within the Executive Board, it seems likely that Liston Oak took scripts which were being considered for production to V. J. Jerome, the cultural commisar of the American Communist Party, for his perusal and comments and allowed himself to be the conduit for Communist opinion in the Theatre Union's discussions of the plays. Michael Blankfort, in his slighly veiled autobiographical novel, A Time To Live, alludes to this practice in the People's Drama Guild, a United Front theatre organization with striking affinities to the Theatre Union.[2] Albert Maltz suspects that Liston Oak took early drafts of his plays to Jerome, though he hastens to add that this was done without his knowledge or consent and that the Theatre Union ultimately made its own decisions.[3]

In the Communist press, theatrical savants kept a circumspect eye on the progress of the Theatre Union stroking it gently when it followed the Party's credo and giving it sharp bursts of critical electric shock treatment when it ignored or negated that creed. One instance is notable for the intensity of the Theatre Union's response. One article in New Theatre claimed that Stevedore, though a stirring drama, attenuated its revolutionary impact because it failed to correct its political vagueness and lack of ideological specificity.[4] The Theatre Union responded with

---

[1]Walker, "Theatre on Left," p. 730.

[2](New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1943), Chapter Three.

[3]Maltz in an interview with James Lyon. The tape was loaned to author by Albert Maltz.

[4]John Howard Lawson, "Straight from the Shoulder," New Theatre, November 1934, pp. 11-12.

a blistering, unconditional retort that left no doubt about its feelings about the Communists' efforts to obtrude from near or far into its program:

> The Theatre Union has consistently followed a non-sectarian, United Front policy. It is a worker's theatre, organized to produce plays that dramatize the problems, the conflicts, of contempotary society; particularly the problems of the American working class against war and Fascism, against the speed-up, against capitalist exploitation and oppression in its manifold forms, against class injustice. . . .
>
> The Theatre Union is not an agit-prop theatre. It is a United Front theatre organized to produce plays that all honest and militant workers and middle-class symphathizers can support; plays that, without compromise on questions of principle, will appeal particularly to unorganized workers who are not yet class conscious . . . Like other organizations which maintain a United Front policy, such as the League Against War and Fascism, we stick to specific and limited tasks, functioning as a theatre, not a political party.[1]

The author of this calculated response was none other than Liston Oak. In a politic demonstration of solidarity, Oak was chosen to make the reply to illustrate the Theatre Union's unshakable independence.

It is interesting to note that despite all the Communists' efforts to stage manage Theatre Union policy, Earl Browder, the Party Chief, was content to let the theatre follow its own course from the outset. Aware of the obdurate nature of many Party members, he earnestly confided to Charles Walker that if they took control of the theatre they would inevitably clog the works: "Many of the comrades are impractical and leftist. . . . I believe if the Communist Party directly controls the Theatre Union you will have interesting debates about plays. If you remain autonomous you might get a theatre."[2]

The best barometer of how the typical man on the street conceived the political collaboration of the Theatre Union is the kind of audiences

---

[1]Liston Oak, "Theatre Union Replies," New Theatre, November 1934, p. 12.

[2]Walker, "Theatre on Left," p. 730.

which attended the plays. Those audiences, boasted Margaret Larkin, "represent[ed] every shade of political opinion, many nationalities, many cultural interests."[1] A sampling of them reveals, of course, the expected Communist and Socialist dominated organizations like the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the American League Against War and Fascism, the International Workers Order, the League for Industrial Democracy, the Workman's Circle, the International Labor Defense, the Friends of the Soviet Union, and the Young People's Socialist League. But Sylvia Regan's roster of over 250 organizations that regularly bought blocks of tickets also included trade unions--ILGWU locals, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the Beautician's Union; schools--Thomas Jefferson High School, Byrn Mawr Alumni Association, and the Julliard Student Club; religious groups--Congregation Ahavah Israel, Protestant Young People's Society, and the Church of Ascension; and clubs and fraternal orders--the Sigam Phi Tau Fraternity, Friends of the Chinese People, Flatbush Culture Club, Sisterhood Path of Life, Dentists' Wives Society, and the Liberal Club of the Young Women's Hebrew Association.[2]

One important factor in forging the United Front image was the Advisory Board with which the Theatre Union adorned its programs, stationary, and publicity material. The Board contained the names of leading men and woman from the world of letters and the stage. These were people who were known as liberals, some with a proven proclivity for left causes and some who were shy politically, but who were demonstrably humanitarian in spirit. In identifying such a group as supporters of

---

[1]"Building Social Theatre," p. 5.

[2]Various Press Releases, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

the Theatre Union, the Executive Board hoped to demonstrate conclusively its ideological autonomy. Among the twenty-two names listed on the Advisory Board in the Theatre Union's first prospectus were such literary luminaries as Sherwood Anderson, Waldo Frank, Lewis Mumford, John Dos Passos, and Edmund Wilson. Writers and journalists on the Board with narrower reputations were Arthur H. Beckhard, Stephen Vincent Benet, the educator George S. Counts, the black poet Countee Cullen, H. W. L. Dana, John Herrmann, and Mary Heaton Vorse. From Broadway, playwrights like Sidney Howard, Lynn Riggs, Morrie Ryskind, John Howard Lawson, and Albert Bein, actresses like Rose McClendon, Ida Ruah, and Blanche Yurka, and the stage designer Cleon Throckmorton gave their blessing and their names to the new enterprise. Roger Baldwin, the founder and director of the American Civil Liberties Union, gave his support also.

The credit for assembling this impressive congregation of personalities must go in the main to Charles Walker. His upper class background, his graduation from Yale—he roomed with Donald Ogden Stewart—and his easy movement through literary circles facilitated the task of organizing the Advisory Board. Among the people he brought to the Advisory Board were his Cape Cod neighbors, Waldo Frank and Edmund Wilson, Anderson, Dos Passos, Mumford, Vorse, Benet, Rauh, and Sidney Howard (who addressed him by the sobriquet "Doc.")[1] Walker's connections with these writers were varied. Some, however, shared his frustrations with the direction American society was taking. Anderson, Dos Passos, and Frank had also been to Harlan County in '32. These and some others on the Advisory Board, along with Walker, had during the election of 1932

---

[1]Adelaide Walker, 9 September 1978.

lent their names and prestige to The League of Professional Writers for Foster and Ford, signing an open letter declaring their support for the Communist Party candidates because the two major parties were "hopelessly corrupt" and the Socialists were a do-nothing party.[1]

Walker was not the only one who knew people, though. Margaret Larkin brought Lynn Riggs, and Gomez brought Morrie Ryskind.[2] Hammond brought Bein whose first play, Little Ol' Boy he had recently produced, and Peters helped bring Roger Baldwin for whom he had worked as publicity man for the American Civil Liberties Union.

Aside from giving their stamp of approval to the Theatre Union, this group had no stated function and they never met as a body. They were sponsors, friends, interested persons, well-wishers who in some cases contributed money as well. In a word, they were window dressing; celebrities who gave the theatre an aura of respectability and serious intent.[3] Some individuals were more interested than others and directly participated in building the project. Waldo Frank, for example, met with the Executive Board and served as a sounding board for the selection of plays and gave informal advice on the degree to which the Theatre Union should employ professional talent. Anderson, Howard, and Baldwin were likewise enthusiastic backers and helped raised money by speaking to friends and at Theatre Union fund raising dinners. Elmer Rice, who joined the Board after Peace on Earth, helped with his considerable theatre expertise when he attended several rehearsals.[4] Lewis Mumford

---

[1]Aaron, Writers on Left, pp. 196-197, 523.

[2]Adelaide Walker, 9 September 1978.

[3]Peters, 20 August 1978. [4]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

agreed to chair a symposium at the New School, "The American Theatre Tomorrow," which was given under the auspices of the Theatre Union in an effort to publicize its plans.[1] Fenningston remembers Mumford also coming to one of the blueprint meetings and being critical of some of the Theatre Union's statements and intents.[2]

All decision-making power rested with the Executive Board. The nucleus of twelve which founded the theatre and shepherded their concepts to their final realization, decided early that the full responsibility for every facet of the theatre's operations and maintenance would reside with them. As Manuel Gomez affirms, "We were always determined that the Board would run the organization and not the actors and not the technical people, that the Board which was imbued fully with a sense of purpose would run the theatre in every way."[3] This was not going to be a communal venture like the Theatre of Action or the Worker's Laboratory Theatre where the actors shared in the destiny of the theatre. Nor was it going to be like the Group Theatre which in addition to its cooperative structure was a theatre guided by the diacritical artistic vision of its directors. For the Theatre Union, the focus was to be on the play and its message, not the virtuosity of the direction or the development of a singular style. The founders felt that if they were to remain faithful to their original purpose, they alone had to be responsible.

The purview of the Executive Board was all-embracing. "We voted on everything. There was nothing else but the Executive Board; that was

---

[1] New York Times, 23 March 1933.

[2] Interview with Sylvia Fenningston, Redding, Connecticut, 8 October 1978.

[3] Gomez, 8 October 1978.

the theatre," says Victor Wolfson.[1] They read manuscripts, debated their merits and flaws, and decided what plays to produce. Once a play was selected they worked with the dramatists on rewrites, chose a director and designer, and monitored the progress of rehearsals from casting through previews. They deliberated on the budget for the theatre and invented a series of ancillary projects like the actor's studio, a script library, and a radio program. They considered who should respond to published articles critical of the theatre and what should be said in those rebuttals. And last, but certainly not least since it consumed a great deal of their time, they were involved with the nitty-gritty of getting an audience, from deciding how much and where to advertise to criss-crossing the city in subways making speeches day and night to union groups, labor organizations, and clubs.

Although the range of its power was firmly resolved early on, how the Board was to function was not formally structured until after the first play. Prior to Peace on Earth, the Board was busy ironing out the practical problems of getting off the ground. We shall therefore reserve consideration of the Board's operational methods and policies for the next chapter. At this point, it is important to note, however, the zeal and dedication of the Board. Among its members, there was the kind of selfless spirit one might expect in a convent of Buddhist monks. Personal ego was subordinated in favor of the common goal. Albert Maltz makes the following comment about the groups dedication:

> I have no memory whatsoever, that is in that period, of any members of the Board seeking any kind of individual profit of any sort. I don't mean money profit, because there was none to be had, but any kind of personal advancement of any sort. It was an experience . . .

---

[1]Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

> a varied group of individuals dedicated to a common goal and it was very lovely . . . a rich human experience of common endeavor.[1]

One factor which explains the almost religious consecration felt by the Executive Board members was their relative youthfulness. Although the average age of the group was thirty-four, they were mainly in their early or mid-twenties and fresh out of college. Like the under-thirty generation of the turbulent sixties who were confronted with overwhelming social crisis which demanded answers, these postgraduates were likewise fired with the idealistic vision of breaking out of the past and of forging a new and better world. An excerpt from Blankfort's book, A Time To Live, referring to the fictitous People's Drama Guild captures the essence of the dream that stoked the Theatre Union's energies and sustained its members through setbacks and frustrations:

> . . . they were kept going by the palpable sense that they were all participating in the creation of something important. In the dream of their mind, during all those months, they imagined the play produced and tens of thousands of people who had never seen a "show" before crowding their theatre. They heard like distant music the great waves of applause; but most of all they were kept alive and moving by the thought that on some day to come, some man who had seen their anti-war play would remember it and refuse to support an unjust, wicked war for empire and greed and markets. In some hour that must come, some man, a longshoreman perhaps, who had seen their play, would remember it and refuse to ship munitions to Japan or to Germany or to England at war. And in some trench, some inevitable day, there might be a soldier who had seen their play and would remember it and say, "This is not my war." . . .
>
> Like their comrades painting or writing new music or poetry, they were artists living in the gigantic hope that their substance might make men act. They were world shakers, not with pale disconnected beauty, but with the iron logic of their faith and conviction. . . .[2]

It was this high-principled idealism that prompted a dizzying momentum of work for the members of the Board. They would have meetings and office work all morning, rehearsals in the afternoon, and additional

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978. [2]Blankfort, Time To Live, pp. 65-66.

meetings in the evening. They plunged into their work with the kind of perfervid passion an uxorious husband had for his new bride. Charles Walker was rebuked by his son's governess for leaving his home so early in the morning and returning so late at night that he never had time for his child.[1] Sylvia Feningston attended meetings with her infant daughter Carlotta in a wash basket.[2]

If there was something madcap about their schedule, there was something euphoric about it, too. Meetings were characterized by a bracing openness, an extraordinary atmosphere of frankness prevailed. If meetings were long and occurred day after day they were not abhorred as a tiresome nusiance, but welcomed as a vehicle of personal growth. Michael Blankfort still marvels at the honesty of the criticism that was offered, at the eagerness with which such was accepted, and at the frequentcy of self-criticism. He remembers, for example, the deliberations over his play Battle Hymn at which one member of the Board stood up and delivered an extensive and erudite analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the play. "There was," he observes, "a creative critical spirit there that was really extraordinary. I've never had such an experience ever."[3] Indeed, the Executive Board resembled an extended family. "I don't think we had a social life apart from each other," remarked Sylvia Feningston.[4] In a few instances they even vacationed together, combining business and pleasure for three or four days on the sunny beaches of Cape Cod where they could escape the mayhem of produc-

---

[1]Adelaide Walker, 9 September 1978.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Blankfort, 17 July 1978. [4]Feningston, 8 October 1978.

tion and ponder long range financial and organizational problems on a carefully worked out agenda.[1]

Another policy which was hammered out during the long gestation period was whether to make the Theatre Union a professional theatre or not. Up to this time, the workers' theatre movement and coeval radical theatre groups, steeped as they were in the purist tenets of the Third Period, unconditionally rejected traditional theatre in its forms and practices. "Workers' theatre today is the theatre of the class struggle. Its only purpose is reflecting (dramatizing) the class struggle, and promoting (propagandizing) the class struggle. Its only audiences are the mass of the workers. Workers' theatre is for the exploitated, bourgeois theatre is for the exploiters," screamed John Bonn.[2] The bourgeois theatre, they affirmed is decadent to the core. Its playwrights pander to the escapist desires of the audience and the actors, directors, and technicians who work in those defiled temples on Broadway have sold their souls to the same devil. There would be no advantage, they continued, in picking the bones of the carrion of Broadway. The robust workers' theatre, its sights set on a new, untarnished audience, wanted to forge a new form. In making the theatre a weapon in the grand crusade, it would be folly to keep an eye on Broadway. "No workers' theatre has much chance of success if it tried to imitate the bourgeois theatre. . . . The workers are not prepared, financially and ideologically, to support such a theatre. Consequently, the theatre either modified its policies and makes concessions to the prejudices of the intellectual

---

[1]Theatre Union to Miss Schwartz, 17 December 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]"Workers' Theatre," p. 1.

class or it fails."[1]

The Theatre Union, however, did not subscribe to this tail-wagging-the-dog logic. The extremists on the left were arguing that the form of the theatre itself is a political statement. The Theatre Union insisted that although form could not be ignored their first obligation was to the statement made by the play.

> We didn't give a good God damn whether it was bourgeois or not. We had terrific quarrels with the Theatre of Action and the Theatre Collective . . . who had as a slogan "Down With the Proscenium Arch." We said we would use the proscenium arch, we would use anything, anything that happens to be effective to what we're saying—the important thing is what we're saying."[2]

They felt no compunctions about appropriating whatever was good from the Broadway stage. The other workers' theatre groups used amateurs and had limited resources. As a result, they were inherently limited in their impact on audiences in terms of number. Wanting to attract the broadest possible segment of class conscious workers and intellectuals, the Theatre Union opted for a professional theatre which applied the standards of Broadway.

In the spring of 1933 they began interviewing professional actors promising them only the Equity minimun of $40.00 per week for all, regardless of their prestige and previous experience. Benefiting this policy was the Theatre Union's United Front posture. Their open-handed politics made it possible for theatre artists of any political persuasion to work with the Theatre Union. The austere political views of other workers' theatre groups precluded this possibility even if they had wanted it. This decision, as Sklar noted, brought the Theatre Union into

---

[1]Harry Ober, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre," Workers Theatre, April 1931, p. 9

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

conflict with the Workers' Laboratory Theatre and the Theatre Collective. Sam Rosen of the Collective led the way in showering the Theatre Union with bitter maledictions. He denounced the project as reactionary because it wanted to ape the bourgeois theatre. Aside from such passionate name calling, they raised serious operational questions. For instance, how could Broadway actors have any understanding of workers' problems, problems which are alien to their realm of experience? How could the Theatre Union hope to give a convincing performance of a revolutionary play, a proletarian play, with actors who had not lived through what they represented? What insight and understanding could they bring to the play? If the Theatre Collective was weak in artistry by Broadway standards, it was certainly rich in projecting the nuances of the revolutionary spirit.[1]

The Theatre Union remained unmoved in its resolve. Yes, it wanted a political theatre but it was not about to sacrifice the effectiveness of that theatre by allowing factitious political arguments to dictate the theatre's artistic form. Unafraid of compromising its intentions, it went its own way, leaving the Theatre Collective and the Workers' Laboratory Theatre to discover for themselves the error of their thinking. In time the Theatre Union was vindicated in two ways. First, the exigencies of the United Front thaw brought waves of recantations from the obdurate repudiationists. John Bonn seemed to have changed not only his accent but his voice when he declared, "Our attitude toward the bourgeois theatre was up to now incorrect. I in particular had taken a wrong leftist standpoint. . . . But after a close study and wider experience I now fully agree with my critics, who urged a more active at-

---

[1] Jay Williams interview with George Sklar, transcript p. 2., Jay Williams Papers, Mugar Memorial Library Special Collection, Boston University, Massachusetts.

titude toward the bourgeois theatre."[1] Second, no matter what the 'bourgeois critics' thought of the play, even if they panned it, they always admired the consistent professionalism of the Theatre Union's productions. In reviewing the fourth production, Black Pit, one critic remarked,

> Though "Black Pit" is not perhaps a play of the quality of "Stevedore" or "The Sailors of Cattaro," it is none the less a work of more than usual interest, and in its production the Theatre Union again proves itself an organization to be reckoned with. Whatever the Theatre Union produces it produces well, and it does not hesitate to employ bourgeois actors to portray proletarian roles if proletarian actors haven't the proper training or innate talent.[2]

Other critics, among them John Anderson, John Mason Brown, Stark Young, echoed these same sentiments in their commentaries on the plays because as Peter Xantho (stage manager for four productions who had come to the Theatre Union after some experience on Broadway) observed, the professionalism at the Theatre Union was complete and rooted deep in its everyday operations. It adhered to Equity rules, it cast professionally, it started rehearsals at specific times, everything was as it should be.[3]

As discussions with actors began, another crucial policy issue had to be addressed. Since the Theatre Union hoped to become a permanent producing organization, should it try to establish a permanent acting company? The Group Theatre was achieving so much success and acclaim with a permanent company that the idea became tantalizing. Besides, though it was alright to use Broadway actors, how much more effective could the theatre be if it were able to develop and sustain a company of

---

[1]"Dram Buro Report," p. 8.

[2]Grenville Vernon, "Black Pit," Commonweal, 5 April 1934, p. 654.

[3]Interview with Peter Xantho, New York, New York, 26 May 1978.

professional actors who were committed to Marxism. The Theatre Union debated the pros and cons of establishing a permanent ensemble and at first they were inclined to go ahead with the idea. In the spring (1933), Maltz borrowed his mother's car and together with Sklar traveled south to Abingdon, Virginia. There they negotiated with Robert Porterfield, founder and manager of the Barter Theatre on the campus of Martha Washington College, an abandoned girls' finishing school, to use the theatre and its facilities that summer as a rehearsal camp after the fashion of the Group's Brookfield Center. In June, all the leading newspapers were carrying short notices announcing that the Theatre Union was organizing a company of actors which would depart 17 June for ten weeks of rehearsal and training at the Barter Inn in preparation for its first season of three plays. Interested actors were to apply at the new theatre's Fifth Avenue office. Consistent with earlier considerations of making the Theatre Union a cultural center, there was even some talk of Anna Sokolow joining the expedition southward to direct a dance group.[1] Several actors were signed up for the adventure. Among them were the soon to be forgotten Hans Hohenwald and Trevor Bardett, but also Millicent Green, who later became, among the actors, one of the strongest advocates of the Theatre Union.[2] After spending $259.00 on the project, the Board finally decided that it could not economically sustain a permanent company and the summer venture was cancelled.[3]

---

[1]"Theatre Union to Prepare Three Plays," Post, 3 June 1933; "Summer Activities of Theatre Union," Sun, 3 June 1933.

[2]New York Times, 7 June 1933.

[3]Financial Report, January 1933 to 28 July 1934, loaned to author by Zelda Dorfman.

Economics was the main reason given for aborting the plans for a permanent company. Though it was a credible and sufficient reason—the Theatre Union could not expect the same subsidy that underwrote the Group's company—there were other reasons as well. One was the Board's impatience. They were not willing to invest the time, effort, and capital necessary to get a permanent company started. Like a good wine, a permanent company, to be resonant with collective imagination and rich in diversity, needs time to develop. It needs the guarantee that initial failure will not result in its instant demise. Times were hard and the Executive Board could never hope for such guarantees; the first failure would certainly be its last. "Our hearts weren't really in that . . .," concludes Gomez speaking for the majority opinion of the Board, "although it may have been with Sylvia [Feningston] and some members, but most of the members were more interested in getting accomplished actors than in the slow building up of an acting company."[1]

Another significant reason was the fear that a permanent acting company could become detrimental to the repertory of a revolutionary theatre. Margaret Larkin voiced the Board's reservation in this regard when she argued that there is the tendency with a permanent company to select plays that fit the company "rather than for their intrinsic artistic and political merit as working class drama."[2] A workers' theatre needs the freedom and flexibility to choose the plays that best suits its audience. That should be its first criterion for assembling a repertoire. A permanent company—and one composed of radical actors is no

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]"Theatre Union—Its Tasks and Problems," Daily Worker, 15 May 1935, p. 5.

exception—might take collective umbrage if a play were chosen which required the importation of talent from without, thus deflecting the theatre from its mission. Besides, Wharf Nigger was a play Walker very much wanted to do so how could they do a single play calling for a large black cast with a predominantly white company? Clifford Odets, a firm if sometimes manic exponent of the permanent company concept, proffered a neat solution to take such a contingency into account—put the actors in blackface![1]

These factors notwithstanding, this decision also reveals a serious weakness in the thinking of the Executive Board, a weakness which was to have decisive ramifications for the plays that were actually selected for production. Sylvia Feningston lamented in retrospect, "If only we had had people [on the Board] who cared more about the theatre as such."[2] As we have seen, the Board was composed of two groups of people. Some were representatives of labor groups or political organizations and the remainder were budding playwrights who had seen few of their plays produced. All of them were novices to the theatre and none of them were especially theatrically-minded. This is not to cast any aspersions on their sincerity, but only to explain their lack of interest in the actor's craft and their unwillingness to embark on any theatrical experimantation. The Board did not possess a trained theatrical person like the Group's Lee Strasberg. Though they tried to make a virtue out of this by stating that their productions would not reflect any single particular style, they were nonetheless weakened by this gap; the plays they chose were traditionial and repetitive in form and content and their productions, in-

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [2]Feningston, 8 October 1978.

cluding the 'avant-garde' Mother, were undiversified and made conventional.

As more actors and directors became a part of the Theatre Union operations, there was more pressure to form a permanent company. The actors took the initiative in pushing for one and the Executive Board made some half-hearted promises and condoned the formation of the Experimental Studio. But in the minds of Executive Board members the idea of a permanent acting company was just not feasible.

Along with deciding on the nature of the acting company, the Executive Board was busy trying to locate a home. As an ongoing producing organization they wished to find a permanent home. Some, like Maltz, perferred to find a theatre on Broadway to lend the Theatre Union the same air of respectibility accorded the 'bourgeois' theatre.[1] The high rent of mid-Manhattan real estate and the austerity of their budget forced them to look off-Broadway. Nothing was available and for a time they even flirted with the idea of setting up shop in some labor halls, though this was not a serious thought since they definitely wanted a real theatre.[2] Finally, and fortuitously, Eva Le Gallienne ended her seven-year tenancy of the huge Civic Repertory Theatre, transferring her highly esteemed repertory company in their latest success Alice in Wonderland to a Broadway theatre. The Board scooped up the vacated theatre in an instant. The Civic Repertory Theatre was ideal for their purposes. Here was a large twelve-hundred seat theatre situated in the heart of the working class community of New York, only footsteps away from the soapbox radicals of Union Square. "We liked that idea very much because it represented 1) a theatre that had been made famous as theatre and 2) in Fourteenth

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978. [2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

Street, in a real proletarian environment, it was just an ideal combination," says Gomez. "So there was no question as soon as we knew the Civic Repertory was available we were determined to get that theatre."[1] The Board leased the theatre on a "four-wall" basis (putting its own personnel in the box office) thus not sharing anything with the owners of the theatre.

The grey exterior of the theatre resembled the armory which was down the street. The bile green walls of the auditorium exuded a stuffy antiqueness which was compounded by the cakes of dust which had settled everywhere in the theatre's interior. The auditorium was divided into three sections—a large orchestra and two spacious balconies—yet it retained a sense of intimacy. It had a magnificent stage, adequate wing space, and, behind the backstage wall, a cavernous, gloomy gallery, 'the paint frame' of nineteenth century vintage, which Le Gallienne had used for building and storing scenery for her complex repertory operation. In addition, it had a maze-like arrangement of lofts and offices which the Theatre Union later took over for its offices and as a studio for its acting classes. Up one flight, too, on old, creaky, wooden floors, was an apartment which was let to Irene Scharaff, a friend of Eva Le Gallienne. She was a stunningly beautiful, dark-eyed, Russian-looking Theda Bara who was a skilled designer (she later became famous for her work on the King and I) and who occasionally helped the Theatre Union costume committees with advice on where they could purchase cheap material.[2] By some quirk of design, what the theatre did not have were dressing rooms. Le Gallienne had compensated for this architectural failure by renting

---

[1] Ibid. [2] Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

an old brownstone directly behind the theatre and converting it into dressing room facilities. Rain or shine, the actors trudged across the open yard to change their costumes. The Theatre Union continued this cumbersome practice until a later time when it cleared out the cellar and built the dressing rooms down there.[1]

When Le Gallienne moved out of the theatre in 1933 she did so on a temporary basis, allowing the Theatre Union to occupy it only for an indefinite period. Though she held a lease on the Civic Repertory until 1938, in August 1934, she decided to move her company into the Forty-Sixth Street Theatre. This action made it possible for the Theatre Union to make the Civic Repertory its permanent residence and for it to relinquish its Fifth Avenue office and consolidate all its operations on Fourteenth Street.[2] This measure saved the company $13.50 a week in rent for that office space.[3]

Almost two years were spent hammering out the many policies, large and small, that we have examined thus far. This long preliminary period of discussion and theorizing could have been shortened, and indeed, the Executive Board wanted to curtail it,[4] were it not for the lack of the two most crucial components in any theatre organization: money and the right plays.

With regard to raising the initial funds, the Executive Board made the critical decision not to solicit money by selling subscriptions. Instead they opted for outright gifts. Though in some respects this is

---

[1]Regan, 28 June 1978. [2]New York Times, 3 August 1933.

[3]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[4]Margaret Larkin to Mr. Wyckoff, 9 August 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

a more difficult procedure, they reasoned that it would be more honest and equitable. Since they could not guarantee their continued existence, they believed it would be bad financial policy to sell subscriptions for a series of plays and then spend the money thus raised on the first play.[1]

They incorporated themselves as a non-profit making organization.[2] Victor Wolfson was given $10.52 for his expenses and sent to Washington to file for a tax exemption on the basis of being an 'educational institution.'[3] This was a ritual that was repeated the following year by Gomez (who, incidentally, doubled his expenses for no explicable reason).[4] This tax-exemption request may account for the Board's willingness to set up an actors' training studio despite its disinterest in a permanent company.

Incorporation accomplished, the Board and its friends plunged into a feverish campaign to raise $10,000 to begin the first season. Needless to say, such a sum was astronomical for the year 1933, yet within a few months $1,000 was raised from hundreds of contributions of one, five and ten dollars each.[5] Claiming itself a proletarian theatre it appealed to the people for support. This, however, was insufficient and

---

[1]Margaret Larkin to Edward Barnhardt, 21 November 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]The Theatre Union was incorporated simply as a business matter. They were incorporated under the laws of New York State as a non-profit making membership corporation. They formed no constitution except the standard corporation constitution required by state law. (Margaret Larkin to Fred Asher, 8 August 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.)

[3]Wolfson, 22 June 1978; Financial Report, 1933-34.

[4]Financial Report, 1 August 1934 to 6 June 1935, loaned to author by Adelaide Walker.

[5]Public Relations Notes, Albert Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

the bulk of the money raised by the Board's wizard with names and connections, Charlie Walker. Walker, who first dreamed of the Theatre Union, implemented his hopes through the herculean task of accumulating the necessary funds.

Walker turned to Sidney Howard, Maurice Wertheim, and Katherine Hepburn, all of whom either gave or loaned the theatre some money.[1] The biggest boost in the Theatre Union's fund-raising effort came from Walker's friend and neighbor, John Henry Hammond, Jr. who magnanimously donated $2,000, a gift which breathed life into the new theatre. Hammond had become acquainted with Walker in the early thirties, accompanying Walker to Harlan, Kentucky, on the latter's second sojourn there. Despite his patrician background—he was heir to the Hammond organ fortune, his grandfather was Commodore Vanderbilt and his mother was the blue-blooded Emily Sloan—he voted a straight Communist ticket in 1932.[2] At this point in his life, the twenty-three-year-old Hammond, who sported a Prussian-style haircut, was casting about for a career. With Joseph Losey as his adviser, he was considering becoming a theatrical producer. He had produced an Albert Bein play in April 1933 and he was planning an authentic all-black revue for the fall when he supplemented his producing activity by joining the Theatre Union's Executive Board, largely on the strength of his munificence. Though never very active in the Theatre Union's internal affairs, Hammond remained a close friend, assisting the theatre financially both through his own largess and by bringing contributions from some of his wealthy friends like Vanderbilt

---

[1]Adelaide Walker, 9 September 1978.

[2]Clipping, source unidentified, Peace on Earth Scrapbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

Field and the Pratt brothers.[1]

Another strong supporter was the lawyer H. William Fitelson. Though first introduced to the Theatre Union family through Margaret Larkin, who probably knew him from her participation in Green Grow the Lilacs, he soon became close friends with the Walkers. His specialty was entertainment law and in ensuing years he developed an extensive practice giving legal advice to performers and producers. He agreed to become the theatre's official counsel and he was so symthathetic to its program that he frequently helped with the cash flow. Before the end of the first season he had given the Theatre Union $100 and loaned it a total of $1,403.[2] He, too, canvassed friends, such as B. Margolis, for additional donations.[3]

Members of the Executive Board, those who could, also contributed to the Theatre Union. Walker, Maltz and his brother Edward, and Gomez together loaned the theatre $2,100 during the first season. With a hint of self-congratulations, a note in the first season's financial report states that as of 28 July 1934 all five loans were paid in full. What did not need to be repaid, in cash at any rate, were the many gifts the theatre received. There is no breakdown in the account ledgers as to how much accrued over the course of the first season. It is safe to assume though that a large proportion of the $7,604.65 entered as Miscellaneous Gifts and many of the twelve gifts of $20.00 or more totaling $2,507.50 (among them a generous $1,250 from one "Munsell of Baltimore" and $500 from Elmhurst) were in the bank before Peace on Earth.[4]

One source of income which the Board explored on a number of occasions was the green pastures of Hollywood. With $85.00 in her pocket-

---

[1]Adelaide Walker, 9 September 1978. [2]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[3]Adelaide Walker, 9 September 1978. [4]Financial Report, 1933-34.

book for expenses, Mara Tartar was dispatched to the west coast to drum up support. Tartar was a raven-haired, attractive, gypsyish-looking, multi-talented performer. Only 22, she had been an adagio dancer, a director, an actress and a "leading lady." As early as 1931, she latched on to the Theatre Union group, leaving the Red Bank Players to volunteer her services to the new theatre. Her effervescent enthusiasm for the theatre's platform led the Board to consider her, at one point, for an executive position, and after Peace on Earth opened she was given the title of Promotion Manager. Armed with a packet of prospectuses, she knocked on the door of many of the movie city's most notable denizens. One paragraph of the prospectus read, "The Theatre Union means to be self-supporting and the budget calculations have been carefully adjusted to that purpose. However, a sustaining of $15,000 is necessary to insure the first full season of plays. A proportion of this sum has already been pledged. We urgently solicit your contributions."[1] Individually and in small groups, the Theatre Union's west coast representative distributed the prospectuses, outlined the theatre's history, its aim and the scope of its plans, then pleaded for money. She mentioned the Theatre Union's plan to start branches of itself all over the country, with each theatre presenting its repertoire of plays without leaving the city. How much of this was indeed a concrete plan and how much was Tartar's idea of enticing support from people is a moot point. At any rate, she managed to see many well-known actors, writers, and society people, many of whom endorsed the Theatre Union with a contribution. Among these were Chico Marx, Francis Lederer, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Paul Muni, Jimmy Durante, Joseph Schildkraut, Edwin Justin Mayer, Mrs. Ad Schulberg, Mrs. Salka Viertel, Berthold

---

[1]Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

Viertel, Lester Cohen, Kenneth MacGowan, Mrs. Caspar Whitney, Louis Weizenkorn, and Herman Mankowitz.[1]

Of all the money that was collected, at the beginning and throughout the history of the Theatre Union, it is a fact that no political organization was called on to donate money and none volunteered any (not that the Communist Party or the American Workers' Party was rich enough to do so even if they wanted to). The only form of support the Theatre Union was willing to accept from these sources was audience support. "I would be willing to swear on six Bibles," attests Michael Blankfort, "that the Theatre Union never got one penny from a political party. Never got any money from Moscow, Communists, Socialists; but there were organizations under the influence, that didn't contribute, but bought tickets, like the ILD and so on."[2] Otherwise, all the funds were raised from individual donors, many of whom were liberals mildly sympathetic to the left.

The period from January to October was fraught with activity with the pace mounting steadily through the summer. As Board members made contacts, a small paid office staff wrote follow-up letters to see to it that pledges were honored. Office expenses for this period best tell the story of the big effort made to get the Theatre Union started: $258.32 for telephone usage, $57.20 for stationery, $95.00 for postage, and $118.59 for miscellaneous expenses.[3] Office manager during the summer while the Board was on the road or in organizational meetings at the Cape, was Irving (later Michael) Gordon, a fresh young graduate

---

[1]"New Drama Plans Revealed," Hollywood, 7 September 1933; "Founder of Theatre Siezes Her Chance at 'I Told You So,'" Herald Tribune, 4 February 1934; Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Blankfort, 17 July 1978. [3]Financial Report, 1933-34.

from the Yale Drama School.[1]

The first play a new permanent theatre organization chooses to produce represents not only its theatrical ability but its collective vision. The play makes its own statement, but it also exemplifies the nature and intent of the group; it conditions audiences to know what to expect; it prefigures the ensuing repertoire. When a theatre claims to be a social theatre, the problem is compounded by curiosity about how intensely political the play will be and, more important, what political complexion the play will assume.

The Theatre Union's announcement in the New York Times stated that The Third Parade was to be the inaugural production.[2] Walker and Peters had written the play through the summer and fall (1932) and the play had become an integral part of the history of bringing the Theatre Union into existence.[3] Also mentioned in the article as projected follow-up plays were Wharf Nigger and a new untitled work by Sklar and Maltz. Walker, who was very impressed with Peters's play, was determined to see it produced. The play, however, was not ready for production. It had a strong opening and vivid characterization and dialogue, but it became diffuse as it progressed.[4] Sklar and Matlz had returned from California with only some amorphous ideas for a play and a scruffy outline so in December 1932 their play was only a gleam. Six months later

---

[1]Interview with Michael Gordon, Los Angeles, California, 14 July 1978.

[2]"New Stage Group Formed," New York Times, 23 December 1932. A note appended to an excerpt from the play published in New Masses also states that the play was to be produced by the Theatre Union. (Charles R. Walker and Paul Peters, "Get That Bonus," New Masses, December 1932, pp. 22-24.)

[3]Gomez, 8 October 1978. [4]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

though, when the Theatre Union declared its first season, it was Sklar's and Maltz's play Peace on Earth which was now scheduled as the first production. This was to be followed by Friedrich Wolf's Mutiny in the Fleet and a third production which was indefinite but would probably be a dramatization of Grace Lumpkin's novel of Southern mill towns, To Make My Bread. The Third Parade had been temporarily shelved. The play was subsequently mentioned in the Theatre Union's first and second prospectuses as a possible second production, but it was never produced by the Theatre Union.[1]

The selection of Peace on Earth was not without some stress due to the United Front. The play depicts the awakening of a demure college professor to the political and ecomonic causes of war, leading him to adopt an aggressive pacifist stance. Some Board members, notably Gomez, believed that the anti-war thesis of the play was too broad and should be modified to reflect the more doctrinaire Marxist view. That is to say, when the protagonist shouts "I am against war," Gomez would have adjusted this to have him say instead, "I am against imperialist war." Gomez claimed that ideologically the play was too pacifist without thie distinction and could mislead the audience, especially in view of the fact that this was the first play. This, of course, was the source of not a little consternation on the Board since Gomez, heedless of the United Front, was advocating the party line. A schism within the Board was avoided because the other Board members were in accord that in addition to being a solid play, Peace on Earth made a strong enough polit-

---

[1]On 22 October 1933, The Third Parade was given a brief run at the Heckscher Theatre by the ARTEF in a Yiddish version by Moishe Olgen, and directed by Benno Schneider with sets by Ben Yano. ("Bonus March Dramatized," New York Times, 23 October 1933.)

ical statement in its original form without alienating any political groups. Despite his qualms, Gomez relented and agreed to accept the play. In retrospect, he acknowledges the error of his stubbornness saying, "We were feeling our way rather uncertainly in the United Front effort at that time and we had a kind or narrow attitude toward it."[1]

Sklar and Maltz worked thoughout the summer polishing the play, readying it for production. Henry C. Potter was chosen to direct the play, set to open in September. Potter was Walker's friend. The year before he had directed Walker's Crazy American at Southampton. He was a rich man's son, a Long Island socialite, who had been to the Yale Drama School a year before Sklar and Maltz, and had dabbled with theatre for some years before deciding to make it his profession. Walker wanted Potter to direct the play so Potter read it and was intrigued with it even though he himself was not political. He had his Southampton theatre group do a reading of the play, which Sklar, Maltz, and Walker attended, with the idea that he would then decide whether to do it.[2] Potter continued to hem and haw and in the interim produced and directed Elizabeth McFadden's popular Victorian thriller, Double Door. As late as 25 September when the Theatre Union announced that Peace on Earth's opening was pushed forward to early November, Potter was still to be its director.[3] Eventually, realizing the play was not for him, Potter declined.

Now the search began for a replacement. The man who seemed most desirable was Walter Hart. He had had some experience with social plays, having produced Merry-Go-Round. Furthermore, Hart was to some extent

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

materially involved in organizing the Theatre Union. His name appears on the Executive Board roster in the first prospectus. (No other program, prospectus, or letterhead contains his name, however, on either the Executive Board or Advisory Board, so he must have severed his ties with the Theatre Union early and conclusively.) Hart, however, did not like the play. This was disconcerting for the authors who respected him for his views and abilities. Despite some coaxing from his close friend Michael Blankfort, Hart was inflexible. Sans director again the Theatre Union turned to George Kaufman for advice; Walker was a friend of Kaufman's, too! Kaufman recommended his young assistant Robert Sinclair.[1]

Born in Toledo, Ohio, and the son of an insurance agent, Sinclair graduated from the Warton School of Finance and Commerce having majored in industrial management. Prior to that he had attended the University of Pennsylvania where he excelled so in his theatre courses that when he decided to chuck industrial management and pursue a career on the stage, Arthur Hobson Quinn, that institution's distinguished drama historian, gave Sinclair a letter of introduction to Kaufman. For three years, Sinclair assisted Kaufman as stage manager on such productions as Once in a Lifetime, Of Thee I Sing, and Dinner at Eight. Though Sinclair's directing experience was limited to one production—he did a medicore production of Somerset Maugham's For Services Rendered in April 1933 which had a very brief run—he was entrusted with Peace on Earth largely on the strength of Kaufman's endorsement.

There is an ironic footnote to this story which illustrates how fickle the fates can be in the purlieus of Broadway. Later, Sklar and

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978.

Maltz learned that one significant reason for Hart's refusing to do Peace on Earth was that Sidney Howard had approached him prior to this and offered him his new play Dodsworth. However, after Peace on Earth opened, Howard was so impressed with Sinclair's work that he dropped Hart and offered his play instead to Sinclair.[1] Dodsworth was an overwhelming critical success, making Sinclair one of the most sought after directors on the Great White Way, opening a career which included directing Claire Booth's The Women and Philip Barry's The Philadelphia Story among many others.

Having procured a director, the next step was casting the play. Theatre Union literature had promised professional productions, using the best actors for the roles even if the actors were so-called 'bourgeois' actors. But the question was would the bourgeois actors be interested? Would they be willing to participate in an admittedly political theatre? In other words, was there credibility in the United Front? And, practically, would Broadway actors accept the Theatre Union's low salary scale?

In order to keep their admissions prices within the reach of the worker's pocketbook—tickets cost 30¢, 45¢, 60¢, 75¢ $1.00, and $1.50—they were forced to keep all expenses as low as possible. Actors' salaries were therefore fixed at the minimun wages set by Equity: $25.00 per week for Junior members and $40.00 per week for Senior members. Moreover, these stipends were paid across the board without any distinctions or allowances for the actor's status; leads were not paid more or bit players less.[2] Directors, designers, production assistants, and

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [2]Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 3.

administrative personnel were also paid on this schedule. This policy was strictly adhered to and was an important factor in keeping the morale of the company very high; everybody understood that no one was making a profit out of the theatre.[1] Executive Board members, in their capacity as Board members or even when they worked on production committees, received no salary at all. If they wrote a play they were given royalties or if they directed a production they were paid according to the minimum wage scale, but otherwise they sustained themselves through outside jobs and by freelance writing. To compensate actors for their low salaries, the Board established a profit-sharing scheme which promised to boost the actor's earnings in the event that the production realized a profit. In such a case half the profit would be returned to the theatre to be put into a sinking fund to offset production cost for future productions and half was to be distributed within the company on a percentage basis, with the leading players drawing a larger share than the minor players. Unfortunately, this occurred only once when $3,000 was so disbursed among the cast of Stevedore.[2] As far as backstage help and box office work were concerned, these workers were paid according to operative union rates. Although the Theatre Union was looking to cut costs, they always hired union labor. "We thought it was somewhat anamolous to start a workers' theatre and try to chisel under the union scale."[3]

When Peace on Earth had its casting call many good actors were indeed discouraged by the low salary, but this was the Great Depression

---

[1]Maltz, 17 July 1978.

[2]Margaret Larkin to Felicia Shpritzer, 12 December 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Theatre Union to Florence Wyckoff, 17 January 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

and actors' incomes were also affected. Besides, for an actor, being employed, no matter what the pay, is always preferable to sitting by the phone. For the rest of its life, with only a few exceptions, the Theatre Union never again had a casting problem because of salaries. After the successes of Stevedore and The Sailors of Cattaro and some kind attention from the press, general casting calls attracted experienced actors. The theatre gained considerable prestige among actors who recognized that they might play a larger and different type of role there.[1] Two instances where artists refused to work for the Theatre Union because of low salaries occurred with Black Pit. Maltz recalls considering a leading Broadway actor for one of the leads, but he turned the role down because he could not do it for $40.00 a week. Maltz, at the Board's behest, asked Herman Shumlin to direct the play but though he liked it he declined for the same stated reason.[2]

The political thrust of the Theatre Union was likewise not a significant deterrent in attracting actors. Older actors with years of experience on the stage, like Hallam Bosworth and Caroline Newcomb, who between them had chalked up sixty-eight years in the theatre, as well as younger perfomers who appeared on Broadway in such sturdy audience pleasers as Grand Hotel and Dinner at Eight, were eventually cast in leading roles in Peace on Earth. Robert Keith, who took the role of Peter Owens, the play's protagonist, had played opposite Helen Mencken and Frank Craven and achieved some renown as Dion Anthony in Eugene O'Neill's The Great God Brown. True to its word, the Theatre Union

---

[1]Theatre Union to Carlisle, 20 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

never made a leftist political orientation a prerequisite for casting. As one member of the Board put it, "We made a deliberate effort to get the best actors we could. That was our only concern—to get the best we could."[1]

Pressure from the left against bourgeois actors in proletarian plays was, however, very srtong. The Theatre Union tried to assuage these critics by pointing out that wherever possible it was making every effort to use people dedicated to the cause and to build a solid workers' theatre company. Half the cast of Peace on Earth, claimed one press release, was composed of individuals who had been in the labor movement or close to it. Victor Killian, it said, was a dock worker in his twenties; Paul Stein defended labor cases for the International Labor Defense; Earl Ford had been active in strikes with William Foster in Seattle; and Mara Tartar had marched to Washington with the bonus army, entertaining them with worker's songs. It also identified Irving Gordon as an active member in the League of Workers Theatres; Fred Herrick as having performed in the Theatre Collective's 1931-; Mary George as a veteran performer in various workers' theatre groups; and Robert Keith as the author of Viva Pancho, a play which deals with the exploitation of Mexican peons.[2] A feature article by Emery Northrup in New Theatre further defused extremist criticism by giving the impression that the Theatre Union was nothing less than a cell of political ferment and that if it was not now it would very soon be composed only of zealous social reformers. The article, the first extended examination of the Theatre Union in print, is entitled "Meet the Theatre Union," a title which suggests that it will provide the reader with an overview of the origins, aims, program, and problems of the new theatre group. Instead,

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978. [2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

after briefly describing the Theatre Union's goals, the article deals exclusively with attempts to raise the political consciousness of the actors. We learn, among other things, that the young actors of the company are all class-conscious and well-versed in Marxist economics and that much of their energy and enthusiasm was harnessed to organize the Theatre Union. Millicent Green, a pretty, young actress who appeared in Machinal, Street Scene and The Left Bank, is pictured as a stalwart adherent of the worker's theatre movement. She is quoted a follows:

> I've always felt that the theatre should be a means of political and social expression. This is the first play in which I had a chance to express that feeling my self. No other play ever did it. A few plays attempted it with a slightly satrical approach; but no other play invole both the actors and the audience like Peace on Earth. [sic]
>
> For some years now I wanted to contribute to the social struggle. I've often talked to my friend Eleanor Curtis on how I could do it. I cannot, like Eleanor, go and talk on the street corner. I cannot type or write. But I can act. Now for the first time I feel that I can contribute in the way most natural for me to contribute—through my acting.

We are informed also that non-political Broadway actors are being radicalized by their work on Peace on Earth. Many of them, "the more thoughtful actors," had become "disillusioned with Broadway" and had already begun to rebel. Others were skeptical about the Theatre Union initially. At rehearsals they balked at certain lines and some bit of action, considering them merely soap box stuff. The excited responses of the audience to these points in the play forced them to reevaluate their attitudes. Soon, Marxist literature surfaced in the dressing rooms. Actors who had never heard of the New Masses began reading it, and ideological debates were heard both before and after performances. Members of the Workers Ex-Servicemen's League, fourteen of whom were engaged to take walk-on parts, guided the novices through their perplexing encounter with

politics and prompted their conversion.[1] Reading this report, it seems that there was more political action backstage than on stage. That was precisely the point. As far as the left was concerned, the Theatre Union might be using Broadway actors but it was trying to draw them into the movement, and more importantly, had not compromised its integrity.

In reality, this picture is somewhat exaggerated. Some of these things may very well have taken place but not in the romantically revolutionary sense in which they are described. Many of the actors were at least sympathetic to the Theatre Union's platform and to the messages of the plays in which they performed. Occasionally, there was a hard-nosed conservative in the company. For example, Frederick Rolland, who played the bourgeois Captain in The Sailors of Cattaro, was acknowledged as a good actor, but characterized as a "general nusiance around the workers theatres."[2] By and large though most of the actors reserved their politics for the privacy of the polling booth. Most were there only for the opportunity to act and many would have echoed Peter Xantho, who stage managed three productions, when he said, "My job was on the stage and nothing else."[3] The actors could remain as political as they were inclined to be and actually only a small cadre of actors participated in Theatre Union policy making. Their fight was for the establishment of a permanent company and for the development of the Studio.

Forty-two actors were cast in the seventy-two speaking parts of

---

[1]Emery Northrup, "Meet the Theatre Union," New Theatre, February 1934, pp. 8-9.

[2]Theatre Union to Carlisle, 2 April 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Interview with Peter Xantho, New York, New York, 26 May 1978.

Peace on Earth. Of interest, aside from those already mentioned, are Jules (later John) Garfield, who was given a small part as a messenger; Julia Colin, a diminuitive pixie-looking woman, a practicing attorney for nine years, who played Robert Keith's twelve year old daughter;[1] and Jack Williams, a minor character actor who held the play's record for doubling, having played nine parts, six of them in the play's frantic last act. One casting issue which remains a mystery is whether amateurs were used in the production. Emery Northrup mentions that members of the Workers Ex-Servicemen's League were used as extras in the mass scenes to play students, strikers, and sailors.[2] A Theatre Union press release seems to confirm this, stating that fourteen World War veterans opposed to further wars, were used and that none had ever been on the stage before. They were said to have diverse ethnic and national backgrounds.[3] Though these statements are coeval to the production and their veracity therefore should not be doubted, the problem remains that 1) the Theatre Union's insistence on professionalism is antithetical to the use of amateurs and 2) Michael Gordon, the play's stage manager, cannot remember any amateurs in the production at all, the production having been completely an Equity contract show. The program sheds no light on the question. There is no mention in the credits of the Workers Ex-Servicemen's League but in the listing of the supernumeraties there are twelve names plus the vague phrase "and others."

As rehearsal commenced, the Theatre Union announced that it would

---

[1] G. Sartain, "Julie Colin," World Telegram, 20 December 1933.

[2] Northrup, "Meet the Union," pp. 8-9.

[3] Press Release, January 1934, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

hold a gala masquerade ball Saturday evening, 4 November 1933, at the hugh Webster Hall:

> The Theatre Union presents a Costume Ball, a pageant of the theatre: actors, writers, artists, dancers; heroes and heroines of stage, screen and opera, casts of current Broadway hits will be on parade in cosutme. You are invited to come as your favorite star or ham of the theatre of any period past or present or future. Or you may come as a member of the audience—quite without costume. After the theatre—at mignight—the unveiling of the secret surprise.[1]

The Master of Ceremonies for the evening was the redoubtable Heywood Broun and judges for the costume contest were Stella Adler, Millicent Green, Tonio Selwart, Cleon Throckmorton, and the dancer Tamiris. First prize was opening night seats for Peace on Earth. The ball served two purposes: it was an entertaining way of christening the Theatre Union and of promoting its first production and it added some revenue to a quickly depleted budget. As over 1,200 disguised patrons laughed and danced to the boisterous music of W. C. Handy—"the King of Jazz"—and his Negro Dance Orchestra, the Theatre Union's till rang up $812.23 in profit.[2] The party was such a success that the Theatre Union gave one every year to shore up the season's production expenses.

If the heroes and heroines of current Broadway hits actually came to Webster Hall there would have been a luminous galaxy of personalities in attendance. For by the time Peace on Earth opened, the 1933-34 season was in fourth gear and coasting smoothly with at least a half dozen hits. The season's first big one came right after Labor Day when Earl Carroll and Rufus King presented their leggy musical mystery Murder at the Vanities. Soon after, the Group Theatre offered their hygienic melodrama

---

[1]Handbill for Ball, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Financial Report, 1933-34.

Men in White and two days later, across the street, the curtain rose on the landlocked high-jinx of the briny jack-tars of the U.S.S. Dakota, Sailor, Beware! Other hits of the season thus far were the Irving Berlin-Moss Hart revue As Thousands Cheer, Eugene O'Neill's homespun comedy, Ah, Wilderness!, the Langners' comedy of the American revolution, The Pursuit of Happiness; Mordaint Shairps parlor room drama of moral decadence, The Green Bay Tree, and Clare Kummer's gleeful comedy Her Master's Voice. In the ten days immediately preceding Peace on Earth, three more long run productions opened: Roberta, She Loves Me Not, and Mary of Scotland.

The season was glaringly devoid of any plays of social significance. Of the forty-nine plays that opened in the first three months of the season, only two relected contemporary events: Kultur by Adolf Philipp and Birthright by Richard Maibuam. Both were anti-Nazi dramas exposing the tragedy of the new Chancellor's rabid anti-Semitic program which was swiftly ordained after his accession to power on 30 January. The first play had a fanciful happy ending and the second ended in despair. Both departed quickly for lack of interest.

Peace on Earth opened Wednesday night, Thanksgiving Eve, 29 November. When it opened, after having given seven previews, the Theatre Union reported that there was just about a nickel remaining in its bank account.[1] Total production costs amounted to $5,833.15.[2] This sum was quite an accomplishment and a tribute to their frugality considering the size of the cast and the complexity of the scenery. Comparable plays on Broadway averaged $35,000 to $40,000 in production costs.

Peace on Earth was certainly not the first American anti-war play.

---

[1]Public Relations Notes, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Financial Report, 1933-34.

There had been others, beginning in 1924 with What Price Glory? by Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings. What Price Glory? shocked New York audiences with its admixture of comic comeraderie and the brutal realities of war. Still, though the anti-war statement of the play was clear and overwhelming, it was relegated to the secondary characters in only one third of the play. Five years later, 1929, became the peak year for a sober look at the Great War and wars in general. All Quiet on the Western Front and A Farewell to Arms were both published in that year. In the theatre that year, war and its consequences were examined in Journey's End by R. C. Sherriff and in the Theatre Guild's Wings Over Europe by Robert Nichols and Maurice Browne. The Theatre Guild also produced Hans Chlumberg's Miracle at Verdun in 1931, a play which in its premise—resurrected soldiers plead with government leaders to put an end to the war—presages the style and action of Bury the Dead. All these plays illustrated the horrors of war, its blood, mud, and mutilated bodies, or explored, sometimes with more sentiment than reason, the agony, waste, and utter absurdity of war. They said, in effect, war is destructive of life and property, it is indecent, and therefore should not take place. Sklar and Maltz do not reiterate these commonplace precepts. Instead they focus on the causes of war, in particular the ecomonic and political forces of society which lead a nation toward war. The play asks the question: can those forces be resisted if identified?

Peace on Earth is a tightly written didactic drama. It is exemplary of this genre, having its roots in the hortatory religious morality plays of the Middle Ages. Every incident, every line is calculated to make a point, to teach a lesson. Ideas planted in one act, sprout in the next, and blossom in the last. If there is one real criticism of the play's structure it is this tendentious quality, for the credibility of

the play is mitigated by a neat, rather smug, piling on of coincidences. The authors wish to leave nothing to chance. Their aim is to exhort the audience to espouse their Weltanshauung and to incite them, by means of their persuasiveness, to take the actions they deem necessary to improve the lot of mankind. They are like the prosecuting attorney who in his summation address to the jury catalogues the evidence he introduced in the trial, often reiterating an idea in a different light to underscore its import, to prod the jury into rendering a verdict of guilty.

Not only is the play's purpose identical to that of the morality play, but its action is, too, like the archetypical Everyman, the hero, Peter Owens, is led on a quest. He becomes a wanderer, wrenched from routine life, set in search of secular truths about himself and his environment. This stratagem is functional since the protagonist's peregrinations and encounters afford the authors the opportunity to introduce an array of related social issues that are central to their purpose of penetrating the entrenched hypocrisies of society. Moreover, in making Owens the central figure and the focus of dramatic interest, the authors force the audience to identify with him and to make the discoveries he does.

The play's setting established its allegorical framework. The place is a New England city; the time is a year or two in the future. As the curtain rises, we see Laurie Owens, Pete's adolescent daughter, sprawled out on the living room sofa, reading a book and gently humming to the music from the victrola in the background. All signs point to the normality and typicality of this staid college town with its prosperous cotton mill whirring throughout the day. It is a balmy June day and Peter Owens, a good-natured, sincere psychology professor, who wanted to spend the day working in the library has instead spent the

day in a musty police station helping to arrange bail for one of his students, arrested for making an anti-war speech at a rally. The student is released and a meeting is called at Owens's house to determine what further steps this ad hoc committee of students and faculty will take to protest the interference with their rights to free speech. When he returns home, he is greeted to a surprise visit by his former classmate, Walter (Mac) McCracken, now a politically wise journalist. Mac serves a pivotal function in the scheme of the drama. He becomes Pete's mentor, his guardian angel, guiding him out of the political lethargy of his ivory tower towards the informed indignation of a social revolutionary. Mac, tall, perceptive and worldly-wise, also serves as the author's mouthpiece and an anchor for the play's exposition. He identifies the conspicuous indifference of the academic community to current affairs when he characterizes Owens as a "bookworm" and a "fossilized academician."[1] He notes, too, that other classmates who have returned for the alumni reunion which coincides with commencement ceremonies, are frivolously skampering about town decked out in cowboy suits. As the students and faculty gather for the conference, he is amazed to find that people at his Alma Mater, even a small minority, register any "interest in anything but football."[2] At the conference, Mac points out that though the free speech violation is an important issue, it is secondary to the more urgent matter of the longshoremen's strike that prompted it. The dock workers, Mac informs them, are striking against war. The cotton mill has secretly turned from manufacturing rayon to producing

---

[1]George Sklar and Albert Maltz, Peace on Earth (New York: Samuel French, 1936), pp. 5, 7.

[2]Ibid., p. 8.

gun cotton. After munitions are manufactured and shipped, they are inevitably used. These altrustic stevedores hope to cut this cycle by refusing to allow its transportation. The strike is a concrete and pragmatic action against war. Mac frames the question facing the group of scholars in ineluctable terms; if they are against war, as they say they are, they have no recourse, morally or ethnically, but to support the strikers. Owens and Anderson, another tweed-suited professor, stammer some often-heard, flimsy demurrals: there is really no evidence that war is actually in the offing; strikes precipitate violence and violence is no way to settle anything; finally, professional etiquette constrains university professors from brawling and agitating in the streets, especially when the mill owner in this case is also on the university's board of trustees. Mac explodes at these rationalizations for insouciance: "My God, you University people are wonderful. . . . You're a thousand miles from nowhere. You sit here in you ivory towers, you do finger exercises with the riddle of the universe—but you wouldn't know if there was a war going on in your own backyard. Why don't you wake up for a change?"[1] In this outburst, Mac describes the thesis of the play for, indeed, waking up is the watchword. The remainder of the action delineates the dire consequences of the intellectual community's closed eyes and mere lip service to peace while war preparations take place right beneath their noses. Mac does prevail upon the group to at least make their protest in the public square rather than within the cloistered confines of a campus lecture hall. He knows that the municipal government which is under the thumb of the town's industrialists will not tolerate even a benign threat to their enterprises. He hopes

---

[1]Ibid., p. 12.

that police action will radicalize the innocent scholars. At the square, Owens, Mac, and the students are summarily arrested for trying to read the Declaration of Independence on a street corner. The next evening Owens vows he will fight his arrest in court despite the university's discomfiture. At the end of the first scene, Owens listened to Mac but was skeptical. Now he senses the depths of his naivete and is determined to learn the truth. He is defiant (casually tossing a tennis ball) as he listens to the dean pressuring him to be mindful of his "academic dignity"[1] and drop the matter, suggesting that his job hangs in the balance if he does not. He takes the significant step of escorting Mac downtown to strike headquarters.

As the lights fade at the end of the third scene, the pace of the action abruptly changes. The exposition is completed and the play's action begins. Downstage, in front of the traveler, as the setting is changed behind them, a beam of light picks up the sheriff on the phone requesting two companies of state militia. This done, one light fades and another strikes a man at the other end of the stage phoning the dockyards and ordering crews of scabs to load the ships, assuring them the militia will protect them from the strikers. Swiftly and efficiently, the point is made that government law enforcement agencies are at the beck and call of capitalists, serving as their accomplice in the grand subterfuge. Interludes like this one, using the revue technique of playing a scene "in one," now lace the action and follow every scene. They lend a cinematic quality to the play, giving its incidents the immediacy and impact of a newsreel. Disparate events which later converge

---

[1]George Sklar and Albert Maltz, "Peace on Earth," Promptbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, Act 1, Scene 3, p. 18.

are cut into the action earlier to instensify the tension and illustrate the rollercoaster momentum that has already been set in motion.

At the abandoned warehouse that is the strikers' makeshift headquarters, Owens witnesses the fortitude of the beleaguered workers. The scene made a strong impact on audiences because it showed that the workers faced death in their effort to prevent the exportation of the gun cotton. One critic described the scene: "They are sincerely bewildered and infuriated as they huddle on the floor at strike headquarters, waiting for the news of a fellow striker's death."[1] The man does die and the dockworkers, including the dead man's anguished sister, march down to the docks determined to stop the scabbing. Owens, mesmerized, follows. In another interlude, the death of the murdered striker is used as the pretext for declaring martial law and mobilizing the national guard.

On the docks, a surly company officer admonishes a crew of German seamen to hurry and finish loading the piles of crates ingenuously marked Blue Boy Soap. The strikers enter, shouting to the seamen that they should disist loading and close ranks with them. There is a standoff as the foreign workers stare dumbly at the strikers, unable to comprehend their blandishments. Peter Owens jumps into the breach by becoming their interpreter. He helps the strikers inform the Germans that they have been duped into loading not soap but munitions. The sailors are nonplussed and furious when they open a crate and see the deception. An old-fashioned Yankee tea party ensues as strikers and sailors together sing "Solidarity Forever." The New Masses hailed this

---

[1]"'Peace on Earth,'" The Stage, February 1934, p.222.

scene as the "most exciting fighting climax in the whole drama."[1] Nameless characters, all workers of the world, conjoin to put national differences aside to fight the real foe—the war-mongering capitalists of the world. Stark Young claimed the scene was the "one genuinely creative item" in the entire play. The authors here crystallized in succinct stage trems the notion that workers can prevent war; "it is a dramatic image created to embody the idea."[2] Even the conservative Theatre Arts Monthly considered the scene a "noble moment" in the play.[3] The moment is soon cut short, however, as the police arrive. At gunpoint, they order the strikers to leave. Mac climbs the gangplank and resists. A shot rings out. He slumps down and the act ends with a rivetting tableau of Owens bent over his friend's lifeless body. As if to drive home its point without mincing words, each act ends with a death: in the second act, an alumnus is shot in the melee as the strikers breakup the commencement ceremony with their protest, and the last act ends with Owens being led to his execution, having been framed for the murder of the alumnus. Each death is made to seem a murder perpetrated by the government to perpetuate its design.

Mac's death is indicative of the progress of Owen's enlightenment. As a character, he is dispensed with because his services are no longer needed. He has shown Owens the essential facts, now Owens must synthesize them for himself. He rushes off in search of Andrews, the owner of the mill, the local Croesus. Their confrontation in Act II,

---

[1]William Gardener, "Peace on Earth," New Masses, 16 January 1934, p. 29.

[2]"Toward a Theatre Art," New Republic, 3 January 1934, p. 225.

[3]Edith Isaacs, "News-Reel Theatre: Broadway in Revue," Theatre Arts Monthly, February 1934, p. 90.

Scene 1, consititutes the crux of the play's argument. Owens and Andrews meet in the University Faculty Club where five community leaders, all would-be recipients of honorary degrees the next morning, are being entertained at a reception. The scene is an obvious contrivance to bring together the pillars of American society: the scientist, the social workers, the religious leader, the educator, and, of course, the financier/industrialist. These are the respected men and women who mold our thinking and shape our national behaviour. They happen to be chatting about the prospects of war when Owens enters. Immediately, he engages Andrews in a dialogue about the economic of war. Echoing the lesson he learned at Mac's knee, he postulates that profiteering, not patriotism, sparks wars. He prognosticates that if war comes the chemist will develop poison gas, the novelist will be pressed into writing pro-war propaganda, and the bishop will inspire soldiers to fight in the name of God. No one responds to his accusations, but they all piously aver their dislike of war. When he tells them about the strike, its purpose, the violence instigated by Andrews, and McCracken's death they are as unmoved as a stone wall. Owens insists that the university rescind its award to Andrews and that if it does not, the others should refuse to accept their awards in protest. Cornered, they respond that they have no truck with the strike since it is Communist-led, intimating that Owens is also a subversive red. "I'm no Communist and I hold no briefs for Communism," ripostes Owens, "But I know this, that if you don't make trouble, you keep quiet, and if you keep quiet, you let things happen—you let war happen."[1] After a deliberate pause, he walks out of the room, frustrated but not

---

[1]Sklar and Maltz, Peace, (French), p. 64.

defeated.

The next scene is based on a purported incident at Princeton when several alumni attempted to hang professor Randolph Bourne. A chorus of three inebriated alumni, in full cowboy regalia, break into Owens's home, menacingly chanting the class cheer. They taunt Owens, even get a rope around his neck, but their shenanigans are interrupted when his wife comes home. The scene illustrates the blind, unthinking, cowardly jingosim of Owens's peers.

The next morning, at Commencement, it is business as usual at the university. The president delivers a lengthy encomium detailing the achievements of John Andrews. But before he can distribute the kudos, the strikers, Owens among them, storm onto the dias carrying Mac's coffin and chanting "Down with imperialist war! Down with the war makers! No more profits from war."[1] There is chaos for a time; again a shot is heard. This time Biff Morris an alumnus falls dead. The police drag Owens out as the culprit. The scene was an exciting finale for the second act, the excitement being enhanced by bringing the action into closer proximity to the audience. The actors protraying the strikers ran down the aisle of the auditorium. This was a novel technique for Broadway audiences, who had seen it only once before, thirteen years earlier, in Galsworthy's The Skin Game. Workers who frequented agit-prop performances, however, may have been familiar with this emotionally involving technique, which was put to powerful use the next season in Waiting for Lefty. This bit of staging was not without its mishaps. The actors had to go under the stage and through the cellar of the theatre to reach the back doors of the orchestra. One evening the cellar

---

[1] Ibid., p. 84.

was obdurately uncooperative. The actors were forced to use the stage door exit, and troop through the street in greasepaint and costume before they could regroup at the rear of the auditorium.[1]

The last act is the proof of the argument. It is ten months later. Owens is in prison and the country is preparing for war. Through a series of succinct, interlocking flashbacks we learn how Owens was framed for Biff Morris's murder and how the government, for ecomonic motives—to protect investments in allied powers abroad and as a panacea for economic depression at home—engineers an excuse to declare war. All this is filtered through Peter Owens's racked mind in the last half-hour of his life before his execution. The last leg of his journey is alone and inward. It is a harsh, insane stream of consciousness that conveys the sense and mood of the Walpurgisnacht of escalating war hysteria.

The expressionistic last act was extraordinarily complex. Three versions were tested on preview audiences before a choice was made.[2] Not least of the problems was how to stage about fifty scenes in thirty minutes. Cleon Throckmorton's solution was to design a modular, architechural setting of steps, platforms, and five levels. This basic unit was permanent. It was shaped like a hollow square and set obliquely to the footlights, with its apex, the highest portion, upstage. For the first two acts, the modules became different things by the way they were employed. In the dock scene, for instance, it was outfitted with a pole to indicate a ship's mast and it became a practical ship's deck while another level was a wharf head. The street corner, the warehouse, and

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Michael Blankfort, "Facing the Audience," New Theatre, November 1934, p. 26.

the university campus, all mass scenes, deployed different levels of the structure to create an effective mise en scene. The remaining scenes, the living room and the faculty club room, were placed in the center of the structure within its confines. Free-standing flats and screens flown in from the loft created self-contained, representational interiors. All scenes, no matter how elaborate, were designed to shift in less than a minute so as not to encumber the pace of the action.[1]

In the last act, Owens stands center stage behind a scenic fragment representing his jail cell. The unit set is now masked in black to make it invisible to the audience. On the steps and platform behind Owens, the scenes he visualizes in his heated imagination are staged like some unreal, disembodied, phantasmagoric nightmare. In rapid succession we see the following: the courtroom where the arresting police officer gives his perjured testimony against Owens and where Owens is tried not for murder but for his political beliefs; a gaggle of financiers in an executive board room coming to the conclusion that the only remedy for a sagging ecomony is war, then plotting to manipulate public opinion to reinforce this; the faculty club room where Owens's peers, now miraculously and wholeheartedly converted to his anti-war views, elect Owens secretary of the S.P.C.H.—the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Humans—and jubilantly secure a pardon for him from the governor; a navy war room where the admiral deliberately orders an American destroyer into the war zone; the deck of a ship with sailors waving farewell; an announcer in a radio broadcasting station giving a Walter-Winchell-paced news bulletin concerning the torpedoing of the destroyer

---

[1]Press Realease, Maltz Papers Wisconsin; Gordon, 14 July 1978.

and the American declaration of war; the stock exchange where runners shout the ever-increasing price of wheat; a newspaper staff room with four writers pounding out pro-war propaganda; workers on a street corner protesting the war mania and defending Owens; a sultry nightclub blues singer undulating to the sensual rhythm of a song extolling men in uniform while simultaneously a recruiting officer whoops his spiel; and a patriotic meeting hall where an orator inflames his auditors with a fighting spirit. High above the unit set, for the last act, too, was a black architectural structure which served alternately as the pulpit for a bellicose bishop and the bench for the judge who sentences the professor. The barest props were used to suggest the locale for these quicksilver scenes—a chair, a ship rail with a green light, a microphone, a table, a recruiting billboard, a street lamp, etc. A large crew of stagehands dressed in black, scurried quietly up and down the construct arranging the props while dodging the actors. Occasionally, the confusion in the scene was unplanned. At one performance the judge lost his way in the maze. With some assistance he groped his way to his lofty bench to assume a judicial, though somewhat dishelved, air just as the lights hit him.[1]

This impressionistic collage of war fever and national mayhem was facilitated by the use of a well-planned soundtrack and highly selective lighting. Distant explosions melt into harmonious dance music. Bells, bugle calls, ship's whistles, drum rolls pierce the air absorbing the spectator in the discordant mood of the act. From one side of the stage we hear a mob singing "Onward Christian Soldiers" while from the other side we hear the chant "fight Against War" steadily building in

---

[1]Press Realease, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

volume.[1] The lighting, more than anything, created the effect of the scene. Spotlights flashed sometimes on Owens, his hands clasped to the bars, a bewildered expression on his face. As the scene approached its conclusion, the lights came faster and faster, at a vertiginous velocity, which complemented the national frenzy that culminates in the declaration of war. At the end, in a ghoulish mirage, all images appear simultaneously until the judge dispells them by pounding his gavel and intoning the fatal verdict: "Hang by the neck." Fifty spotlights, wired independently, with each focused on a separate area, allowed for the pinpointing of specific players. At the twin switchboard backstage, August Lynch, the Theatre Union's master electrician, imitated a dexterous octopus to control the pinwheel effect on stage. Two weeks of rehearsing five hours a day were needed to polish and coordinate the scene shifts and the lighting cues of the last act alone.[2]

The pyrotechnics of the third act exhilarated many viewers. The effect of the act is breathlessly described by one ctitic:

> The first two acts of "Peace on Earth" are couched in the realistic idiom. It is the third act, however, which is by far the most engrossing and moving of all. This act is a dramatic phantasmagoria. It is a staccato and vivid sequence of images flashing through Peter Owens' febrile brain a few minutes before his execution. . . . These graphic flashes have the architecture of a musical symphony. It is as if one instrument plays, then another, then several together. There is the constant unity of theme, and all the variations harmoniously stem from the core of the idea. The third act is imaginatively constructed and emotionally stirring. When you leave the theatre, you have experienced that catharsis of feeling which is the essential of all good tragedy from the days of the Greek classics to our own times.[3]

---

[1]Sound Plot, Peace on Earth, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Thomas R. Dash, "'Peace on Earth' Arms to Bring Good Will to Men," Retailing, 1 January 1934.

Not all critics, however, ranked the play's ending so high. Stark Young was bored with the expressionistic devices of the play, saying with some condescension, that though workers who had never seen these before may find them interesting, he had become inured to all but the fresh imaginative use of such devices.[1] Even the left was not entirely satisfied by the shift in stylistic gears which they said blunted the effect of the play because the last act was "muddled by symbolism" and "the role of the working class in connection with this theme, was somewhat lost."[2] One critic, though he liked the play, offered the authors the following bit of dramaturgical advice:

> One can only conjecture what the play might be if the whole had been developed according to the impressionistic last act. . . . But one can wish that, having worked into the intensity of this style of presentation, the authors had considered going back over their work to see if the conventional scenic method of the first part could not have been tossed out and with it the rudiments of the student revolt play that apparently was used as a starting point in the writing, only to be abandoned when the longshoremen took the stage.[3]

Sherburne was wrong in his conjecture concerning the genesis of the play. Another idea did, in fact, inspire the play, an idea that to some extent justifies the radical departure in the last act from the realism of the first part of the play. The central concept of the play was a line which occurred to Maltz wherein a judge tells the defendant before him, "You have been found innocent of the crime of which you have been accused, I therefore sentence you to be hanged by the neck until dead."[4] This was the jumping off point and it was incorporated with their intent to write an anti-war play. The paradoxical quality of the statement

---

[1]"Toward Theatre Art," p. 225. [2]Lawson, "Shoulder," p. 11.

[3]E. C. Sherburne, "Peace on Earth," Christian Science Monitor, 23 December 1933.

[4]Sklar, 14 July 1978; Maltz, 15 July 1978.

was given an explicit objective correlative in the surrealistic composition of the third act. Moreover, the telegraphic form of expressionism enabled the authors to condense a great deal of material in a short time. The dissonant juxtaposition of images in itself could say much more than an extended scene written in conventional terms. For example, there is little doubt about the reasons for war when the declaration of war is followed by a scene depicting a frantic bull market on Wall Street. The shift in style seemed natural. On the stage, it was, according to Sklar, who dubbed it "the Alice in Wonderland bit," a "moment of magic" which was scorned only by narrow-minded theatrical purists.[1]

The producers of Peace on Earth were confident they had a good show prior to its opening and, more importantly, that they had an unassailable mission. They knew it was a "heavy show" with complex technical problems that had not been fully resolved in the seven preview performances, but financial exigencies demanded they go ahead with the opening. (Later they admitted they could have used an additional week of rehearsals.) Despite an undependable front curtain, fifty-seven light cues in the last act that were not quite coordinated, and chaos created by a malfunctioning sprinkler system which doused the scenery, the Theatre Union believed that its premiere production was solid enough for an unveiling.[2]

The opening night performance was rough, but a friendly and appreciative audience kept optimism running high. Then as now, the rituals of Broadway called for the producers to interrupt their opening night

---

[1]Sklar, 17 July 1978.

[2]Margaret Larkin "On Progaganda," New York Times, 18 March 1934, sec. 9, p. 2.

festivities and collect the first editions of the morning papers. They did, and what they read early Thanksgiving morning disappointed them greatly. The theatrical Neroes of the press had turned thumbs down at Peace on Earth. The consensus was that the play was trite, that its plot was clumsy and unconvincing, and that its characterizations were hackneyed and dull.

Brooks Atkinson set the tone for the chorus of naysayers:

> The current incitement in the interests of peace is based on a hypothetical incident; it is hysterically written and crudely presented and it is not likely to convince any one who stands in need of conviction. Yet by glancing off the truth in passing and by jostling against grave matters, it shifts the burden of proof upon those who disagree with it, and, afterall, that must be reckoned as a service. If you do not believe that the United States will be slipping into war "in a year or so," which is the time scene of "Peace on Earth," the authors can expect you to give your reasons. Perhaps that is excuse enough for a freshman propaganda play. . . .
>
> As propaganda against war, "Peace on Earth" is pathetically inadequate. Being conceived in a mood of adolescent hysteria, it is as maudlin as the mob it denounces. We have had two or three horrible examples in the last two or three days of what mobs can do when they are led by muddle-headed fanatics. If war is to be destroyed truth is a better weapon than irresponsible excitement.[1]

The nicest thing Atkinson could say about the play was that he was made "furiously to think" about war not because of but despite the play.

Two words that rebounded from one review to another were "familiar" and "commonplace." The play, the critics affirmed, added nothing to our understanding of the causes of war and gave little trenchant thought to the human weaknesses that make war mankind's habitual plague. What it did say had been said before, they claimed, and with greater theatrical cogency and dramatic insight. Robert Garland noted,

> What it says about war is good and plenty. And, for the most part,

---

[1]"Propaganda for Peace in a Drama by the Authors of 'Merry-Go-Round,'" New York Times, 30 November 1933, p. 39.

> good and true. What it says has been said many times before and will be said many times again. Much of it is terrifying to the ear, hellish to the imagination, But first-rate as propaganda, it is second-rate as a play. Long on anti-martial dynamite, it is short on good old-fashioned drama.[1]

Others who echoed these same sentiments were Gilbert Gabriel: "Its large cast is banded together to voice choral dissonance on several sore subjects, all of which have already been argued out loud with much more logic—and much better drama, too—on the footlit platforms hereabout;" John Mason Brown: "In thirty or more scenes these vehement collegians write a story that is almost as familiar as is the song of the angels from which their story takes its title;" Joseph Wood Krutch: . . . the play "impressed me as much the same elementary, wooden, and plodding exposition of the commonplaces about war and its causes to which we have been treated many times before;" and John Anderson: "My dissent is that they do not make it dramatic, do not trick the stage into any fresh statement, do not, in fact, come to grips at all with the human fallibility which lies behind their subjects, a sort of dopey sentimentalism which makes war a household pet of the unfortunately human race."[2] To corroborate the indictment of "commonplace", critics cited We, the People, disparagingly comparing Peace on Earth to Rice's panoramic assault on the social abuses caused by the depression.[3] Though We, the

---

[1]"Propaganda is Polite in 'Peace on Earth,'" World Telegram, 1 December 1933, p. 34.

[2]Gilbert Gabriel "'Peace on Earth' A Bad Jab Below the Theatrical Belt by the Messr. Sklar and Maltz," American, 30 November 1933; John Mason Brown, "The Theatre Union, Inc. Presents George Sklar's and Albert Maltz's 'Peace on Earth' at the Civic Repertory," Evening Post, 1 December 1933, p. 24; Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama: Poor White," Nation, 10 December 1933, p. 718; John Anderson, "Authors of 'Merry-Go-Round' Retain Their Carbolic Mood in Thrust Against War," Evening Journal, 1 December 1933.

[3]Burns Mantle, "Peace on Earth is Against War, Theatre Union Takes Over Civic Repertory for Propaganda Drama," Daily News, 30 November 1933;

People, produced in January of the previous season, is not wholly an anti-war play, it does contain in its list of society's ills some scenes which examine the relationship between ecomonics and war and it is a play which in spirit upholds the simple citizen's need to challange the values and decisions of the establishment. Peace on Earth also reminded one critic of George Brooks's and Walter Lister's most impressive Spread Eagle.[1] That 1927, short-lived Jed Harris production was concerned with the mechinations of a Wall Street financier who sought to amass a fortune by prodding the United States into a war with Mexico.

Either implicitly or explicitly Peace on Earth was viewed as propaganda. No fewer than four reviews headlined the work "Propaganda," a term, which liked a red flag, cautioned readers that here was a hybrid drama, as much soapbox as theatre.[2] In this context feelings varied from those who thought that though the propaganda was sincere, noble, and earnest, it was nevertheless insubstantial and sophomoric; to those who claimed that it was "well-mannered," "polite" if "slightly apologetic;" too strident and noisy to be heard and heeded; "tailor-made" with a "one-tract mind;" and, worst of all, that its strained homiletic intent made it unconvincing to all but those already committed to its point of view.[3] Richard Lockridge summed it up in his mild and rather kind as-

---

Richard Lockridge, "'Peace on Earth," Propaganda Drama," Sun, 1 December 1933, p. 10, Kelcy Allen, "Peace on Earth is Protest Against War," Women's Wear, 3 December 1933.

[1]Anderson, "Carbolic Mood," 1 December 1933.

[2]Lockridge, "Propaganda Drama," 1 December 1933, Garland, "Propaganda Polite," 1 December 1933; Atkinson, "Propaganda for Peace," 30 November 1933; Mantle, "Propaganda Drama," 30 November 1933.

[3]Mantle, "Propaganda Drama," 30 November 1933; Garland, "Propaganda Polite," 1 December 1933; Arthur Pollock, "'Peace on Earth' a Melo-

sessment of the play:

> Perhaps it is too much to ask of each new propaganda play that it voice its assult on the same old evils in accents which have not been dulled by repetition. . . . "Peace on Earth" is an able play, ably acted, and if it were not so very much like so very many other plays on allied subjects it might prove an effective agent in the campaign against war. . . . Here, of course, you have the familiar pattern. Quite possibly the best propaganda is that which consistently repeats itself, hammering in its point. Repetition does not, unfortunately, make the best drama, and it is with drama not with sermons, that I suppose we are here concerned. Mr. Sklar and Mr. Maltz hit hard at the same spot, but it is, after all, the same spot. If you saw "We, the People," "Merry-Go-Round" and a half dozen others you have, in all that matters, seen "Peace on Earth." Doubtless, if you saw these, you are already in agreement with the various authors on most of their points, since most propaganda plays make their appeal to those already convinced.[1]

Though the official verdict on the play was uniformly negative, many first-nighters had complemented the direction and the acting. According to Burns Mantle, Robert Sinclair, mindful of the complexity of the scenery, managed to "quietly and effectively" marshall the many vignetted scenes into a smooth and well-paced sequence.[2] His only difficulty was adequately integrating the interludes and animating the drunk scene.[3] If there were problems with the play, the acting, in general, but especially Robert Keith's, was nothing less than first rate. Keith's performance apparently transcended his material.[4] He delivered a tightly controlled, restrained, sincere protrayal of the much abused but en-

---

drama Designed to Prove That There Is No Such Thing, Opens in Fourteenth Street," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1 December 1933; Anderson, "Carbolic Mood," 1 December 1933; Stark Young, "The Drama," New Republic, 10 December 1933, p. 169.

[1]Lockridge, "Propaganda Drama," 1 December 1933.

[2]Mantle, "Propaganda Drama," 3 November 1933.

[3]Anderson, "Carbolic Mood," 1 December 1933.

[4]Atkinson, "Propaganda for Peace," 30 November 1933.

lightened protagonist of the play.[1] His dignified performance redeemed the production because its power and persuasiveness gave credence to the play's argument and lent the play an air of respectability by counterbalancing its inherently stentorian tone.[2] Moreover, his performance epitomized the thesis of the play to the extent that he projected the image of a man steeped in the rhythms of the contemplative life who changes his pace, physically as well as intellectually, to suit the engaged life of a political agitator. Edith Isaacs observed,

> He creates to some extent by the tempo of his playing, the way in which his steps always seem to follow a few seconds behind his words—the sense of a man to whom thought and speech come more naturally than action. Peter Owens is quiet in the midst of noise, slow in the midst of hurry, patient in the heat of anger until the cause "gets him" and sets him too, to the pace of the doer. Because Robert Keith knows the play's intention he gains for the character he represents and for the social argument the character portrays a sympathy that springs from his own understanding.[3]

Keith's performance was considered so strong that at the end of the season it was remembered, along with Henry Hull's in Tobacco Road and J. Edward Bromberg's in Men In White, as the best in a leading role that year.[4] Other players who were singled out for praise were Clyde Franklin—"excellent in the badly written and stereotyped part of the correspondent," Walter McCracken—and Victor Killian who played Fred Miller—"a believable strike leader;" "was of the best type of honest fanatic."[5]

---

[1]Sherburne, "Peace," 23 December 1933.

[2]"Peace on Earth" The Stage, 11 February 1934, p. 22; Garland, "Propaganda Polite," 1 December 1933.

[3]Isaacs, "News-Reel," February 1934, p. 90.

[4]Press Release, Exclusive for World Telegram, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[5]Anderson, "Carbolic Mood," 1 December 1933; Pollock, "Melodrama," 1 December 1933; Percy Hammond, "Proving That There is no Peace on Earth," Herald Tribune, 1 December 1933, p. 26.

There were encouraging, sympathetic words about Peace on Earth from the left press and a smattering of leftward leaning intellectual magazines. Of the latter, Catholic World proclaimed "It is propaganda—frank propaganda—dramatic propaganda for peace. A well-written, finely-acted play . . . Not only is it human and sincere but it is very exciting as a drama."[1] Survey Graphic approved, too, finding the play "exciting, written with idealism, irony and theatric skill. Acting and direction are fresh and competent, without the handicaps of amateurism and artiness."[2] More significant, however, were the notices in the Daily Worker, the New Leader, New Theatre Magazine, and the New Masses. Reports from these venuses endorsed the play with much fanfare and enthusiasm. From their perspective, if the play was propaganda, the word was snynonymous with truth rather than with mere soap-box evangelism. All factions of Marxist thought united in commending the play as a courageous, honest effort to depict an urgent and complex problem. Joseph Freeman, in the Daily Worker, hailed it as a "landmark in the American Theatre" because it contributed to the movement to establish a "drama dealing with the class struggle from a revolutionary viewpoint." Peace on Earth, he suggests, reflects orthodox Marxist philosophy in so far that it accurately and dexterously illustrates the real-life conflict between the world of the munitions manufacturer and his minions and the world of the striking workers who oppose war and capitalism.[3] The Socialist New Leader echoed these

---

[1]Euphemia Van Rensselar Wyatt, "Peace on Earth," Catholic World, January 1934, p. 478.

[2]Leon Whipple, "The Theatre Confronts Life: 'Peace on Earth,'" Survey Graphic, May 1934, p. 240.

[3]Joseph Freeman, "'Peace on Earth': The First Theatre Union Production," Daily Worker, 2 December 1933, p. 7.

remarks, but without Freeman's emphasis on revolutionary action, saying Peace on Earth is an "excellent drama" because it "opposes two vital forces in the world and lets the audience see them in inevitable conflict."[1] Even Norman Thomas gave the production his official imprimatur saying, "The play is almost prophetic as a probable indication of what will happen—of what will happen, that is, unless all who hate war are well enough organized to make their resistence and their strikes end in victory, not defeat."[2]

The left-wing press, however, was entirely not satisfied. Writers did not claim that the play erred because it was too political, as the commercial papers insisted, they asserted that it was not political enough, that it lacked clarity. One complaint, was that the play's intent is weakened by its focus on a middleclass, liberal university professor. The effect is that this approach diverts audience attention from the interests of the mass of workers to the individual sacrifice of Peter Owens.[3] Joseph Freeman, however, defends the play on this very score, making the choice of emphasis a virtue rather than a fault. The authors, he concludes, understate their case, thereby improving their argument without soft-pedaling their intention:

> To show the worst brutalities of capitalism, it would be necessary to follow events from the viewpoint of the working-class. Here we have a story dealing with the evolution of an intellectual toward the left under the impact of a wartime situation. . . . But while the world is seen through the eyes of an intellectual, his development toward

---

[1]"New Leader review of Peace on Earth by Joseph Shipley," Press Clipping loaned to author by Adelaide Walker.

[2]Norman Thomas, "Hail 'Peace on Earth,'" New Masses, 2 December 1933, p. 8.

[3]William Gardener, "Peace on Earth," New Masses, 16 January 1934, p. 29.

the left brings in the two classes engaged in bitter social conflict. Freeman adds, too, that to their credit Sklar and Maltz do not falsely convert Owens into a red-blooded revolutionary, but leave him at the end only an "ally of the working class full of liberal illusions."[1]

The New Masses hinted at yet another political shortcoming of the play. As it recommends the play with some eagerness, it draws back and observes that "Differences of opinion on one point or another were to be expected." Then throughout the review it refers to Peace on Earth as a dramatized protest against "Imperialist war" though that phrase or concept hardly appeared in the play.[2] The issue is reminiscent of Gomez's objection to the play when the Executive Board first considered doing it. The left press also pointed out some production problems. One critic regretted that the direction of the mass scenes was weak.[3] Another, ambiguously states that there was a "diffusion of dramatic means" which marred the production, but he minimizes this, saying that the revolutionary theatre is still in its early stages in development.[4] Lastly, the New Masses, reviewing the play in January, informs us that the technical complications and mechanical mishaps which hampered the production in its early weeks had finally been eliminated.[5]

The Executive Board met at the Theatre Union's Fifth Avenue office at ten o'clock Thanksgiving morning, and pondered what to do. The re-

---

[1]Freeman, "First Production," 2 December 1933.

[2]Gardener, "Peace," 16 January 1934, pp. 29-30.

[3]Freeman "First Production," 2 December 1933.

[4]Jack Shapiro, "Peace on Earth," New Theatre, January 1934, p. 11.

[5]Gardener, "Peace," 16 January 1934, p. 29.

views had been disastrous. Any other play with that kind of negative send-off would have closed within the week. Sklar and Maltz were particularly crestfallen. It was their play that had launched the Theatre Union enterprise. Not only would the play close, but the dreams of creating a professional workingclass theatre would die. As the meeting progressed, though, despair gave way to hope. The problem was how to reach that audience for which the Theatre Union was originally conceived. As the New Masses noted, "Between the theatre and its logical audience . . . the uptown press had thrown a barrier of contempt and silence."[1] Those members on the Executive Board with trade union experience proffered an innovative solution. Why not treat the audience of the play as you would the audience at a strike meeting or a political rally and organize them in the same aggrssive fashion? The idea made sense, besides there was no alternative other than posting closing notices.

Walker, as usual, raised some somey and Hammond gave a sizable sum in order to keep the play running for two or three weeks until their efforts might show some results.[2] The campaign was channeled in several directions. First, a leaflet was hastily printed describing the play's anti-war thesis, highlighting the theatre's cheap prices, and urging people to come. An army of unemployed people was recruited to stuff these handbills in all residential and business mailboxes in the theatre's district, the politically active Union Square. Hopefully the Theatre Union might be established as a neighborhood theatre, survival depending

---

[1] Ibid.

[2] Losses in the first three weeks of the run averaged $1,000 weekly. ("Strength in the Theatre Union," New York Times, 9 December 1934, sec. 10, p. 2.; Sklar, 14 July 1978.)

on the interest and partonage of the immediate community. Second, a list was drawn up of the people who were connected with organizations which might be interested in social plays or anti-war plays. Leaders of such organizations were phoned and invited to attend the play gratis. For two weeks the house was papered with heads of organizations. After each performance, a Theatre Union representative came out on stage and made a pitch for them to buy blocks of tickets at half price if they liked the play. These tickets could then be sold to their membership at full price, in this way allowing both the Theatre Union and the organization to benefit.[1] Third, leaflets and posters were distributed at key locations throughout the city where workers habitually gathered. Included were the Rand Bookstore, the Worker's Bookstore, the main offices of the League for Industrial Democracy, the Trade Union Unity Council, and the International Ladies Garment Worker's Union. (Later "subbox" offices were established in many of these places.)[2] College students, too, were informed of the play by the National Student League, many of whose members volunteered to leave special student circulars on every bench of every classroom in the city.[3] Fourth, a group of speakers traveled from factory to business, day after day, addressing workers for ten to twenty minutes during their lunchtime.[4]

The hectic emergency effort to rescue the Theatre Union succeeded. In a short time, the Theatre Union was able to cover its running expenses and to show a slight profit. The strategy which was most significant in

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]Public Relations Notes, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Gardener, "Peace," 16 January 1934, p. 29.

[4]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

achieving the result was the theatre party effort. Within the first six weeks of the run 15,126 people were brought to the play by seventy-three organizations.[1] There is some small irony in this, however. The idea for building an audience through theatre parties had been conceived and implemented with little result prior to the opening of Peace on Earth. Sylvia Regan, the alert, energetic young woman who was now so successful as the Theatre Union's audience manager, had in the fall of 1933 conducted a vigorous campaign to enlist the support of unions, workers' clubs, and mass organizations. She volunteered her services to the Theatre Union with the idea of selling blocks of tickets to organizations much as the Yiddish Theatre had done. The Theatre Union, she believed, could do the same with workers groups. If anyone had the skill and aptitude for this sort of work, Sylvia Regan did. Born in New Haven, she had been a factory worker as well as an actress. At seventeen she had produced Andreyev's Waltz of the Dogs in Greenwich Village at the Cherry Lane Theatre, financing the play from her factory earnings. Before coming to the Theatre Union, she started and ran a flourishing millinery business with a large theatrical clientele. At the Theatre Union, Friedman and Fox as well as other members of the Board who were acquainted with various organizations helped her assemble a list of names and addresses from which she could start making contacts.[2] The plan was to gather officers and representatives of the organizations and give them a reading of the play for the purpose of interesting them in buying blocks of tickets for their organizations. About twenty such readings were held with discouraging results. Only a few small groups were con-

---

[1]Gardener, "Peace," 16 January 1934, p. 29.

[2]Regan, 28 June 1978.

tracted.[1] The others despite their interest in the manuscript were reluctant to commit themselves to a theatre organization which was, for all practical purposes, an unknown entity. They were skeptical, too, about the Theatre Union's ability to be both a genuine worker's theatre and a fully professional theatre at the same time. As Margaret Larkin noted, "The workers, who deserve the best, always have been given the worst in theatrical entertainment, and this was reflected in their distrust of a project which claimed to be revolutionary in spirit and professional in technique."[2]

In the crucible of those febrile do-or-die days, the Theatre Union evolved its methods of promoting a play. With each succeeding production, of course, the operation was refined, but essentially it remained unchanged for the duration of the Theatre Union's existence. The cornerstones of its success were the theatre parties and the speeches made at meetings of workers.

The theatre party benefit system provided the Theatre Union with two functional advantages: it was the means of cultivating a vast audience and it offered a modicum of economic stability. The benefit system became the link between the theatre and the growing labor movement. From the outset, the Theatre Union sought to reach the masses in factories, workshops, and dockyards. But these people were intimidated by theatregoing, they associated it with top hats and silk gowns, not flannel shirts and cotton dresses. They never went to the theatre; at best they went to the movies and perhaps, too, they might happen to see an agit-

---

[1]Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 4; Margaret Larkin, "Building an Audience," New Theatre, October 1934, p. 26.

[2]"Building Audience," p. 26.

prop theatre group perform a short skit at one of their union meetings. The whole idea of going to a box office to purchase theatre tickets was foreign to them. The benefit system circumvented this. By working through organizations familiar to the worker and having these organizations endorse the Theatre Union, the Theatre Union successfully nurtured and sustained the interest and patronage of the workers. As time went on, workers identified with the Theatre Union; it became, indeed their theatre.

The Theatre Union derived ecomonic security from the party system in the form of guaranteed advance sale. By the time Peace on Earth concluded its sixteen week run, 158 organizations had bought blocks of tickets.[1] Many were so satisfied that when the next production was announced they again purchased seats without even knowing what the play was about. For all future productions the Theatre Union sold group tickets about two months in advance of the opening. The process was relatively simple. Two to four weeks before rehearsals began, Sylvia Regan would cull her list of organizations, which at one point totaled about 500, and she would send them all an announcement about the forthcoming production. This timetable would give the groups about six to eight weeks to inform their constituencies about the play and collect money. Sometimes readings were held but more often the organizations took the play on faith.[2] With Stevedore, for example only one reading was necessary.

The Theatre Union's benefit system policies were extremely flex-

---

[1]Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 4.

[2]Regan, 28 June 1978; Margaret Larkin to Carlisle, 20 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

ible, making it easy and enticing for organizations to participate. First, the Theatre Union offered a 33½ to 40 percent discount, depending on the size of the group, thus permitting the organization selling the tickets to accrue a sizable profit. Many of these organizations operated on a shoestring and appreciated the opportunity to make some money. Second, the low price scale, with some seats priced as low as 30¢, 45¢, 60¢, and 75¢, made it simple for the organizations to sell tickets to its membership. Third, organizations were give the option of buying whatever priced seats they could sell best. Fourth, an installment plan for making payments relieved the cash-flow problems of some groups. And fifth, to facilitate the organizations's work, the Theatre Union furnished posters, leaflets, and other publicity materials.[1] In addition to mailings, Sylvia Regan and her staff made personal contacts with people in trade unions. Eventually they reached shop chairmen and floor ladies who circulated in their shops, and contacted the theatre box office when they had fifty names. Occasionally an organization would purchase the entire house, but more often small blocks of tickets were sold ranging from fifty to 150 seats. As a result, there would sometimes be as many as ten organizations represented on a single night. In any event, some tickets were always reserved each night for general sale at the box office, and on Friday and Saturday evenings no benefits were ordinarilly sold as these were the nights the Theatre Union did its best box office business.[2] By the time a production opened, the Theatre Union would have sold, in most instances, enough tickets to cover

---

[1]Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 4.

[2]Regan, 28 June 1978.

the running expenses for a six to ten week period. With Stevedore, 138 theatre parties were sold before the curtain went up, thus assuring a six week run for the play.[1] The Sailors of Cattaro and Black Pit were likewise guaranteed a nine and ten week run respectively prior to their openings.[2] Such advance insurance was important to the Theatre Union not only because it provided secure and early income, but also because it yielded a comforting independence from the capricious and sometimes hostile reports of the newspaper critics. Regardless of any unfriendly reviews, the play would have a sufficient period to time to "catch on" with its audience through word of mouth. There was, of course, one disadvantage to the theatre party system. When the play was a critical success, as Stevedore was, the Theatre Union's earnings were lower because they would be selling many tickets at a discount to groups rather than selling them at full price at the box office. The Theatre Union, however, wisely chose to sacrifice this potential income for the secutity of a stable audience and the promise of continuous operations.[3] The efficacy of this method of building an audience is verified in the statistics and also by Sylvia Regan in her recollection of how really simple the process was:

> There was a miracle in the way the audiences suddenly became aware of this theatre. It might have been hard pulling for the first production. We were still getting lists, making phone calls, and writing individual letters and so on, getting the thing rolling. But in practically no time—by the second production—it was so phenomenal that the audience began to come to us. . . . They would be lined up all the way down the stairs outside our office waiting to buy tickets.

---

[1] Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 4.

[2] Public Relations Notes, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 4.

[3] Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 4.

> After awhile it became a cinch. We didn't even have to do much plugging.[1]

It seemed that Walker and the others who believed that workers wanted a theatre that spoke their language were at last vindicated. The workers would come if they felt they were wanted.

To complement the theatre party effort, the Theatre Union mounted a speaking campaign to generate publicity about the organization and to bridge the gulf between the theatre and its natural audience. Executive Board members and interested actors spoke to groups and organizations—unions, workers' cultural clubs, Parent Teachers Associations, womens' clubs, benefit societies, drama study clubs, and other social-minded groups. The diversity of the groups addressed may be seen in the following examples of speaking engagements undertaken during the run of Peace on Earth: On 13 December 1933 Michael Blankfort spoke at the New School for Social Research along with Lee Strasberg, Virgil Geddes and John Lyman in a symposium held under the auspices of New Theatre Magazine entitled "Towards a New Theatre"; on 22 January 1934 Albert Maltz engaged the members of the Rebel Arts Writers' Group in a colloquy to answer the question "Can there be a Proletarian Theatre?"; on 27 January 1934 Manuel Gomez (identified as a playwright) and Maltz spoke about "the Social Theatre and the Worker" before the Steve Katovis Branch of the International Labor Defense; and on Saturday afternoon, 17 February 1934, Maltz and Margaret Larkin spoke to the Theatre Lovers Society at the McAlpin Hotel on the subject of the "Social Drama of Today."[2]

---

[1] Regan, 28 June 1978.

[2] Daily Worker, 13 December 1933; Herald Tribune, 22 January 1933; Daily Worker, 27 February 1934; World Telegram, 17 February 1934.

At first, the Theatre Union sought out these groups, but in a very short time the speakers were eagerly solicited. Board members exhausted themselves every spare evening crisscrossing the city by bus and subway trying to meet the demand for talks. To help keep Peace on Earth alive Michael Blankfort remembers making about fifty speeches.[1] George Sklar recalls traversing New York City and traveling to New Jersey (to a Jack London Club) and never having a free night.[2] For some, like Maltz, the busy schedule was adhered to despite great personal sacrifice. The three hours that it took to travel to Brooklyn, to speak to fifty people and return was three hours less writing for Maltz.[3] Despite headaches, sleepless nights, and fears (for they were not trained orators) all members of the Executive Board contributed their share of time and energy to publicize the theatre.

This promotional practice, which began as an emergency measure with Peace on Earth, became standard procedure for every production. In fact, the demand for speakers was so great, that to alleviate the burden on the Executive Board and the small corps of volunteers who helped, several people were hired to speak and were paid $3.50 a speech.[4] Speeches would range from fifteen minutes to an entire evening's lecture. The speakers would endeavor to describe the aims and purposes of the Theatre Union, the kinds of plays it did, and its price structure. They emphasized the uniqueness of the Theatre Union, the only professional theatre in New York, and in the country, for that matter, which was

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978. [2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[3]Barbara Zheutlin and David Talbot, "Albert Maltz: Portrait of a Hollywood Dissident," Cineaste 8, no. 3 (1978), p. 9.

[4]Larkin to Carlisle, 20 February 1935.

dedicated to the theatrical exploration of the problems of the working class. The Theatre Union was a nonprofit organization, speakers would say, and needed the patronage of workers and other people who felt that the theatre should deal with social matters. Following each speech, the speaker would file a report on his discourse. Along with the name of the organization and its administrative officer. The "speakers report" included such routine but valuable information as the number of people who attended, the length of the speech, and the reception accorded the speaker.[1] These reports were catalogued and used to circularize the organization with notices of new plays.

Because this speech making activity was so popular, the Executive Board considered organizing a more formal Speaker's Bureau or Lecture Bureau. The idea was never really developed further. However, it did serve as the basis for the Theatre Union Council. The Council, which was christened in January 1934 (though it had been in operation when Peace on Earth was in rehearsals) was a group of people who believed in the objectives of the Theatre Union and volunteered their time to help. At times, about eighty volunteers considered themselves members of this amorphous body. Usually though, only thirty or forty people were available to make speeches, conduct membership drives, hear new scripts, audit rehearsals, and assist with the ever increasing clerical work in the office.[2]

Among the people who worked on the Council were writers, news-

---

[1]Forms for the Report are included in Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 2; Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

paper journalists, lawyers, several artists, a vocational guidance expert, and a group of women who were at that time simply dubbed "housewives."[1] Some of the more notable members of the Theatre Union Council included Kyle Crichton, the much respected commentator on social themes for Collier's Magazine, who was a steadfast friend of the Theatre Union and frequently made speeches; the young poetess, Muriel Rukeyser, who wrote promotional blurbs and assidulously addressed envelopes for mass mailings; and Francis Gorlik whose many connections with various political groups were incaluable to Sylvia Regan in the early days of compiling lists.[2] Another energetic Theatre Union booster was Molly Thatcher. Sylvia Regan trained her in the techniques of organizing theatre parties, but later she moved to the Group Theatre to work on audience building projects there.

A group tickets policy which Sylvia Regan was not in charge of was the distribution of tickets to the unemployed. During the theatre's gestation period, the Executive Board had toyed with the idea of giving tickets gratis to unemployed people on a regular basis. The notion was consistent with the Board's desire to be the theatre of the working class. Since many workers were unemployed and could scarcely afford to eat let alone go to the theatre, the Theatre Union announced that the policy was a natural function of its being and that the unemployed were an integral part of its audience.[3]

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Regan, 28 June 1978.

[3]Fourth Prospectus, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center; "Theatre Union Donates Tickets to Unemployed," Bronx Home News, 21 January 1934.

The program was managed entirely by the Executive Board and not the business office. Unsold tickets for an evening's performance would go to either a union, a settlement house, or some relief committee by noon of that day. Such groups would be offered blocks of fifty to one hundred tickets to distribute.[1] The following were some of the organizations that cooperated with the Theatre Union in this enterprise: Unappointed Teachers Association; Urban League; United Neighborhood Houses; the Grand Street, Henry Street, and Union Settlement Houses; Unemployed Adult Students of Central School for Business and Art; and the Association of Unemployed Single Women.[2] At first, the Theatre Union bore the brunt of the financial outlay for these "guest tickets". Later, they asked the audience for contributions to help cover the cost of the program. Actors would make a curtain speech during the intermission or after the final curtain explaining the rationale for the practice and soliticing as little as 30¢, the cost of such a seat, or for a donation for the special fund which was set up for this purpose.[3]

Not all Theatre Union supporters agreed with this policy nor the way it was handled. Sidney Howard, for one, considered it impolitic and inopportune, a policy that could jeopardize the continuance of the theatre:

> May I question one small point of policy? I doubt the wisdom of soliciting seats for the unemployed. In one sentence you ask people with money to support the Theatre Union and in the next sentence you ask them to subscribe to revolutionary stirrings up. It seems to me

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978; Fourth Prospectus.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Maltz, 15 July 1978; George Ross, "Boisterous, Embattled Audiences Greet Theatre Union's Play for Peace," World Telegram, 30 January 1934.

> bad judgement to put these two so close together. I am more interested at the moment to the success of the Theatre Union and I really believe you will do better not to talk about seats for the unemployed.[1]

Interestingly, however, in March 1934, the Theatre Union reported that audiences were responding to the Theatre Union's appeal with an average of $100 a week.[2] As a result, 600 to 700 tickets were given away weekly. After two seasons of operation the Theatre Union estimated that eight of each one hundred playgoers had seen the play without charge.[3]

The Theatre Union reached out to its desired constituency, and the workers responded. They flocked to Fourteenth Street, adopting the theatre as their shrine. They arrived not in limousines and taxis, but by subway and in chartered buses. Fourteenth Street was lined each evening with buses that came from Brooklyn and New Jersy all jammed with workers eager to taste of that strange exotic fruit called "culture." Walker swelled with pride as he watched the faces of this fresh audience pass through the doors of the Civic Repertory Theatre:

> The wise men . . . told us that a workers' audience for workers' plays existed only in our imaginations. "The American working man," they said, "doesn't want to see plays, he wants to see movies about bankers and their mistresses lolling about Palm Beach. He wants to see pretty-pretty love scenes, boudoir scenes, nightclub and seduction scenes. He wants to escape from his own hard, hum-drum life." They were dead wrong. The American working man wants to go to the theatre all right, provided it doesn't cost more than a movie and the play presents, in a grasping way, a phase of life from his own point of view.[4]

Paul Peters, too, scanning the auditorium full of cheering proletarians

---

[1]Sidney Howard to Charles Walker, 27 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Larkin, "Propaganda," p. 2.

[3]Dreiblatt, Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]Michael Mok, "Peace on Earth in Seventh Week at Civic Repertory Theatre—Worker is Audience," Evening Post, 13 January 1934, sec. 2 p. 9.

crowed about the "miracle" the Theatre Union had ordained: "a workers theatre, with a militant workingclass play, packing the house—with workers! Here was something new under the American sun. The lesson of the Theatre Union is that workers do want culture. But is must be competent and stirring; and it must be their culture."[1]

Who were the spectators at Peace on Earth and subsequent productions? We can begin to compose a profile of the typical audience by surveying the groups that purchased theatre parties. There are three categories: first, the union and workers' clubs such as Jewelry Workers Industrial League, Beautician's Union, New Workers' School, Office Workers' Union, various locals of the ILGWU, United Council of Working Class Women, the M. Singer Dress Shop Workers, Majestic Metal Shop Workers, Bronx Free Fellowship, Photographic Workers League, and the Mount Eden Workers Center; second, political organizations such as the League for Independent Political Action, the League for Industrial Democracy, the International Labor Defense, the Socialist Party, the Conference for Progressive Labor Action, the Communist Part, Friends of the Soviet Union, International Workers Order, the Young People's Socialist League, branches of the Workmen's Circle, the American League Against War and Fascism, and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; third, there are social clubs and cultural and educational organizations such as the Liberal Club of the YMHA, the Flatbush Culture Club, the Brooklyn Hebrew Home for the Aged, the Adult Education League, the Followers of Nature, Association of University Teachers, Adult Student's Association, New Jersey College for Women, Bryn Mawr Alumni Association,

---

[1]Paul Peters, "Do Workers Want Culture?" Daily Worker, 23 January 1934, p. 5.

and the City College Conference Against War.[1] The last category, composed largely of educated, liberal middleclass individuals, had previous playgoing experience. For the others, however, constituting a majority, their trip to the theatre was a novel event. These were the "ninety percent," as Walker called them, for whom the established society had provided no outlet for their cultural drives except the 25¢ movie which only filled them with frothy fantasies.

The list of organizations suggests little about the background of the new audience. A more revealing portrait of the kind of people they were emerges from responses to the production. On departing the theatre some could be overheard saying, "That was the best picture I ever saw."[2] They were truly seeing a play for the first time and they did not even have a word for "theatre." They were culturally unsophisticated. They reacted to the plays simply and directly, sometimes blurring the destinction between reality and illusion. After one performance of Peace on Earth, Walker came upon a glowering, muttering assemblage of working men outside the stage door. They were waiting for the actor who played the part of the cop who arrested Peter Owens for trying to read the Declaration of Independence. They didn't want his autograph; they wanted to beat him up. Walker patiently told them he was only an actor. They retorted, "What d'ye think we are—crazy? We know he's an actor. But we're gonna beat him up just the same. We're gonna beat him up for wanting to take the part of that cop."[3]

If at times their reactions were somewhat ingenuous, they were

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978. [3]Mok, "Worker Audience," p. 9.

absorbed by the proceedings behind the footlight, and they became enormously excited by what they witnessed. Since they had no habit of theatregoing, they were ignorant of the theatrical etiquette that dictated the proper forms of registering approval or disapproval. They were uninhibited about expressing their feelings. Unabashedly they would hoot, howl, and stomp their feet as the spirit moved them. If they liked something some character said about the union or some worker, they would murmur approvingly, cheer, or burst in applause. At the end of one performance a group of one hundred children from a workers' club stood up and gave three cheers for Peter Owens. Members of the Marine Workers Industrial, were so indignant and so stirred by the action of the play that they joined the actors in the last scene in vociforously chanting, "Peter Owens shall not die."[1] On the other hand, evil characters, like the militaristic Bishop, and anti-labor pronouncements were treated with full measure of opprobrium in the form of hisses and jeering catcalls. Broadway was unaccustomed to this kind of bold display of emotion.

The play elicited such reactions because it struck a familiar cord in the minds of its spectators. It dealt graphically with real happenings that they could recognize, that they knew about first hand. When the houselights would come up at the end, clusters of people would remain in the auditorium debating the issues the play had raised. Others would congregate on the sidewalks outside the theatre and discuss the great verve what they had just seen.[2] The plays were both entertaining and educational for them. Very quickly they became strongly dedicated

---

[1]Press Release, For American, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]"Many in Audience At 'Peace on Earth' are New to Theatre," Herald Tribune, 24 December 1933; Regan, 28 June 1978.

to the Theatre Union. When asked by speaker after a performance, "Do you want a theatre like this? Will you help maintain one in New York?" the answer was always resounding "Yes!"[1] Some people became regular customers. One elderly lady from Coney Island brought a different group of friends with her each time. A clergy man from New Jersey was so moved by the play that he announced his "duty as a man and as a preacher would be unfulfilled" until he brought his entire Sunday school class.[2]

Several noted writers and playwrights, among them Sidney Howard, Robert Morse Lovett, Alfred Kreymborg, and John Howard Lawson, observing the behavior of this audience, commented on the vitality and energy conveyed by the rapport between the play and its working-class audience. Images were conjured up on the Greek, medieval and Elizabethan theatres, theatres which engendered a rousing bond between the performance and the spectators. Such theatres, according to them, had the courage to be concerned with vital, contemporary political and social problems.[3]

The attention and immediate responses of the audience invigorated the actors' performances. As more and more workers began coming to the play, Walker noticed a distinct change in the quality of the performances. "The audience determines the character of the play," he said, "and to a surprising extent—the quality of the acting. Anyone who saw 'Peace on Earth' at its opening and again several weeks later must have noticed the heightened warmth and vigor of the performance, as the actors respond-

---

[1]Peters, "Culture?" p. 5.

[2]"Concerning 'Peace on Earth,'" Sun, 5 January 1934.

[3]"Worker-Audience Responsible for Great Success of 'Peace on Earth,'" Daily Worker, 30 December 1933.

ed to the enthusiasm of working class audiences."[1] William Gardener, contrasting the opening night performance with other performances, claims that the acting company which at first gave a shaky and uneven performance was not, under the influence of a more sympathetic audience, "increased in poise, confidence and definiteness."[2] The actors were aware of the deep impression this audience had on them. Robert Keith, a mature, seasoned performer, expressed admiration: "I've never played to an audience like that in my life. . . . These are the people who should make up the audience theatre. They are honest; they have feeling. To play before them makes the actor feel again that the theatre is a great art.[3] Millicent Green likewise enjoyed working for them: "You felt they were with you before you opened your mouth. On Broadway you had to work getting a response whereas these audiences were primed. They ra-ra-raed the way a meeting would respond to the things they were familiar with, to the things they approved of. It was a cinch to play to them."[4] During rehearsals, Paul Peters reports, many of the Broadway actors balked at the more militant passages of the play. However, as the Theatre Union found its audience, they discovered that these "soap-box" moments were applauded as the most dramatic moments of the play. They stopped talking about "soap-box," involved themselves completely in the drama, and inquired what the "social problem" of the next play would be.[5]

---

[1]Charles Walker, "Theatre as a Weapon," Fight, May 1934.

[2]Gardener, "Peace," 16 January 1934.

[3]Northrup, "Meet Union," p. 9.

[4]Interview with Millicent Green, New York, New York, 30 June 1978.

[5]Peters, "Culture?" p. 5.

On several occasions, the actors were so swept up by the spitit and political solidarity of the audience that at the curtain call they stood with clenched fists unraised and joined the audience in singing "The International."[1]

If the workers were the life-blood of the theatre, the carriage trade, or at least the liberal, sympathetic portion, was its plasma. In order to survive the Theatre Union had to attract the middle of the road middleclass. They were the ones who could afford the $1.50 orchestra seats which yielded the bulk of the revenue. Even Mike Gold, that died-in-the-wool revolutionary, recognized that unless the bourgeoisie could be interested the Theatre Union's fare, the theatre would collapse because of its mounting deficit. "Will they be licked by the same capitalist economics that defeated the New Playwrights and other such ventures?" he asked. "Can a revolutionary theatre carry the overhead under which they stagger?" In order to survive, he declared, such a theatre cannot rely solely on a revolutionary audience, it must attract, as did Piscator in Berlin, a bourgeois audience as well.[2] The Theatre Union's managers did make an earnest effort to reach such an audience. They tried to offset the bad reviews by publishing commendatory endorsements; they debated the critics' assessments in print; and they initiated a membership drive directed at the middle class.

It was common practice then, as it is today, for producers to take out ads for their productions in which they published excerpts of laudatory comments by critics. The Theatre Union opted for a somewhat

---

[1]Green, 30 June 1978.

[2]Michael Gold, "What a World," Daily Worker, 25 December 1933, p. 5.

modified public relations strategy. They decided not to mention the reviewers and instead to quote the opinions of "honest critics and intellectuals of America."[1] Some of these prominent personalities submitted their views of the play voluntarily; others were canvassed. Margaret Larkin collected names from the Executive Board of people who might oblige with a written statement which the Theatre Union could publish. She then sent each of these people a letter much like the one she sent to the radical ecomonist, Scott Nearing: "George Sklar gave me your note of congratulations. . . . Will you write a paragraph about the play 'as a force in the theatre in the struggle against war.' We are trying to fight the Broadway critics by publishing the comments of those who are likely to be more kindly disposed."[2]

The remarks and sentiments of liberal dramatists, writers, and civic leaders peppered the advertisements and handouts published to promote Peace on Earth. Zona Gale, the Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, said, "'Peace on Earth' leaves one hungry for more of this kind of drama which is ABOUT SOMETHING. Some of us have had far too much good drama which is about nothing. Here is a powerful tragedy both in content and in dramatic conception." Harry F. Ward of the Methodist Federation of Social Welfare, felt "heavily indebted to the authors" of the play and urged others to see it at once. Stephen Raushenbush, the economist and expert on power trusts and big business stressed the play's documentary accuracy: "This play had the low-down. That is the way company police

---

[1]Paul Peters, "'Peace on Earth' Arouses Class Anger of Reviewers," Daily Worker, 5 December 1933, p. 5.

[2]Margaret Larkin to Scott Nearing, 18 December 1933, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

shoot men. That is the way sheriffs talk; that is the way workers occasionally accept the risk of death. In the coal and steel area of Pennsylvania a large part of 'Peace on Earth' has been playing all this summer." Ruth Morgan of the Peace Committee of League of Women Voters commented on the artistic merits of the play: "The play 'Peace on Earth' seems to me to answer the question 'can we have good propaganda and good art at the same time?' Certainly, we can, and considered only as art I think the play is an artistic triumph." And Reinhold Niebuhr of the Union Theological Seminary found Peace on Earth a "very moving play, full of dramatic interest," adding, "Whatever the critics say this play is very much worth seeing."[1] There were more, many more, who offered capsule comments of praise for the production and the Theatre Union. The thrust of their comments was the Peace on Earth, unlike standard Broadway fare, offered a compelling message; it was stirring and imaginative drama; the critics did not like the play, not because it was bad, but because they disagreed with its message.

The Theatre Union also reaped the benefits of free publicity in the form of letters to the editor. The New York Times, for example, printed letters from Sherwood Anderson, Virgil Geddes, and John Howard Lawson, all of whom decried the scabrous treatment of the play by the daily critics, especially Brooks Atkinson.[2] The Herald Tribune printed a letter by one Annie Nathan Meyer who relates that she was almost dis-

---

[1]Handbills, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Sherwood Anderson, "The Herald Angel Sings," New York Times, 10 December 1933, sec. 10, p. 4; Virgil Geddes, "Good Will Toward Men," New York Times, 17 December 1933, sec. 9, p. 5; John Howard Lawson, "Still 'Peace on Earth,'" New York Times, 24 December 1933, sec. 9, p. 2.

suaded from seeing the play because the critics all considered it dull propaganda and treated the authors like school boys. But since she held a ticket from an International Labor Defense benefit she saw it anyway. She was enthralled and delighted by the plays's passion and sincerity. She ends with the exhortation. "Don't be discouraged by the reviewer. Go see!"[1] Some newspapers and magazines even published panegyrical editorials inviting their readers to attend the play. In the same week the New Republic and the Nation both heralded the achievement of the Theatre Union. The former, devoting a full page to expatiating its views, adumbrates the purposes and policies of the Theatre Union and advocates its United Front constituency. It offered an explanation for the critics' hostile reception of the play by comparing it to the London critics vituperations of Ibsen. "It is to be expected that dramatic critics should be concerned with defending the purity of the theatre as the home of fine art against the intrusion of disturbing ideas." It also places the Theatre Union in the distinguished company of theatre in the age of Pericles and of Elizabeth because like the theatre of those times the Theatre Union has succeeded in reaching a broad audience with ideas that are pertinent to their lives.[2] The Nation, in its editorial, confirms the Theatre Union's ability to find its audience despite the contempt of the critics. It outlines the intentions of the organization, and urges its readers to patronize it: "The unfortunate corollary to the encouraging fact of working-class support is that the Theatre Union

---

[1]Annie Nathan Meyer, "A Boost for 'Peace on Earth,'" Herald Tribune, 10 December 1933.

[2]"Toward a Workers' Theatre," New Republic, 27 December 1933, p. 184.

needs also, if it is to survive, the support of the people who can buy the higher-priced seats. And so far, it has not succeeded in filling its front rows."[1] The editors of the World Telegram also felt the need to express their support of the play. They called it "one of the most exciting plays in town," and said, "intent upon its message, it takes care to speak it in terms of a lump in the throat, in terms of entertainment and dramatic interest. We hope New York will long continue beating a path to its door."[2]

The effort to diffuse and negate the critical denunciation of the play took two forms, one factual, another political. First, the Theatre Union tried to confute the charges, implied or openly stated, that the events of the play were false and contrived. Maltz and Sklar scored the critics for their ignorance of current events. "Every major event in the play," they insisted, "has at least one basis in fact."[3] To the charge that the play was nothing but a "bitter fantasy" and the authors would have been better off in thier desire to destroy was if they had used the truth rather than "irresponsible excitement,"[4] the authors pointed out that strikers are killed and that longshoremen have gone on strike to prevent the shipment of munitions. In Rotterdam, in October 1933, Dutch stevedores went on strike in sympathy with a Chinese crew who refused to load munitions on a ship to Japan. In April 1933, American sailors refused to work on a yacht at the Brooklyn shipyards

---

[1]"'Peace on Earth,'" Nation, 27 December 1933, p. 721.

[2]"'Peace on Earth,'" World Telegram, 10 March 1934.

[3]"News 'Ignorance' of Play Critics Hit," Post, 6 December 1933.

[4]Atkinson, "Propaganda for Peace," 30 November 1933.

that was being converted into a gunboat for the Peruvian Navy.[1] To the charge that people had the right to read whatever they like as long as they do not threaten the peace,[2] the authors presented the cases of Upton Sinclair who was arrested in San Jose, California, for reading the Declaration of Independence at a meeting on behalf of free speech and Norman Thomas who was arrested for the same reason on the east coast in Passaic, New Jersey.[3] To the charge that college professors were not censured for expressing their political views, but were on the contrary being invited to Washington to help formulate and implement the President's decidedly socialistic New Deal,[4] the authors reminded the critics of the California professor who was relieved of his duties when he publically defended those who sought the release of Tom Mooney, and of Professor Donald Henderson who was dismissed from Columbia because his radical opinions on ecomonics were not compatable to those of Nicholas Bulter and the Columbia Board of Trustees.[5] Sklar and Maltz did not even bother responding to the allegation that the play appealed more to intellectual liberals than to stevedores.[6] They did not need to. Even on opening night one hundred stevedores attended as part of a theatre party from

---

[1]"News 'Ignorance,'" 6 November 1933.

[2]George Jean Nathan, "Post Mortem," Vanity Fair, February 1934, p. 41; Hammond, "No Peace," 1 December 1933.

[3]"News 'Ignorance,'" 6 December 1933.

[4]Gilbert, "Jab Below Belt," 30 November 1933; Brown, "Theatre Union Presents," 1 December 1933.

[5]"News 'Ignorance,'" 6 December 1933; Peters, "Class Anger," 5 December 1933.

[6]Lockridge, "Propaganda Drama," 1 December 1933.

the Marine Workers Industrial Union.[1]

Within two weeks of the opening of Peace on Earth, New York headlines validated another aspect of the play. In one of those bizarre twists of history where life seems to mirror art, the New York Times reported that two Yale students were arrested for participating in a foundry strike in New Haven. Dean Clarence Mendell, reprimanding the students for interfering in local affairs, declared that the college was "out of sympathy" which such interference, and denied the students permission to hold a mass demonstration on campus.[2] George Sklar, remembering the strong New England conservatism of his alma mater, remarked that this attitude was "typical of the age-old reactionary tradition of the university."[3]

The Theatre Union's second offensive against the critics struck much deeper than simply accusing them of being ingorant of the news. The Theatre Union and its supporters accused the critics of villifying the play because it challenged their political views. The critics, they argued, were not objective, impartial arbiters of art as they claimed. They were responding directly to the play's political message, not its artistry. In the minds of the critics, the play's content was separated from its form, with the critics commenting on its form though they were thinking of its content. As servants of the status quo, these dramatic critics would naturally echo the sentiments of their class and lambast

---

[1]Press Release, Exclusive for Journal American, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]"Yale Pickets Rebuked," New York Times, 11 December 1933.

[3]Press Release, Exclusive for Daily Worker, 19 December 1933, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

the play in order to disqualify its thesis. Their animadversions were nothing more than political self-defense; the cry that Peace on Earth was propaganda was simply an attempt to nullify its impact. Paul Peters led the counter-attack for the Theatre Union: "With what energy and fervor the dramatic critics of the capitalist press rush to arms in defense of their masters as soon as the class struggle rears its head in the theatre has been illustrated the past few days in the reviews of 'Peace on Earth . . .'"[1] John Howard Lawson made the same point:

> In reading the reviews of "Peace on Earth," I was not surprised to find that the majority of the critics were bored and annoyed by what seems to me an outstanding dramatic achievement. As is invariably the case with any play that deals with current social problems, the critics were well-nigh unanious in describing it as "propaganda," "sophomoric," "hysterically written and crudely presented," etc., etc. All this puzzles me, and leads me to believe that the reviewers themselves become intemperate and lose all sense of perspective whenever politics is introduced across the footlights.[2]

If it were not for the initial damage to audience attendance caused by these reviews, the Theatre Union would have agreed with Erwin Piscator, that politicizing the press was one of the purposes of a revolutionary theatre. Referring to his own theatre in Berlin, Piscator confessed, ". . . we have . . . to our credit the unquestioned fact that our stage has had direct political value. The critics could not long rest content with esthetic appraisals. They were obliged to take sides politically. This was exactly what we wanted."[3]

The left press, however, did not hesitate to make political hay out of the critical response to Peace on Earth. In utterances that

---

[1]Peters, "Class Anger," 5 December 1933.

[2]Lawson, "Still Peace," 24 December 1933.

[3]Piscator, "Social Theatre," p. 14.

resonated with Third Period dogmatism they vented their conviction that the critics had disclosed their true colors by their reactions. Michael Gold branded them "Watchdogs of a treasure house of ordure," and screamed that "all the frustrations, all the bitter venom, and self-disgust that is stored up in the bosoms of the intellectual slaves of a corrupt civilization are released on such a theatre."[1] Joseph Freeman was a little less strident but a good deal more sarcastic:

> Natural law, majestic and implacable, rules the universe. It gives one a great sense of security to know in advance that the sun will rise in the east and set in the west, that if winter comes spring cannot be far behind, that Mae West will forever thrill the repressed with idealizations of the oldest profession in the world; and that after a superb play like "Peace on Earth" the bourgeois critic will sit on their well-oiled haunches and chant in chorus "This is propaganda."
>
> . . . One knows, of course, that real art is concerned with the eternal triangle which one may, like Mr. Noel Coward, rearrange perversely. It is also desirable to deal with sentimental memories of middleclass life circa 1906. One may even, like George Sklar and Albert Maltz in a previous play called "Merry-Go-Round," attack corrupt municipal politics, provided they do it at a time when Tammany Hall and the Catholic church are preparing the skids for a playboy mayor.
>
> The unpardonable crime is to grapple with the essential character of capitalist society, particularly on the verge of a war which blasts away all masks, veils and falsehoods. In that case the simple and horrible truth becomes "propaganda" and requires on the part of the official critic counter-propaganda.[2]

The nub of the left's ire was the critics' use of the volatile word "propaganda." The word was commonly understood to have a pejorative connotation. At best, it meant the attempt to alter someone's opinions or beliefs through repeated and often simplified arguments. At worst, it suggested an underhanded effort to convert someone to a different

---

[1] Gold, "What World," 25 December 1933, p. 5.

[2] "'Peace on Earth': The First Theatre Union Production," Daily Worker, 2 December 1933, p. 7.

system of (political) belief through the use of insidious, subversive methods. When a theatre critic used the word in describing a play it was recognized as a signal that here was a play that was in some way something less than a play. It fell short of being classified as Art and it was reduced to the level of pamphlet. At the very most, it demanded a wholly different critical set.

The reason for this dimunition in stature was best articulated by Joseph Wood Krutch. Krutch postulated that the artist maintained a special relationship to the world. In his art, the artist must divorce himself from the hurly-burly of diurnal affairs. He must assume an attitude of dispassionate detachment from the tumultuous events within his environment; he must hover above the rapids not try to steer through them. Only with this posture will he be free to evaluate his relationship to the world. The "real business of literature" demands "disinterestedness," he proclaims. The act of engaging politically in the affairs of the world and the act of endeavoring to right the evils of daily life, though they may be commendable and highly moral, are nevertheless acts which are inimical to the act of creating art. For "Man qua Artist and man qua Reformer are antithetical things," says Krutch, "the reformer concerned largely with what he can do to the world, the artist primarily interested in what the world is doing to him." The two roles are worlds apart because, according to Krutch, art has a unique purpose: it "is essentially a form of rationalized and extended Contemplation, designed primaily to render more vivid and assimilable those experiences which are capable of being enjoyed for their own sake." The fidelity of an ardently politicized artist is not to "those experiences which are capable of being enjoyed for their own sake," but to experiences which

have some bearing on his beliefs. These experiences, however, are tied to a particular time and place by viture of their urgency and their immediate social utility, and thus lack the universality and the eternal truths the other experiences have.[1]

The left vigorously denied Krutch's premises about the function of art and the role of the artist. It is impossible, they maintained, for the artist to assure such neutrality. "There is no such thing as art versus propaganda," insisted Michael Blankfort.[2] The distinctions between the two are factitious and unreal. The artist is a social being living in a world of social causes and effects. Consequently, he can never refrain from injecting his political opinions, unconsciously or subtly, in his work. It is spurious, absurd, and somewhat arrogant to conceive of the artist as a superior creature nestled in a lofty tower, serenely ruminating about "experiences for their own sake." "An author is a propagandist by what he says or fails to say," declares Albert Maltz. "He is a propagandist for one cause or another, directly or indirectly, by the very nature of the 'slice of life' he selects or fails to select."[3] No matter how cloistered from the actual occurences of the world the artist believes himself to be, his work will inevitably relate to or comment upon that world in some way. All plays are therefore propaganda because they try tacitly or overtly to propagate some doctrine. Plays as diverse as Sailors Beware, Days Without End, or Mary of Scotland all

---

[1]Cited by Aaron, pp. 258-59.

[2]Speech by Michael Blankfort to ILGWU, 1935, p. 1, Blankfort Papers, Boston University.

[3]Albert Maltz, "What is Propaganda?" New York Times, 28 April 1935, sec. 10, p. 3.

convey a particular morality. Thus a play needs to be judged as either a good play or a bad play without allowing speculations about the author's motives to intervene. To use the word propaganda as a critical shorthand for disparaging a play's worth is confusing and in and of itself a political act. Since every play sets forth a view, denouncing a play as "propaganda" reveals more about the viewer than the thing viewed. In that context, propaganda is in the ideology of the beholder. If a play conforms to the critic's creed and it is good it is judged great art. If it represents a divergent belief, it becomes simply somebody else's propaganda. For the left, this mode of perceiving and judging was another manifestation of the ever widening cultural schism. The ruling class, wishing to preserve its hegemony, impeached the credibility of any work of art which expressed the point of view of the rising class—the proletariat—which wished to supplant the former with something better.[1]

The question of whether art and propaganda are mutually exclusive, whether it is possible for the artist to reconcile his political life with his artistic life, surfaced with a predictable regularity every time the Theatre Union presented a play, or any time a social play was produced. It was, of course, never resolved. Sometimes a critic would side-step the issue by insisting that the play is just a bad play regardless of its social matter. Richard Lockridge, for instance, countered Sklar's and Maltz's rebuttal to the critics by saying simply, "'Peace on Earth' does not seem to this reviewer at all 'preposterous.' On the contrary, it seems pretty old stuff."[2]

---

[1]Speech by Blankfort to ILGWU, pp. 2-4.

[2]"Peace on Earth," Sun, 9 December 1933, p. 10.

Some critics had second thoughts, and hearing that the Theatre Union was buzzing with activity, decided to have another look at Peace on Earth. Second reactions differed little from first reactions except to acknowledge that the Theatre Union had an audience which was more exciting to watch than the play:

> You're likely to find the audience more exciting than the play itself They are a throaty, palm-pounding crowd that yells the capitalistic and militaristic villian down with a roar that shakes the rafters of Eva Le Galienne's old stand. There are no restrictions on enthusiasm. The ushers are ordered simply to safegaurd the old hardwood seats, Let the customers rant. That is what the play was made for.[1]

One last attempt to create a more heterogeneous audience was the start of a subscription membership drive. As mentioned earlier the Executive Board, during its early planning had decided against subscriptions as the main source of ticket income. Now, however, that Peace on Earth was doing well, and a second production was coming along, the Board felt it could promise subscribers a season of theatre. Helen Thompson was hired as subscription manager and a membership drive was launched with the 100th performance of Peace on Earth.[2]

The Theatre Union's subscription system was never as elaborate as the one the Theatre Guild had developed though it was comparable in its set-up. It was intended more as a backup to the theatre party system, to supplement income and audience reach. The Theatre Union realized that a workers' theatre faced special problems in trying to establish a subscription audience, not the least of which is the difficulty of creating an image of stability. Previous workers' theatres or ideas for them

---

[1]Ross, "Boisterous, Embattled Audiences," 30 January 1933.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Financial Statement, 1933-34.

had the tendency to appear and vanish on the theatrical horizon with the speed of a comet. Margaret Larkin advising on methods of building an audience says, "A cautious beginning is desirable in setting up a subscription system. The new theatre must be financially able to guarantee the productions for which it sells seats in advance."[1] She adds, however, that waiting can be an advantage, because having established itself as a permanent organization the theatre can save some money on running the subscription campaign. Another problem which the Theatre Union had to contend with in moving toward subscriptions was the fear that they would infringe on the immensely productive theatre party system. Sylvia Regan fought against subscriptions for this reason. She maintained that it would complicate the ticket situation because if tickets were allocated in the orchestra to subscribers on any given night, they would be unable to fill an order for a theatre party for the whole orchestra for that night.[2]

Warily, but with much enthusiasm, people were invited to become members of the Theatre Union. Two types of memberships were offered. Five dollars a year paid for a Sustaining Membership.[3] This entitled the member to two orchestra seats for two productions during the term of membership. For one dollar a year, one could become an Audience Member which allowed a twenty percent discount on two seats (priced above

---

[1]Larkin, "Building Audience," p. 26.

[2]Regan, 28 June 1978.

[3]After a few weeks, another category of subscription membership was offered at $3.50 a year which gave subscribers four one-dollar seats (in the last five rows of the orchestra or the first three rows of the balcony) for each of two productions. (Prospectus [April 1934] Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.)

forty-five cents) for two plays.[1] Though it planned to produce three plays the following season, the Theatre Union tried to protect itself and its subscribers by guaranteeing only two. Other membership privileges included free or reduced seats for Theatre Union symposiums and other activities, and invitations to attend special membership meetings to criticize productions and "participate constructively in Theatre Union work."[2] The first steps toward a subscription audience were modestly successful. At the end of the first fiscal year there were $1,529.50 worth of subscriptions against an outlay of $1,346.50 in overhead for the program.[3]

All the sweat, aggravation, and minor set-backs were worth it in the end when the Theatre Union reaped the dividends of income and prestige. By January, Peace on Earth was a "hit." Walker announced that the production would continue to run at the Civic Repertory despite offers from commercial producers to move it uptown.[4] In a letter to Barrett Clark, Maltz notes that the box office is humming, and confides that there is hope of running the play indefinitely.[5] An article in the Daily Worker bore the title "Run of 'Peace on Earth' to Continue Indefinitely, Says Theatre Union Head." In the article Charles Walker cheer-

---

[1]Second Theatre Union Prospectus, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center; Larkin, "Building Audience," p. 26.

[2]Larkin, "Build Audience," p. 26; First Theatre Union Prospectus, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[4]Daily Worker, 8 January 1934.

[5]Albert Maltz to Barrett Clark, 13 January 1933 [should read 1934], Barrett Clark Papers, Beineke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

fully boasts,

> It is interesting to compare the latest attempt to build a workers' theatre with the success of the New Playwrights Theatre which was an attempt in the same direction. It was estimated that 25,000 people saw the eight plays which the New Playwrights Theatre produced in the Cherry Lane Theatre in a season of thirty weeks. "Peace on Earth" has run for eight weeks and fifty thousand people have seen it. I am confident that this number will be doubled before the play closes . . .[1]

Walker was right: 125,000 people saw the play before it closed. When it finally did close on 17 March 1934, the entire production with its cast unchanged was transferred for a two-week run on Broadway. A. L. Jones, half of the producing team of Jones and Green, who had a practice of rescuing works on the Rialto—he prolonged the life of Desire Under the Elms—installed it in the Forty-Fourth Street Theatre from 2 April to 14 April where another 10,000 people saw the play. Economically, Peace on Earth exceeded all expectations. Total production expenses were $63,213.75 while total income was $58,341.93. This yielded a net loss of only $4,871.82. The Executive Board, however, could find encouragement in the fact that total receipts when compared to running expenses—$57,380.60—showed a slight profit![2] The problem they would have to deal with was how to cover inital production costs, but for the time being they were encouraged by the knowledge that the theatre could work.

Peace on Earth also won much prestige for the Theatre Union. Aside from having its leading actor's performance acclaimed as one of the best of the season, the Theatre Union was accorded an award for its contribution to the cause of peace. On 18 March 1934, Charles Walker, acting on behalf of the Theatre Union and the play's authors, accepted the

---

[1] 20 January 1933, p. 5. [2] Financial Report, 1933-34.

Annie E. Grey Peace Plaque from the Women's Peace Society in a ceremony that was held at the New School for Social Research.[1] In addition to this distinction, the Theatre Union could feel some measure of gratification in knowing that its message had reached even the ears of Washington legislators. After seeing a performance of the play, Congressman William Sirovich, a playwright himself and an individual dedicated to the cause of peace, hopped up on the stage, and made the following short speech to the audience: "When I go back to Washington Monday morning I shall prepare as a result of the inspiration that this play has given me a bill proposing national ownership of all munitions factories in the United States, and that no munitions shall be controlled by private ownership."[2]

In retrospect, Peace on Earth was an ideal choice for the inaugural prodution. Its liberal-leftist viewpoint gave it a very broad appeal. Liberals could relate to it because the play considered, with some restraint, themes which were appearing with increasing frequency in the news, such as Europe's spreading Fascism, the economy's influence over the military, the agitation of labor against war, and the need for all to have a greater understanding of the causes of war. Workers identified with it because the play cast them in a pivotal role in the true-life drama of social unrest.

With Peace on Earth, the Theatre Union not only justified its existence but learned how to continue to exist. It demonstrated that a workers' theatre with a Marxist orientation might work. It showed that

---

[1] "Peace Plaque Presented," New York Times, 19 March 1934, p. 7.

[2] Post, 9 April 1934.

the United Front can be an effective means of uniting people with kindred political beliefs. It proved that a workers' theatre can be organized along professional lines and need not be run by amateurs in order to reach the workers. In the first four months of its existence the Theatre Union learned how to produce plays frugally, where and how to find its audience, what public relations techniques worked best, and how to deal with unfriendly criticism. With future productions the theatre would refine and develop such policies and procedures, as well as embark on new ones.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST SUCCESS:

STEVEDORE

By the time the Theatre Union presented its second production, Stevedore, it was well on its way towards becoming "the permanent theatrical organization" it had promised in its first prospectus. The 125 performances of Peace on Earth had demonstrated that a professional theatre producing plays about workers and charging low prices could attract an audience and even cultivate a fresh audience. The Theatre Union had also initiated several other projects which indicated that a vigorous, fertile organization was rapidly taking root in New York. Furthermore, once having gotten started, the Executive Board had been able to formulate needed internal operational procedures.

The activities which the Theatre Union had begun once Peace on Earth was running comfortably included dance recitals and tentative steps toward a Theatre Union Dance Group, a radio program, play contests, symposiums, and a studio for training actors. Such special programs were started for diverse reasons, but had in common the main objective of promoting the theatre. Executive Board members were imaginative and relentless in this effort. Some activities were also a means of raising sorely needed funds. Others were done simply because many theatre groups, whether radical or not, were doing that sort of thing.

On 10 December 1933, the Theatre Union, acting as producer, presented Sophia Delza in a solo recital. The titles of some of her

dance pieces reflect the appropriateness of her sponsorship by the Theatre Union: "Penitence," "Despair," Fugitive," "Satirical Dances: Fanforonade and Automation Figures" and "Dance of Activity: Labor, Play, Organization."[1] After deducting expenses, the performance brought in a meager profit of only $31.60.[2] Though it was true that every penny helped, this income hardly justified the trouble of arranging and promoting the concert. However, an objective of this concert and others like it was to make the Theatre Union an integral part of the developing culture of the American proletariat. In this way, the Theatre Union was taking a small step in the direction of becoming the cultural center that Gomez had envisioned.

Modern dance had been introduced to the radical movement by agit-prop groups who appropriated choreographic movement into such pieces as Scottsboro and Newsboy. After 1932, with the creation of the Workers' Dance League, its integrity as a vital component of workers' art was undeniable. When the Theatre Union was still in its early stages of formation, Anna Sokolow (a student of Martha Graham) and Jane Dudley, two promising and innovative young dancers, who had a group of their own, approached the Executive Board with the idea of incorporating a dance unit into their plans. Wisely, the Board declined. They would have their hands full running the theatre and it was crucial to assume only one project at a time. The Theatre Union could, however, make a gesture in support of dance by sponsoring performers like Delza on

---

[1]Handbill for recital, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center; New York Times, 10 December 1933.

[2]Financial Report, 1933-34.

Sunday nights when the house was dark, but no more.[1] Sokolow's idea continued to simmer in the wings. Dancers remained on the periphery of the theatre's activities and persisted in urging an organic liason with the Theatre Union. Finally, on their own initiative and with the tacit approval of the Executive Board (they never received any financial backing), the dancers organized themselves into a dance ensemble, the Theatre Union Dance Group. They performed at some Sunday benefit programs for the Theatre Union at the Civic Repertory Theatre and with other workers' dance groups at various recitals. For example, they appeared with the New Dance Group, the Rebel Dancers, and the Red Dancers in a program of "Revolutionary Dance Groups" at the City College Auditorium on 7 January 1934.[2] As a member of the Workers' Dance League, they presented their work, "Anti-War Cycle," in concerts at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (20 April 1934), Town Hall (30 June 1934) and at the Civic Repertory Theatre (25 November 1934 and 2 December 1934).[3] By the following year, however, they had ceased to exist.

A longer lasting activity which commenced during the run of Peace on Earth was the weekly radio program, Sunday evenings at 8:00 P.M., on WEVD, the Socialist station. (WEVD is an acrostic for Eugene V. Debs.) The one-hour program, entitled at first "The People's Theatre," was conceived by Mary Fox, who also made arrangements for it through

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978; Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]New York Times, 24 December 1933.

[3]Daily News, 20 April 1934; John Martin, "Dance Contest Held by Workers League," New York Times, 30 June 1934.

her connections within the Socialist Party.[1] The purpose of the broadcasts was twofold: first, it was another way of publicizing the work of the Theatre Union; second, it was a talk show designed to educate listeners on the nature and aims of social theatre. The following sample of some of the early programs illustrates this point: a playwright's free-for-all entitled "Plays of Today--Why I Write What I Write" with Mrs. Lawrence Langer, Sidney Kingsley, and Paul Peters; Michael Blankfort moderating a discussion on "The Old Provincetown and the New Playwrights'--Early Social Theatres" with Susan Glaspell and Em Jo Basshe; a preview of the forthcoming Stevedore in a reading by Millicent Green and John Brown; an interview with John Wexley by Kyle Crichton; and a commentary on current theatre by Dr. Harry Slochower, Professor of German and Literature at Brooklyn College.[2] The program which changed its name to the Theatre Forum Hour, continued to be aired weekly through the Theatre Union's third season.

The first of several forums held by the Theatre Union took place on Sunday evening, 18 February 1934, at the Civic Repertory Theatre. This particular forum marked the 100th performance of Peace on Earth and also marked the beginning of the theatre's subscription campaign. The symposium was part of a series of Sunday forums to consider the role of the theatre in the struggle of the working class. Kyle Crichton presided and the agenda included speeches by Henry Hull

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Press Releases, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Daily News Record, 26 February 1934; Post, 3 March 1934 and 10 March 1934; Daily News, 14 April 1934.

(the star of Tobacco Road) and Blanch Yurka, on the actor's part in social theatre, an address by the designer Mordecai Gorelik, and remarks by Maltz, Lawson, and Walker reaffirming the Theatre Union's policy of presenting good plays at low prices and proclaiming their goal of obtaining 10,000 sustaining members. Entertainment for the evening was provided by the Theatre Union Dancers, under the direction of Anna Sokolow, who gave a debut performance of "Anti-War Cycle."[1] Admission for the program was $.75, but though nearly 300 people attended, expenses were high and the Theatre Union made only $24.30 as profit. The Theatre Union Dancers, incidentally, were paid $5.00.[2]

Concerned about the dearth of good, actable workers' plays, the Theatre Union announced in February that it was sponsoring two contests to encourage the writing of plays dealing with social and economic questions. One contest offered a $100.00 prize for the best production of such a play by any college drama group or other drama club. A tournament was tentatively planned for April. The second contest was for an original unpublished manuscript for a one-act play about workers written since 1932. The prize for this contest was publication of the play by the Theatre Union and a performance of it by the Theatre Union.[3] Unfortunately, the first contest was postponed indefinitely and the second was not adjudicated until July 1934.

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Post, 13 February 1934.

[2]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

The Theatre Union had better luck with a less ambitious contest. In an effort to arouse student interest in Peace on Earth, high school students were asked to write a 500 to 700 word essay on "What I learned on How to Stop War from 'Peace on Earth.'" First prize, $10 and a free box for a theatre party of friends, went to Irving Perlman and second prize, $5 and a free box, went to Naomi Alter.[1]

When establishing the policies of the Theatre Union, the Board, as we have seen, had vetoed the idea of creating a permanent company. It could not, however, extinguish the yearning for one. A company of actors banded together by a single purpose and working over an extended period of time was the ideal of every radical theatre group. In spirit as well as in practice, it was the exact antithesis of Broadway. Actors could hone their craft, but more significantly, new staging methods could be explored for the new content of the workers' theatre. The great theatres of Moscow and Berlin which had achieved so much by collective effort served as a model. In America, the Group Theatre's ensemble performances were envied and emulated. The still young tradition of the worker's theatre movement mandated permanent companies. Previous workers' theatre groups like the Workers' Laboratory Theatre and the Theatre Collective had made it an organic part of their charter. Along with the concept of a permanent company was the concept of training classes and workshops. Harry Elion, one of the founders of the Workers' Laboratory Theatre, speaking at the Eastern Regional

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Interscholastic 30 January 1934.

Conference of the League of Workers' Theatres, emphasized the need for the study of technique as a means of sharpening the skills of performers and deepening revolutionary consciousnesses.[1]

Motivated by such reasons, several actors of the Peace on Earth company and a minority on the Board kept the idea of a permanent company smouldering by pressing for the formulation of an acting workshop out of which a permanent company might be developed. In January 1934, the Executive Board conceded and announced the creation of the Theatre Union Studio:

> The Theatre Union established the Theatre Union Studio for experimental work and the study of theatre crafts. Competent instructors give their service free and there is no tuition for students; admission is by examination of the faculty.
>
> Thirty students, including many members of the cast of "Peace on Earth" are included in the initial enrollment. It is hoped that the nucleus of a permanent acting company will be developed in the studio and from the casts of Theatre Union productions.[2]

It is difficult to describe with much accuracy the work of the Studio. Because its history is tinged by the rosy light of high aspirations, its actual accomplishments are difficult to discern. On the one hand, the Theatre Union got much public relations mileage from the Studio; in print it was a glorious and productive component of the Theatre Union and the workers' theatre movement in general.[3] In May 1935, Margaret Larkin could consider it an indispensable activity of

---

[1]"Workers' Theatre," New Masses, August 1933, p. 27.

[2]Theatre Union Prospectus [February 1934], Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Molly Day Thatcher, "Revolutionary Staging for Revolutionary Plays," New Theatre, July-August 1934, p. 26.

the Theatre Union because it served as a proving ground for actors, young directors, and new scripts.[1] On the other hand, few Executive Board members today remember its work as being so vital. George Sklar, devoting his time and energy to the productions and to building audiences, hardly took notice of it. He thought, too, that it dissolved after Peace on Earth, when Clifford Odets, its first director, left to work on Awake and Sing.[2] The Studio, in fact, continued in fits and starts right through the theatre's penultimate production. For Michael Blankfort, the Studio did not mean much because besides the money problem, the Theatre Union was philosophically not interested in it. Unlike the Group Theatre which was interested in style, "our interest was simply content," he bluntly stated.[3] Even Sylvia Feningston, who for two seasons is listed in the programs as its director and originally one of its most ardent, outspoken supporters, has only shadowy memories of it.[4] A further measure of the Board's indifference to it is the fact that in its first season, it was granted a mere $5.49 in cash support.[5] The following season, 1934-35, the Studio's most active year, the Board became more generous, expending $630.70 on it. (The actual cost was much larger though since $383.52 was raised in special gifts and miscellaneous income.)[6] In the following two years, however,

---

[1]"Theatre Union --- Its Tasks and Problems," Daily Worker, 15 May 1935, p. 5.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [3]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

[4]Feningston, 8 October 1978. [5]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[6]Financial Report, 1 August 1934 to 6 June 1935, loaned to author by Adelaide Walker.

the Studio does not even appear as a line item in the budget. Two factors that may account for the Board's willingness to go along with the idea at all were that the Studio made it easier for the Theatre Union to justify its tax-exempt status and it helped in fund raising.[1]

Participation in the Studio was designed foremost for cast members of current Theatre Union productions since much of the work focused on staging or character problems of that production or future Theatre Union plays. But membership was not constricted. In fact, much of the studio membership came from outside. Young actors like Hume Cronyn and Wendel Corey attended the sessions though they never performed in a Theatre Union play.[2] They were attracted to the Studio by its program and its instructors. Some actors, like Hester Sondergaard, became regular Theatre Union performers after their initial work in the Studio. That, after all, was one of the major objectives of the Studio.[3]

Twenty-seven student actors were enrolled in the Studio when it commenced operations in January. They were selected on the basis of their talent, their desire for further training, and their sympathy with the aims of the Theatre Union.[4] The Studio was not intended as a dramatic school for novices. Experienced professionals could develop their craft and simultaneously explore the most effective means of transforming ideology into theatre. Three times a week, for two-hour

---

[1]Interview with Jerome Moross, New York, New York, 29 June 1978; Interview with Peter Xantho, New York, New York, 27 June 1978.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [3]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[4]Thatcher, "Revolutionary Staging," p. 26.

periods in the afternoons, they met on the stage of the Civic Repertory Theatre and worked around the set of the current production. The sessions focused on scene work and acting technique. One group rehearsed scenes from The Third Parade. Another rehearsed parts of The Sailors of Cattaro, a play by Friedrich Wolf which the Board was contemplating for production. Scenes from the latter were directed by Odets and rehearsals often generated debates on social democracy and the dictatorship of the proletariat.[1] The objective of these rehearsals, as Molly Thatcher observed, was to enable actors and directors to have the time to experiment with "revolutionary staging" methods, time which was not affordable under the ordinary pressures of an opening night. The Studio could free the Theatre Union from the same four-week-box-office-rehearsal syndrome that permeated Broadway.[2]

The actor training that the Studio practiced was a carry-over of the Group Theatre's work on Stanislavski's methods. This was a natural outcome since Odets, having worked with Strasberg and Clurman at the Group for three years, was firmly under the influence of Stanislavski's theory and practice. In his work at the Studio, Odets examined such basic precepts of the method as affective memory, sense memory, and improvisation. Jules (later John) Garfield, an actor with a small role in Peace on Earth, was asked in one session to lie on the floor in a relaxed position and to recall the sensations of taking a

---

[1]Northrup, "Meet the Union," p. 9; Thatcher, "Revolutionary Staging", p. 26.

[2]Thatcher, "Revolutionary Staging", p. 26.

sunbath.[1] In another exercise, the same actor assumed the mien and behavior of a frightening, ferocious tiger.[2] This kind of work, it was believed, sharpened the actor's sensitivity and stimulated his imaginative faculties. Having abandoned the crude, naive, stylized cartoons of the old agit-prop plays in favor of plays in the traditional Ibsenite mold, the radical theatre now fervently advocated Stanislavski's approach to acting as the method which best complements the subtle content of the plays. "We wanted," said Molly Thatcher, also an evangelist for the Stanislavski system and a sometime Group Theatre member, who occasionally conducted classes at the Theatre Union Studio, "to break down acting cliches and type characterizations, the pat and hackneyed 'acting' of emotions and 'indicating' of relationships which have no place in a theatre that asks its audience to face truths."[3]

A large portion of the Studio's work was with improvisations. In Thatcher's words it helps the actor "to develop freedom, genuine contact between players, to gain a fundamental attack in acting by using the actor himself and not a script as a starting point, to permit the isolation of specific problems and concentration on them."[4] Most improvisations concentrated on developing a sense of character and ensemble playing. Typical of these was an improvisation about the subject of marital strife performed by Millicent Green and Abner Biberman which

---

[1]Green, 30 June 1978

[2]George Sklar interview with Jay Williams, Jay Williams Papers, Mugar Memorial Library Special Collections, Boston University, Boston Massachusetts.

[3]Thatcher, "Revolutionary Staging," p. 26. [4]Ibid.

climaxed with the wife storming out of the house and slamming the door.[1] Sometimes improvisations were also used to bring to the actor a fuller understanding of the life and problems of the worker and to familarize him with the background of issues which were likely to be the themes of Theatre Union plays. Improvisations were set in workers' homes, bureaucrat's offices, strike meetings, war scenes, and concentration camps. During the run of Peace on Earth, for example, all the actors in the Studio were told to behave as if they were in a concentration camp. They became so involved in the exercise that when a stagehand suddenly walked in on them they all responded to him as if he were a guard. When he left they continued with their work as before.[2] Sometimes, following the lead of the Theatre of Action, improvistions were based on headlines from the Daily Worker and other workers' papers.[3]

Not all the actors were supportive of this intense absorption with Stanislavski. Many of the black actors who were then rehearsing Stevedore scoffed at the goings on in the Studio when they had an opportunity to observe it. "You just go out and act, you don't have to go through all this hocus pocus," they cried.[4] Some of the more experienced actors in the company, like Millicent Green, were skeptical oabout the over-indulgence in emotions which the exercises fostered and they were resistant, too, to the labored seriousness of purpose

---

[1]Green, 30 June 1978.

[2]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

that consumed many of the younger, more ardent members of the Studio.[1] This group believed in the method as if it were one of the revelations at Sinai and assidulously applied it to every phase of their work regardless of practicability. This led to some comically absurd incidents. One tenet of this method insisted that the actor must completely "live" every moment of his character's life. To do so the actor must create an imaginative biography for every character he plays no matter how small the role, even if it is merely a walk-on. Dutifully, the actors of the Studio practiced what they learned. In one scene of the third act of Peace on Earth an actor with less than a walk-on--he had to run across the stage with a sign and shout "wheat is $2.30"--stood in the wings before his entrance and worked himself up into such a frenzy that when his cue came he ran out garbling the words in an incomprehensible jumble.[2] A still more spectacular misfire of the method occurred in the same play, but fortunately on another night. In the warehouse scene, Millicent Green paced across the stage anxiously awaiting news of her brother, one of the strikers who had been shot by the militia. In the background sat the other workers, with their signs in hand, directing their attention and concern toward Green. As the scene progressed, Michael Gordon was supposed to run in and tell Victor Killian that the man had died. Killian in turn was supposed to inform Green at which point she was supposed to scream and be led off weeping. One night, however, this carefully staged scene fell victim to the misuse

---

[1]Green, 30 June 1978.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

of the method.

> After months of playing, Saturday night I believe it was, before a packed house, I paced back and forth worrying about my brother, at which point Michael Gordon runs on. Before Victor could get a chance to stop him and ask what happened, out of the shadows in the background lept Mara Tartar. She went over to him and said, "What happened?" He tried to get rid of her, he tried desperately to shake her off, she was like a tarantula. To get rid of her, he finally answered her and said, "He's dead." Whereupon she let out a scream that shook the rafters and began to weep bitterly. I couldn't top her even if I tried. So when Victor told me my by brother had died, I turned around and walked off stage quietly. As I waited for the curtain to come down I was livid. I said, "I'm going to kill her." But by the time the scene had finished my anger had subsided and all I could manage was, "What the hell do you mean by that? That was my brother who died." She responded, "Oh, didn't you know, during my preparation for the role, I decided he was my lover."[1]

Because the Studio's leaders envisioned the Studio as the forerunner of a permanent company of the Theatre Union, they also tried to educate the actor in the ideology and philosophy of revolutionary theatre. Executive Board members conducted a series of Saturday morning lectures entitled "The Social Basis of the Theatre." Such talks gave the actors a historical perspective on the purpose and utility of the social theatre. Paul Peters gave one speech which examined social plays of the past.[2] Manuel Gomez gave several talks which were aimed at giving the actors a sense of the Theatre Union's manifesto and activities, to appraise them of what they were a part of.[3] In a special lecture

---

[1]Green, 30 June 1978.

[2]Margaret Larkin to Elizabeth Ann Hoff, 6 January 1936, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

given by H. W. L. Dana, members of the Studio and the Theatre Union Council learned about the innovations and achievements of the Soviet Theatre.[1]

By summer, the Studio had become a significant adjunct of the Theatre Union. Sylvia Feningston was appointed its director when Odets left. Classes were conducted mostly by Theatre Union people--Molly Thatcher, Michael Gordon, Victor Wolfson, and Michael Blankfort--but the connection with the Group did not disappear since Sanford Meisner was an occasional guest instructor.[2] In the summer, too, the Theatre Union announced that thirty additional students would be chosen from a pool of 350 applicants to augment the enrollment and the Studio's program would be expanded to include the production of short plays, skits, and musical numbers for Sunday night programs at the Civic Repertory; performances on the Theatre Union's radio show; and assisting general promotional work for the Theatre Union by presenting short dramatic pieces for meetings and social gatherings.[3]

The process of determining the Theatre Union's second production began as soon as Peace on Earth was confirmed as the first production. In October 1933, the Board announced its choice, Friedrich Wolf's anti-Nazi play Dr. Mamlock's Escape.[4] The play is an acerbic indictment of the heinous racial policies of the National Socialist government,

---

[1]Daily Mirror, 16 February 1935.

[2]Press Release, 12 March 1934, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Gordon, 14 July 1978; Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]"Theatre Union to Give First Play Here Next Month," Daily Worker, 16 October 1933, p. 5.

and also criticizes blind loyalty to conservative values and inflexible belief that the established order will always persevere. Mamlock, a Jewish physician, a veteran of the World War, and a confirmed democrat, weaves his own destiny by ignoring the Nazi regime's repugnant anti-semitic laws and asserting his faith in the rectitude of the Fatherland. Ultimately, when his clinic is destroyed, he recognizes his folly and in a fit of despair commits suicide.

At its summer meetings in Walker's home in Truro on the Cape, the Executive Board read and pondered the play and listened to Edmund Wilson's and Waldo Frank's reactions to the drama. Finally, however, they decided against it.[1] No specific reason emerges but the play was still considered a possibility in January (1934) as a future if not second production. Perhaps the Board felt that it wanted to do a new play written by an American in its first season rather than a previously produced work by a foreign playwright. Or perhaps the strong Communist theme of the play was too intimading for a group that was still uncertain about the elasticity of its United Front posture.

By early January 1934, no definite decision had yet been made. Plays that were under consideration were The Sailors of Cattaro (another play by Wolf which had won a prize at a theater Spartikiade in Moscow), The Third Parade, and The Fourteenth Street Revue (an idea for a satirical, political musical comedy).[2] The leading contender, however,

---

[1]Sklar interview with Williams, Williams Papers, Boston.

[2]Theatre Union Prospectus [February 1934], Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center; Press Release, 8 January 1934, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

was Paul Peter's Wharf Nigger, a spirited and raw examination of racial animosity in New Orleans. Walker had read the play a year or two before and was anxious to do it because the material ideally suited the scope of the Theatre Union. He hesitated to go along with it only because of some reservations he had about the form of the play. Once Peace on Earth was in production and no longer needed its authors' attention, Walker asked Sklar if he would collaborate with Peters on the script of Wharf Nigger. They began rewriting the play after Christmas with an eye on 1 April as the production date. Work progressed smoothly and by mid-January, Stevedore, the new title of the play, was officially confirmed as the next production.[1] An item in the Amsterdam News blazoned the decision to the residents of Harlem. The Theatre Union, New York's only professional people's theatre was planning to do a play about the exploitation of Negroes. It informed readers that prices were low and it promised that no Jim-Crow discriminatory ticket selling policy would be practiced at its box office.[2]

Wharf Nigger is a passionate expose of race hatred in the deep South. It concerns a group of indigent dockwallopers who are miserably exploited by their white bosses and are threatened with lynchings, massacres, and physical abuse when a squad of white vigilantes rampage in search of a black man who allegedly raped a white woman. Events in

---

[1]Sklar interview with Williams, Williams Papers, Boston; Carl Glick, "Thr Drama Handed From Pillar to Post," Springfield Republican, 25 April 1934.

[2]"A Play to Expose the Exploitation of Negroes," Amsterdam News, 17 January 1934.

the play are based on newspaper accounts of racial turmoil in Saint Louis, and a Russell Sage Foundation Report on race riots in Chicago.[1] The play however, is more than a prosaic documentary. Its power is derived from characters portrayed with earnest compassion, dialogue which seems to jump off the page because of its authentic jangling rhythms and natural idiomatic quality, and background details which invigorate and animate the action. Peters captured these qualities by spending a fall and winter working on the hot, damp wharves of New Orleans. He was a "checker " a relatively soft job. His function was to count the bales of cotton, the sacks of sugar from Cuba, or the boxes of nitrates from South America that were loaded from boat to freight car, or vice-a-versa. The loaders were all black. They lined up each morning and were assigned their jobs. There was a deep but unspoken enmity between the loaders and the checkers. Loaders were paid by the piece and though they worked industriously and adroitly they would often be slowed down by the checkers who wanted to avoid carelessness and keep an accurate tally.[2] Peters conceived of the play in the summer of 1929 when he was laid up with an infection in the leg received when a piece of iron fell on him while he was on the docks.[3]

Peters was born in 1902 in Fort Thomas, Kentucky, the son of a simple factory worker. His real name was Harbor Allen. At fourteen he joined his father at the metal factory. He continued his education

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Glick, "Pillar to Post".

though and eventually attended the University of Chicago. In 1923, he spent a short time at the University of Munich where he earned his living by free-lance writing for American newspapers. He was among the first reporters to wire stories to American editors on Hitler's brazen Beer-hall Putsch.[1] When he returned to American, he settled in New York and became caught up in the whirlwind of its intellectual life. In the late twenties he wrote articles, stories, and sketches for the American Mercury, Scribners', and Harper's (the most influential and elite of the contemporary literay magazines) and for the New Masses, (the new revolutionary periodical which had replaced the atrophied The Liberator in May 1926) which offered an alternative for the literarily minded political radical. Peters's interest in theatre began at about the same time. He worked as publicity man for the New Playwrights, a position which he probably got through his friendship with Mike Gold, one of the editors of the New Masses and architect of the New Playwrights.[2] He also wrote a scathing, satirical one-act farce called Mr. God is Not In. The play was published in the New Masses, as a work intended for "the Worker's Theatre," but there is no evidence of it ever having been produced.[3] It is a broad, jaunty, irreverent cabaret skit which pillories the idea that poor toiling workers can take solace in the belief that God is on their side and that at least in heaven they will be requited for their earthly travails. With humor and straightforward

---

[1]Sender Garlin, "Paul Peters--Revolutionary Playwright--An Interview," Daily Worker, 15 May 1934, p. 55.

[2]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[3]New Masses, December 1925, pp. 5-9.

caricature, the play dramatizes Marx's dictum that religion is the opiate of the masses. God, too, is a capitalist and cannot be trusted for he will always conspire with his collegues to subjugate the workers. The workers' only way out is to repudiate God and religion.

Peters's thinking about society, economics, and the proletariat was influenced by Gold, Joseph Freeman, and other New Masses writers. Gold, sensing Peters's talent, urged him to continue to write but to feed his creative imagination with concrete experiences among the workers. Gold was convinced that proletarian literature, fiction and drama, that dealt with working class characters and experiences, was the wave of the future. The best of this kind of writing would come, he often argued, not from reformed bourgeois artists who had a second-hand, distilled knowledge of workers, but from a "Shakespeare in overalls," whose class origins would render the struggles of the workers with precision, without cant, and with the force of inevitability.[1] Gold may have felt he had found his genius in Peters. He persuaded him to return to his roots and seek out his material in the real struggles and lives of the proletariat. Peters, bored with his office work and disenchanted with New York intellectual life, heeded Gold's advice. He undertook what became a five year proletarian odyssey which brought him into contact with every major form of blue collar worker in the country. His experiences and observations led to five full-length plays.

---

[1]Gold, "Proletarian Realism," p. 5.

He began his wanderlust as a deckhand aboard a tidewater oil tanker headed for the west coast. He jumped ship at San Pedro, California, and worked at odd jobs until he landed a job as a laborer in a construction camp at the the St. Francisquito Valley power plant near Los Angeles. This job almost cost him his life when the dam burst in 1927 and killed 400 workers. He was one of fifty in the camp who survived.[1] He chronicled some of his experiences as a transient worker in his first play, Hallelujah, I'm a Bum. The play concerns the efforts of the International Workers of the World to organize workers in Washington state, and the backlash of lynchings and terror. One Marxist critic analyzing the play admired the way the characters were motivated by class interest, but found the anarchistic tendencies in the work politically immature. "Revolutionary clarity," he concluded, "was sacrificed for the 'adventure' and 'color' of this life."[2]

Next, Peters moved east to Knoxville, Tennessee. There he worked for three months as a pipe fitter on the sprinkling system of a textile mill. He worked ten hours a day and earned $16.00 per week.[3] While there he saw the face of racism as he witnessed all the mill workers suddenly stop work, gather ropes, gasoline cans, and pieces of firewood to pursue a 'nigger' who had insulted a white woman.[4] This violent episode became the inciting incident in the play Wharf Nigger.

---

[1]Garlin, "Peters," p. 5.

[2]Walt Carmon, "Paul Peters," International Theatre 1 (1934): 51.

[3]Garlin, "Peters," p. 5.

[4]Peters, 20 August 1978.

New Orleans and the docks of Stuyvesant Wharf were next. His six-month sojourn there gave him time to absorb the pulse and tempo of discrimination in the deep South. He witnessed first-hand black privations, their never ending servitude, and battered self-respect. He saw, too, the dignity and courage of such blacks as Yallah Celestine, the namesake and model for the protagonist of Wharf Nigger, who inspired his fellows to defy the white bosses and the white man's code which imprisoned them. He also heard the sound of their pain and anguish, sorrows and joys, frustrations of the past, and dreams for the future, voiced in songs and impromptu chants. Peters synthesized his observations and thoughts into his second play.

His wanderings next led him to the steel mills of the Pittsburgh area. Because of its concentration of steel mills and coal mines, Pittsburgh was the guts of American industrial might. It was the capital city of an industry notorious for abuse of labor. For nearly a year Peters worked ten to twelve hour shifts, sometimes seven days a week, in the mills of the Carnegie Steel Company, a division of U. S. Steel Corporation, in Braddock, Pennsylvania. Starting out in the brickyard at 44¢ an hour, he eventually graduated to repairman on the blast furnace and then "slagger" on the open hearth furnace.[1] Such experiences resulted in his third play, Men of Steel, an early example of the strike play which was to become a common staple of left wing dramaturgy.[2] The play inventories

---

[1]Garlin, "Peters", p. 5.

[2]Paul Peters, "'Men of Steel' A Scene from a Proletarian Play," New Masses, December 1930, pp. 6-8. This is the only part of the play which was published in America. It was never produced.

the array of abuses that steel workers suffer. It shows them organizing for a strike, under distinct Communist direction, and in the end achieving some victory. The play's lesson is obvious and clearcut: salvation will come through solidarity; united, the workers will prevail. Walter Carmon, tracing Peters's growth as a revolutionary playwright, states that Men of Steel marks a breakthrough in the ideological content of his plays:

> . . . many ideological weaknesses of his former plays disappeared from this time on. In his new play there now appeared a new note of strength and singleness of purpose. No longer a vague militance, this play begins to speak in more definite terms. Revolt is now better organized and leads through definite channels to a certain purpose.

Carmon appealed to workers' theatres to produce the play and added that it has been translated into Russian and placed on the recommended list of the Vseroskomdram.[1]

Before leaving the Allegheny Mountain region, Peters wrote yet another play on a proletarian theme, Coal Diggers, a little known play on the plight of the miners of that area.[2] The last leg of his journey took him to the fertile but poverty stricken farm lands of Wisconsin where he worked for six months as a $15-a-month hired hand. Again, he wrote a play documenting the predicament of yet another segment of the American proletariat. The play, Dirt Farmer, dealt with the Arkansas Farmers' Revolt of 1930 and was based in part on a story by Whittaker Chambers, "Can You Make Out Their Voices," which appeared in the New

---

[1]Carmon, "Peters," pp. 51-52.

[2]Peters, 20 August 1978. It, too, was neither published or produced.

Masses March 1931. Three of the play's climactic scenes were published in the second issue of Left in the fall of 1931.[1] Dirt Farmer is a compendium of the problems that afflict farmers and make their life difficult and unbearable. Though its leading characters are diagramatically portrayed, the many minor characters are convincingly real and combine to create a mosaic of painful farm life. The Theatre Collective at one time planned to produce the play but never did.[2]

Five years of drifting across the country yielded five diverse plays that together encompass aspects of proletarian life in America. When he returned to New York in 1933, Michael Gold hailed him as the genius of the revolutionary theatre and deplored the fact that none of his plays were produced: "Here is a revolutionary writer of the first rank, whose . . . plays have all the vitality of the younger O'Neill. We have not nourished him to full growth, we have not given him an audience. It is almost a crime."[3] Despite this glowing endorsement, no producer, whether on Broadway or from the workers' theatre, produced Peters's plays. The only job he could get was with Albert Deutsch, a friend of his, who brought him into his group to work on a social history of New York, the project being funded by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Peters fell into a depression which lasted until he began working with the Theatre Union.[4]

---

[1]Paul Peters, "Dirt Farmer," Left, Autumn 1931, pp. 3-19.

[2]Jay Williams, Stage Left (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. 99.

[3]"What a World," Daily Worker, 25 December 1933, p. 5.

[4]Peters, 20 August 1978.

Wharf Nigger was Peters's only play that even came close to being produced. The play circulated through the hands of many New York producers. Harold Clurman, at that time play reader for the Theatre Guild, rejected it, commenting only that it was "too thick."[1] Peters had conferences with producers, but these were all idle talk. Most producers wrote back saying that it was "unbelievable," or "not box office" material, or that it was "too tense."[2] In August 1931, a group of inexperienced, ambitious producers undertook a production of Wharf Nigger at the Provincetown Theatre in the Village.[3] Through the mediation of Maxim Lieber, the producers signed a contract. It was not the standard Dramatist Guild Contract. They arranged to bring Peters to New York and gave him room and board during rehearsals. When Peters arrived, rehearsals were already in progress. The lodgings he was given augured poorly for the fate of the production. Peters was assigned a cot in the living room of a McDougal Street slum apartment which he shared with unknown human transients and bed bugs. Rehearsals were an even greater disappointment. The cast was composed of "tired old actors who shuffled listlessly about the tiny stage" and the director lacked the aptitude and wherewithall to inspire them. This was a pale shadow of the brimming vitality Peters remembered of the dockmen of New Orleans. Mercifully, rehearsals were terminated after two weeks. Actors Equity filed a restraining order against the producers for failing to post a bond to assure the salaries of the

---

[1]Glick, "Pillar to Post."

[2]Ibid.

[3]This was an independent venture not to be confused with the Provincetown Players.

cast. The actors had not been paid and apparently the impecunious producers had no intention of paying them unless the show made money. Later, one of the producers had the temerity to blame Peters for the production's failure. He could have waived his Dramatists Guild demands, the man said, knowing full well that Peters had never signed a Dramatists Guild contract. The producers were unscrupulous novices intent on making a buck.[1]

Following this misadventure, Gustav Blum held the option on the play for a short period, thinking of using it as a vehicle for portraying Negro life in the South.[2] A millionaire in the Woolworth buidling toyed with the idea of using Wharf Nigger to embark on a career as a Broadway producer. Finally, William Sirovitch, New York's playwriting congressman, proposed a collaboration with Peters, hoping to rewrite it to include a speech he had once made in the South about a young politician, passionate about Christ nailed to the cross.[3] None of these projects were ever realized. Peters resumed his itinerant agenda and Wharf Nigger waited until the workers' theatre movement, which was the only suitable producer for the play, matured.

Every morning, for about six weeks, Peters and Sklar worked together rewriting Wharf Nigger. Sklar, the veteran author of two plays, had gained a reputation as a "play carpenter," of doing for the propaganda play what George Kaufman was doing for the Broadway comedy.

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978; Paul Peters, letter to author, 17 June 1978.

[2]Glick, "Pillar to Post."

[3]Ibid.

His training at Yale under the tutelage of George Pierce Baker emphasized the well-made play and gave him a strong sense of dramatic structure. One critic, referring to his work on Merry-Go-Round and Peace on Earth, acclaimed him as "the craftsman who knows how to make good theatre out of hysteria."[1] Sklar's contribution to Wharf Nigger, however, involved more than a structural face-lift. He and Peters worked side by side hammering out every line, revising the shape and scope of the play. Wharf Nigger was a compelling, passionate picture of racial oppression in America. It revealed the "terror and brutality of a town mad with lynch spirit." It showed the wild contagion of mob murder, and caught, in a frenzied chase, the desperation and doom swept on by the merest suspicion."[2] Its broad canvass necessitated an epic style. Beginning with an adulterous white woman, who accuses a nonexistent Negro of attacking her, when in fact it was her boyfriend who beat her, Peters traced the red-hot fever of hatred which rushes through the community like the plague. With each succeeding scene, the hatred spreads to more and more people until it engulfs the entire community. Stevedore, though it retained many of the major incidents and much of the dialogue of the original, radically modified the theme. The Negro problem that Peters had been concerned with was given a Marxist twist by proposing that racial violence was conditioned by economic determinants rather than by prejudice. The thesis of the new work demanded a more controlled

---

[1] The Hollywood Reporter, 24 April 1934.

[2] John Anderson, "Tense and Exciting Drama of New Orleans Waterfront Draws Loud Cheers," Evening Journal, 19 April 1934.

structure. The play had changed from being descriptive to being litigious; from illustrating a deplorable state of being to proving an argument about an aspect of capitalist exploitation of labor.

The change was effected by the introduction of a new character, Lem Morris (a white stevedore and the local union organizer) and several scenes involving the dockworkers' union. In Wharf Nigger, Yallah Celestine, the leader of the black dockwallopers, is motivated by anger. He can no longer tolerate being treated as subhuman. In Stevedore, his racial consciousness is amplified by an understanding of the economic facts of life. Lonnie Thompson, the protagonist's new name, has been listening to Lem Morris. Lem advances the union's fight for improved conditions by attempting to weld an alliance between black and white longshoremen. The bosses are color blind when it comes to cheating workers, he contends. To gain victory the workers must overcome their mutual prejudices and consolidate. His motto could be "Black and white, unite and fight," the shibolleth of the Communist National Textile Workers Union of Gastonia in 1929. Lonnie's defiance of Jeff Walcott, the dock boss, is as much economic as racial. He challenges Walcott for cheating the gang on their wages. This makes him a "bad nigger," and the gap between a "bad nigger" and a "rape nigger" is slim. In Wharf Nigger, Yallah is ambushed by the Darcy Colts gang because he is black, the plague strikes him arbitrarily; in Stevedore, Lonnie is set upon by Mitch and his gang as he leaves the union hall.

A scene at the union's headquarters is pivotal for the revised theme. Here, Lem gets word of Lonnie's arrest. He is certain that it was prompted by Lonnie's agitation for the union rather than by the "rape nigger" fever. He immediately mobilizes the union to fight on

his behalf. This leads to the rallying climax of Stevedore in which the white union members rush to join the black dock workers defending their homes against a mob of red-neck vigilantes. The ending becomes a rousing symbol of the triumph of the play's "unite and fight" proposition.

Another change is more structural than thematic. In Wharf Nigger, the first scene, the alleged rape, is followed by a scene on the wharf. Peters intended the scene as a catalyst for the action of the play. Moreover, the gathering storm is off-stage; we hear about it only as the blacks discuss with some trepidation and false bravado the newspaper headlines which are fanning the embers of hatred and violence. The collaboration produced a smoother, more effective transition with a bridging scene--the line up. A police dragnet has captured several suspects for Florrie to identify. The interrogation immediately brings the white world into a hostile clash with the black community. It gives the opening scenes a heart-thumping tempo and momentum. It was also a concrete way of weaving the economic story into the racial one. The "rape nigger" becomes a ripe target for the persecution of the bosses.[1]

In transforming Wharf Nigger to Stevedore the authors retained many of the major incidents of the original, its characterization, and even much of its dialogue. There were omissions, some of which were lamentable, but inevitable considering the altered emphasis. One poignant scene which was cut was a brief incident in which a black shoe-shine boy is beset by a gang of white thugs and cruelly killed. The scene suggested that the race riot had seeped into every corner of

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

the community, taking its toll on simple innocent people. It resembled the mob's blind assault and murder of Cinna the Poet in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. Peters did not consciously draw on Shakespeare though. The idea for the episode came from his reading of the Russell Sage Foundation Report.[1] The scene was cut because it added nothing to the labor thrust of Stevedore and seemed redundant in its depiction of racial hatred.

Wharf Nigger was a much harsher evocation of the vitiating, dehumanizing effects of prejudice. The language was sharper, more pungent, and more faithful to the idiom of the street. For example, Walcott rides the blacks to work bellowing that they are "Black baboons."[2] Even the red-necks of Stevedore are not as raunchy and loutish as those in the first play. Red, a sinewy Irishman, and Pons, an ugly, treacherous-looking French-American, drunkenly prowl the wharves in search of the "rape nigger." In a scene that was also cut, they spitefully taunt the old, grey-haired Sam Oxley. The young hooligans humiliate him by treating him as their mascot; they demean him by forcing him to serve them. Later, they are joined by Canuck, a tar-faced, tobacco-chewing sailor, who reminisces with Red, in Sam's presence, about a grisly adventure in a Zanzibar village where they viciously raped the "nigger wenches" and then gleefully set fire to the village, enjoying the "squealing" of the "nigger cannibals."[3]

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2]Paul Peters, "'Wharf Nigger' A Scene from a Proletarian Play," New Masses, November 1929, p. 9.

[3]Paul Peters, "'On the Wharf' A Scene from a Proletarian Play," New Masses, April 1930, pp. 13-14.

Stevedore is tame by contrast. The authors did not want to offend the audience before they could educate it. The name Yallah Celestine, though it was the actual name of a well respected dockworker (who was light colored) was changed because Yallah denoted mixed blood and could be taken as a disparagement of negritude.[1] The title of the play was reconsidered for similar reasons. Wharf Nigger was derived from the language used by the dockworkers themselves; they thought of themselves as wharf niggers just as they would refer to someone else as a cotton field nigger. Black political leaders in the North, however, were repelled and lodged objections with the Theatre Union when Wharf Nigger was announced as the next production.[2] Who came up with the title Stevedore is unclear. Peters thinks it was Margaret Larkin. The new name was inappropriate, though, since stevedore is a term loosely designating some rank on the wharves and was given to the white dock gangs, hardly ever to blacks.

The process of refining and sharpening the proletarian thrust of the play involved not only the authors but the Executive Board as well. Mid-February, when the first draft of the play was read to the Board, Maltz complained that the drama lacked cohesion. The union scenes and its white union members seemed separate from the rest of of the play.[3] Peters and Sklar went back to work for nearly a month.

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2]Peters, 20 August 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[3]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

When they returned to the Board with a second draft, Maltz's objections had been satisfied. The story's two threads had been effectively blended. Still, another draft was done in order to be sure that the play's political message was "clear and direct."[1] Revisions and adjustments continued right through rehearsals. Blankfort reports that the scene which "contained the explicit 'call to action' was rewritten thirteen times."[2]

The result of this collaboration was a play that exactly reflected the Weltanshauung of the Theatre Union. Wharf Nigger was a product of the evolving but closely circumscibed political liberalism of 1929. It aroused indignation over the Negro problem but offered no solutions. Stevedore, by contrast, rendered the problem in the context of Marxist thinking. Besides being a document of oppression, it offered a positive militant, political platform. It was uniquely of the thirties in its insistence on analyzing the problem by seeking out the "social forces" behind it. Peters himself admitted that Wharf Nigger was politically inept because it failed to probe causes beyond racial prejudice. In a letter to newspapers jointly penned by Peters and Sklar to justify the reupholstering of Wharf Nigger Peters states:

> "Wharf Nigger" . . . dealt purely with so-called "racial conflict." Since that time Mr. Peters has been active in mass organizations, both in the North and in the South. He looks back upon "Wharf Nigger" as missing the essential point of the Negro question, which is, to a student of social forces, not a racial issue at all, but an economic one.

---

[1]Paul Peters, "On Writing and Selecting Plays for Workers," Daily Worker, 27 February 1935, p. 5.

[2]Michael Blankfort, "Facing the New Audience," New Theatre, November 1934, p. 26.

> When the Theatre Union talked of producing "Wharf Nigger" Mr. Peters declared that he felt the play dealt inadequately with the real social forces behind discrimination and lynch terror. He and Mr. Sklar then set about writing a new play . . . Both of us feel that instead of "muddying" the original play, we have in reality clarified it and struck deeper into the real cause of Negro oppression.[1]

With the change the play could better serve the aims of the Theatre Union and its working class audience.

One noteworthy footnote to the saga of the collaboration arises from Peter's current appraisal of the two plays. The inexorable political line of Stevedore, its axiomatic "unite and fight" dictum, he believes today, "diminished both the honesty and the quality of the play."[2] Peters avers that he never liked the union headquarters scene which he found "stiff, unreal and expository," but "mercifully short."[3] The addition of a union with a policy of race cooperation, though it may be dramatically sound, was in actuality far-fetched. On the wharves, as Peters had known them, no such cooperation was evident. At the time Stevedore was written, the notion of cooperation was "sheer wish dreaming." Thus the ending of the original play was much closer to the facts. The black wharf workers fought alone; no white union workers came to their aid.[4] Considering this change of heart, the tailoring of Stevedore to bring it closer to the objectives of the Theatre Union becomes clear. Without such changes the play would never have been produced by anyone.

---

[1]John Anderson, "'Stevedore' vs. 'Wharf Nigger': Collaborators Act on Theory That Problem in South is Economic Not Racial," Evening Journal, 28 April 1934.

[2]Peters, 17 June 1978. [3]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[4]Ibid.

The process of collectively editing and rewriting Stevedore set the pattern the Theatre Union was to follow with all the succeeding plays it considered for production and those it actually produced. The Executive Board would examine the play and give the author its criticism. He, in turn, would revise the play and present it to the Board again. The process was iterative, continuing until all concerned were satisfied with the political impact the play would make. The method became known as "collective criticism." In actuality, there was nothing unique about it; it was no different than the production method used in any theatre organization. The triumvirate leadership of the Theatre Guild also read plays, made suggestions, and asked authors for rewrites. The directors of the Group Theatre did likewise. In fact, every producer arrogates to himself the authority to edit the property he manages. The Theatre Union's Executive Board claimed the same privilege. The special importance, however, that the Theatre Union attached to "collective criticism" is derived from its central purpose as an organization. Its manifesto dictated that all plays (and every part of a play) hew to the ideology of the theatre. The Theatre Union dealt with social problems from the point of view of the workers. It posed and wished to elucidate complex questions: How and why are workers abused and underpaid? Why do workers need to organize into unions? How is this to be done? What obstacles does the present social order throw in their path? What is capitalism and how does it diminish the economic situation of the worker? Do workers in different industries share the same problems? How can we recognize the virus of Fascism and prevent it from infecting and killing the body politic? And on, and on. These questions need "clear and

direct" treatment. Their utility and cogency is reduced in direct proportion to the vagueness of their characterization and action. Confusing and misleading an audience is as great a sin as boring it. Collective criticism was intended as an ideological fail-safe system. Every inch of the play, the characters and the action, would be scrupulously scrutinized to insure social (read Marxist) correctness, and to guarantee that the play was right for the needs of the Theatre Union's mass audience.[1]

There were two other reasons for highlighting collective criticism. First, the process itself represented everything the plays stood for. What could be better than plays advocating Marxism being put together in the Marxist spirit of collective effort? It was the modus operandus of every self-respecting revolutionary theatre. The Worker's Laboratory Theatre and the Theatre of Action wrote its plays by committee. At the Theatre Union, the collaboration of all participants, in all departments, replaced the autocracy of the individual in any one area. Second, there was a practical necessity for formalizing this kind of collaboration. They had to help each other; they had to share their knowledge and opinions on theatrical matters because they were all theatreical novices. On the Board, as we have seen, there was no one person who had the authority and the theatrical imagination to singlehandedly assume the responsibility for the destiny of the

---

[1]"Collective Drama at the Civic Repertory Theatre: A Radical Theory of Dramatic Production is Tested and Found True," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 20 March 1936, p. 17.

theatre. They had no Piscator, no Meyerhold, no Strasberg.

The process of collective criticism began with the selection of the play and continued right through rehearsals until opening night. Next to deciding the theatre's finances, it was the most important operational function of the Executive Board. Aside from their own plays and plays which they knew about, the Executive Board received recommendations on plays from its playreading committee which at one time was chaired by Adelaide Walker. The committee acted, in John Gassner's curt phrase, as "the official bouncer," screening the many plays that came into the Theatre's Union's office once it seemed plain that the theatre had taken up the torch in the effort to establish a serious worker's theatre. Many Board members served on the committee and all intently searched for new authors and vigorous social plays. Some Board members even asked promising young proletarian novelists, friends of theirs like Tess Schlesinger and Myra Page, if they would try their hand at playwriting.[1] Though it soon became evident that good new social plays were scarce, the Board was reluctant to revive classics that might, given a fresh interpretation, have some relevance to contemporary social issues. At one point there was some talk of doing Galsworthy's Strife or The Silver Box but nothing came of it. They wanted plays that had the punch of immediacy. "Our intent," recalls Sklar, "was primarily to do plays which were pertinent to the moment. . . . We thought we had a contribution to make by doing new plays and by coming up with new authors" or bringing "some of the European authors to the attention of the American public."[2]

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978. [2]Sklar, 18 July 1978.

Once a play was found which had some merit it was passed around to all Board members and/or it was given a reading out loud. Then the Board would begin extensive deliberations. "The problem of choosing a play is so important," Peters wrote, "that the Theatre Union spends weeks discussing every potential script. The first consideration is always: of what value will this play be to the workers who nightly crowd into the Civic Repertory Theatre?"[1] Discussions centered on the meaning of the play and how clearly this came through in its action, characters, and style, the structure of the play; and its production demands. Not the least of the Board's concerns was the political impact the play might have.

By the end of the first season, all the work on the Board devolved on twelve of the sixteen members listed in the program. Joseph Freeman and Tom Tippett were not active members after Peace on Earth though they were identified as Executive Board members through Marching Song. Hammond's interest in the Theatre Union and in theatre in general waned as he turned his attention exclusively to jazz. And William Fitelson, though he was always sympathetic to the Theatre Union and generous with donations and legal advice, took little part in the Board's day-to-day decision making.[2] Among the remaining dozen, some assumed a more or less specific role in the discussions of each play. Sklar, Maltz, and Blankfort, who had the most experience and training in theatre, became the major advisors on theatre matters. In time,

---

[1]Peters, "Writing and Selecting," p. 5.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

they were instrumental in helping the trade union people on the Board develop a sense of the theatre, e.g., learn how to read a manuscript critically and know what to look for in a production.[1] Victor Wolfson, who was production manager for the first three plays, handling backstage problems and serving as liason with the unions considered the practical production problems of the play.[2] The role of "chief ideologist" was taken by Manuel Gomez.[3] He was unquestionably the most sophisticated politically and his long exegesis of a play would establish the groundwork for the debate about the play's political ramifications. Michael Blankfort in his book A Time To Live describes one organizer of the People's Drama Guild who loosely resembles Gomez with regard to his function and style.

> He had started out as a pacifist and was kicked out of college for it; then he became a Zionist, and finally, in 1929, a Communist. He considered himself an authority on Lenin and the American mind . . . . At all meetings, he sat on the hardest chair in the room as if it were a hairshirt, and incessantly smoked a heavy curved pipe. He was very conscientious about expressing himself; he had to be clear as well as complete, and as he wasn't very fluent, he circled every point he made like a vulture over a dying horse, torturously making sure that he had left nothing unmentioned. When he wasn't talking politics, he could be very charming.[4]

As discussions about a play proceeded, Mary Fox wanted to be sure that there was nothing anti-Socialist in the play, Sam Friedman saw to it that no overt Stalinist stuff was stuck in, and Liston Oak

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978; Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[2]Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

[3]Peters, 20 August 1978; Blankfort, 17 July 1978; Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[4]Blankfort, Time To Live, p. 59.

checked the political balance of the play to keep it from tilting too far in the Socialist's favor.[1] True to the spirit of the United Front, no one, at least in the first seasons, was dogmatic about politics. Discussions were amicable because they were purposeful, members of the Board subordinated their partisan beliefs to the greater goal of the theatre itself. Plays were evaluated on their intrinsic worth and on the political benefits they could provide to all factions of the left. Friedman and Fox, for instance posed no significant opposition to The Sailors of Cattaro, despite the obvious Leninst bias of its theme. Nor did Oak dissent about Bitter Stream because Silone, the author of the book on which the play was based and once a Communist had become an anti-Stalinist apostate.[2] It is true, however, that some discussions of the plays deliberately excluded Fox and Friedman. But nothing unfriendly, conspiratorial, or treacherous was meant by this. Instead it was a practical measure taken to preserve unity, to anticipate a clash and head it off; as if to say, "Look before Sam or Mary get to this, should we or shouldn't we do something about it?" Then if the play had promise, it would be introduced to the entire Board as if no secret meeting had been held.[3]

The Executive Board did not take a vote on any play. Decisions were made by consensus; "We argued and discussed till we agreed."[4] Everyone

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[3]Gomez, 15 July 1978.

[4]Charles Walker to Karen Malpede, 12 May 1970, p. 4., Loaned to author by Michael Blankfort.

did not always accept the majority view. The debate over Mother (which was accepted for production) created sharp differences of opinion. Other plays, like Let Freedom Ring and Bury the Dead, which were offered to the Theatre Union and turned down, had strong support from several Board members.[1] When the Board found a play acceptable, the second phase of the collective criticism method--rewrites and modifications--would begin. At first the entire Board made recommendations to the playwright; later, mid-way in the second season when more plays were being submitted to the Theatre Union, a playwriting committee was appointed to work with the author. Albert Maltz headed one such committee working with J. O. and Loretto Bailey on their play about Ella May Wiggens and the Gastonia Textile strike in North Carolina.[2] The committee was not the Theatre Union's equivalent to Broadway's "play doctor" who is rushed in to save a wilting play by injecting it with some humor or stimulating its adrenalin with a cunning scene or two. It worked with the playwright from the beginning, prior to rehearsals, to strengthen the manuscript ideologically and dramatically. It tried to insure, as well, that the play complied with the Theatre Union's philosophy. In doing so the committee tried to strike a balance between the dramatist's artistic freedom and the theatre's desire for specifically didactic plays. "We believe in giving free play to the talent of the individual," explains Margaret Larkin in the Theatre Union's official manifest, "our plays are not written in committee. But we have no 'art for art's sake' theories about the sacredness of a script." The script is not inviolable

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

especially when its political line is blurred. Art is important but it takes a back seat to the political moral. A moment later, however, Larkin reassures the playwright that the Theatre Union does not wish to "straightjacket" his work, to use the method of collective criticism to squeeze a play into a uniform mold:

> In offering suggestions to playwrights, the Board does not try to cut each script to fit a hard and fast pattern. We seek for a wide variety of subject matter and for a fresh approach as to treatment and form. We hope that our theatre will touch many facets of contemporary life and reflect every class of society. But our plays do have a consistent point of view.[1]

How effectively such policies were realized and how well the Theatre Union maintained this balance in practice are questions we will discuss later when we consider the Theatre Union's entire repertory and why it chose not to do certain plays.

Every play the Theatre Union did was revised in this way. Indeed, the Theatre Union came to believe that the success of its plays was contingent on the principle of collective criticism:

> Our method of collective criticism of scripts is one of the principle reasons for our success so far, we feel. We don't let a play go on with a blurred line in the name of art if we can possibly avoid it. We have learned to be good critics of plays in the several years we have been reading and considering plays, and we insist that our authors be willing to cooperate in making the plays say clearly what was intended.[2]

Most playwrights did cooperate with this procedure, even finding it stimulating. Some, like Albert Bein when he originally submitted his adaptation of Grace Lumpkin's novel To Make My Bread, were temperamentally

---

[1]Larkin, "Building Social Theatre," p. 3.

[2]Margaret Larkin to Carlisle, 20 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

unsuited to this method. Such playwrights who stubbornly refused to prune a script or to make needed alterations were asked to withdraw their plays.[1]

Collective criticism did not end with the satisfactory completion of a final draft of the play. To shepherd the play through rehearsals the Executive Board appointed a production committee which worked with the director. This mechanism was developed soon after Peace on Earth and realized with Stevedore.[2] The committee consisted of three Board members, the director, and the author. In later productions one or two actors were added to the committee, as well. Before rehearsals began, the committee advised the director in his choice of scenic designer and cast. During rehearsals it sat in the auditorium, took notes and consulted with the director everyday on staging problems and script changes. Periodically, it reported back to the full Board on the progress of the production. At different stages of the rehearsal process and at all the dress rehearsals and previews the entire Board attended together with selected members of the Theatre Union Council and other invited guests. Each Board member made copious notes which he passed along to the director in a special meeting after the rehearsal.[3]

Much like the playwriting committee which sought to enrich the work of the author with the collective ideas of the group, the production

---

[1]Peters, "Writing and Selecting," p. 5.

[2]Albert Maltz interview with Jay Williams, Jay Williams Papers, Mugar Memorial Library Special Collections, Boston University, Boston Massachusetts.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Margaret Larkin to Wyckoff, 9 August 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

committee tried to bring the director under "democratic" control. The Theatre Union feared allowing the director, because he has supreme authority over the production, so much power that rather than clarifying the meaning of the play he might inadvertently (or deliberately, for the sake of art) obfuscate it. The production committee monitored his work on behalf of the Board and gave the director feedback on how effectively he was illuminating the thesis of the play. It did this by moral suasion rather than by exercising any formal veto power. The committee would work in a spirit of friendly cooperation, persuading the director of its viewpoint. If it could not gain concessions from him through reasonable remonstrance it would seek compromises.[1] Of course, there were differences that occasionally resulted in emotional blow-ups, but by and large, this phase of collective criticism was deemed helpful and useful by all parties. Michael Gordon, who directed two productions, never felt impinged upon by any producers breathing down his neck. He could exercise the same artistic freedom under the committee as he could under an individual producer.[2] Compared to the system operating on Broadway it was, according to some, like Tom Adrian Cracraft (the designer of Black Pit who had established his career on the Great White Way), less distressful and much more effective. In a letter to the Dramatic Editor of the New York Times, Cracraft shared his pleasure about the relative ease of working with a production committee:

---

[1]Larkin to Carlisle, 20 February 1935; Larkin to Wycoff, 9 August 1935.

[2]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

> I must confess that when I heard there was a production committee, I asked, because of past sad experiences of what it means to try to please a number of people, that a spokesman be appointed, so that I could deal with one person. This was granted, but I found the precaution unnecessary. I found, in fact, a group of intelligent, sincere young people who knew what they wanted to do, and best of all, how to do it in an efficient, business-like way. The engagement was the cheeriest note in the theatre in the past few years as far as I am concerned.[1]

The cooperative brio embraced two other areas. too. Four representatives of the backstage and business office were selected to work as a technical committee. They read the script from a technical perspective and gave the designer suggestions on construction and ways of economizing on equipment and props.[2] Actors, too, were given the opportunity to partake in the collective process as each cast was asked to select two representatives in addition to the representative required by Actors' Equity, to take up actors' problems and request meetings with the Board when necessary.[3] Deputies from the cast of Stevedore, for example, regularly sat in on Executive Board meetings during the run of the play. Their duties included working on the organizational details of the production, convening meetings of the Board to arbitrate actors' problems when they arose and, because the actors shared in the profits of the production, helping to prepare and review the weekly financial reports.[4]

---

[1]25 April 1935; Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin

[3]Larkin to Carlisle, 20 Februrary 1935.

[4]Michael Blankfort, "Production Notes on 'Stevedore,'" Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

Once Stevedore was confirmed as the second production, the Board turned its attention to the choice of director. Again, they asked Walter Hart and again he turned them down.[1] Eventually, the Board gave the assignment to Michael Blankfort.[2] Aside from helping to produce Merry-Go-Round, Blankfort had no professional theatre experience. He had, however, a strong desire to direct, self-confidence, and a fascination with theatre that went back to his childhood. Blankfort had been born in Harlem on 10 December 1907. His fondness for the theatre stems from his father, Henry, an orthodox Jewish immigrant from the ghettos of Eastern Europe, who for a time was proprietor of a nickelodeon, and a ticket speculator around the Yiddish theatres of the Lower East Side.[3] While at De Witt Clinton High School he wrote, acted in, and directed plays. After a few months of extensive traveling abroad he attended the University of Pennsylvania where he continued to engage in the two passions of his life--writing and acting--while studying psychology. One of his extracurricular activities during the three and a half years he spent at the university involved a short acting stint at the Hedgerow Theatre outside Philadelphia under the direction of the redoubtable

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]As early as June 1933, the Theatre Union announced that Blankfort would direct its second production which was then going to be Friedrich Wolf's Mutiny in the Fleet. ("Theatre Union to Prepare Three Plays," Post, 2 June 1933.) Blankfort served as assistant director of Peace on Earth probably as a way of preparing himself for the task of directing, something he had never done before.

[3]Lou Smith, Press Release, Columbia Studios, Hollywood, California Blankfort Papers, Boston.

Jasper Deeter, an early pioneer of the radical theater movement.[1] After graduating, he sampled the tranquil life of an educator and scholar. For one year he taught psychology at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, where, he confesses, some of his students only three years his junior, knew more than he did.[2] To deepen his knowledge of the subject, he went to Princeton for two years to work on a Masters. He particularly wanted to do research on Freud, aesthetics, and abnormal psychology.[3] He bolstered his academic credentials by publishing an erudite essay, "Why We Don't Know Much About Hypnosis," in the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology.[4] Armed with the Masters degree, he departed the ivy-covered walls of the university for a job as psychologist at the New Jersey State Prison at Rahway. He tested and counseled convicts for a few months before deciding to dedicate himself fully to a life in the theatre.

One of the first things Blankfort did to prepare for the production was to visit New Orleans. The play, he sensed, needed a strong realistic treatment which he could give it only if he acquainted himself first-hand with its milieu. For a fortnight he traversed the docks absorbing the feel of the place. He watched the longshoremen at work, he observed how they moved their bodies, he listened to their chants. He tried to imbue himself with the rhythm and tempo of the docks. He recorded much of what he saw with a small motion picture camera, using

---

[1]"Facts and Opinions By and On Michael Blankfort and Goodbye, I Guess, a Novel," p. 4, Blankfort Papers, Boston.

[2]Ibid., p. 5.

[3]Hand written note by Blankfort, Blankfort Papers, Boston

[4]26 (1931-32): 390-394.

the film, once rehearsals commenced, to supplement his memory.[1]

To design the scenery, the Board appointed Sointu Syrjala, a young Finnish born designer, who had apprenticed with Jo Mielziner and who had created the scenery for I. J. Golden's Precedent (1931). It is worth noting that the Board had entertained the idea of having Mordecai Gorelik design Stevedore. As late as the 18 February symposium he was introduced as the designer of the forthcoming production.[2]

Stevedore, was a "heavy show" scenically because its ten scenes required eight sets. Syrjala's design was flexible without sacrificing realism, and efficient in its ability to shift rapidly. About ten feet from the proscenium and parallel to it, a second proscenium with a smaller opening was built. Two walls, downstage right and left, connected the false proscenium to the real one. Fitted into these walls were two jack-knife stages in the shape of a quarter circle that could be revolved onto the stage or turned out of view into the wings. These small turntables were pre-set off-stage and used for the smaller scenes: the right one carried the settings for Florrie's backyard (I.i) and the office of the Oceanic Stevedore Company (I.iv); the left one held the decor of the police station (I.ii) and the union hall (II.i). Upstage of the false proscenium and perpendicular to its opening was another set of walls seven and a half feet deep. One had a window set into it, the other, a door. Upstage of these walls, traversing the rear of the stage, were tracks for two long, narrow platforms. When

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978; Michael Blankfort, "Behind the Scenes of 'Stevedore,'" Daily Worker, 27 April 1934, p. 5.

[2]Jewish Daily Bulletin, n.d., Clipping in Stevedore Scrapbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

rolled into place, these platforms occupied the full expanse of the eighteen foot opening of the false prscenium. The left platform was used for Binnie's Lunchroom (I.iii and II.iii) and Bertha's attic (III.i). The other platform was used to carry the properties for the wharf scenes (I.iv and II.ii). The last scene, in the courtyard (III.ii), used the entire stage. The false proscenium itself represented the walls of the houses in the courtyard. Up to this point, the second proscenium had only been used as a frame for the previous scenes. Now windows and doors, cut into it and its thickness walls downstage, were opened for the first time, giving the illusion of a complete change of set. Entrances from Bertha's attic to the courtyard were made from a door high up, stage left on the false proscenium's wall in front of which a small stair unit was placed. Entrance to the street was in front of the second arch stage right and the barricade was erected within and behind the second opening.[1] Thus, alternating from one area to another and giving the appearance of something new each time, the set was a "model of mechanical ingenuity" which was "neatly pivoted, slotted or suspended in exactly the right spot" to meet all the demands of the play.[2] The critics later found the design eminently appropriate and functional: Brooks Atkinson considered it graphic; Robert Garland found it "imaginative and elastic"; and John

---

[1]Unsigned letter to Rowena Jelliffe, 9 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center; Michael Blankfort, "Production Notes on 'Stevedore,'" Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Paul Peters and George Sklar, "Stevedore", Promptbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]"Backstage View of 'Stevedore,'" New York Times, 24 June 1934, sec. 9, p. 1.

Mason Brown felt it "admirably heightened the play's effect."[1]

The setting was not only functional, it was also inexpensive, an important concern for a theatre with low admission prices and the need to develop what Blankfort called, "a technique of poverty."[2] The set for Stevedore cost $750.00 to construct.[3] Some savings were accomplished by re-using certain set pieces like the turntables from Peace on Earth. Furthermore, the running costs for the production were cut because the design could be implemented with only nine stagehands, almost a record for a show with this many scenes.[4] Syrjala, incidentally, was paid $250.00 for his design.[5] His work was partly the result of collective criticism, the most significant contributions coming from Charles Friedman, the versatile and talented technical director for the production. Friedman suggested the idea for the false proscenium structure and indicated how the window and door openings in it could be made flat and unnoticeable, or opened so that the same structure could serve for both the pier and the tenement.[6]

---

[1]Brooks Atkinson, "Drama of the Race Riot in 'Stevedore,'" New York Times, 19 April 1934, p. 33; Robert Garland, "'Stevedore' Exciting, Full of Violent Vitality," World Telegram, 23 April 1934; John Mason Brown, "The Theatre Union Takes to the Soap Box Once More--Stevedore and the Race Problem in America," Evening Post, 21 April 1934.

[2]Blankfort, "Behind Scenes," p. 5.

[3]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[4]Blankfort, "Behind Scenes," p. 5.

[5]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[6]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

In casting Stevedore, the Theatre Union demonstrated the courage of its convictions by creating for the first time on the New York professional stage a fully integrated cast where black actors were accorded the same privileges, ecnonmic and social, as white actors. On Broadway, Equity allowed Negro shows to be done on a non-Equity basis, thus permitting producers to hire amateurs, work them around the clock and pay them a pittance. The Theatre Union gave all its actors, black and white, regular Equity contracts. There was no discrimination in salary rates nor was there any segregation in the dressing rooms backstage. There was, on the contrary, a "militant anti-prejudice."[1] Every effort was made to make the blacks feel comfortable and a part of the Theatre Union family. Even before rehearsals began, as a means of averting any embarassing incidents, Michael Gordon, the assistant director for Stevedore, spoke with the proprietor of Field's Restaurant on Sixth Avenue, a neighboring eating place where Theatre Union actors often retired for meals or coffee. He informed him that black actors would be coming to lunch there and that no discourtesy should be shown to them.[2] Once rehearsals were in progress, the black actors of the cast were entitled to the same rights to air grievances before the Board as the whites. Georgette Harvey, one of the older, more experienced members of the cast and a very imposing actress, was elected as the cast's representative. On two occasions she voiced the cast's displeasure with the production. In the first instance, Sklar and Peters were ready,

---

[1]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[2]Ibid.

after the first week's rehearsals, to dismiss one of the actors, Rex Ingram, an erstwhile boxer who was just beginning his career as an actor. He had been cast in the central role of Blacksnake and his performance so far was wooden and unpromising. The decision was made to replace him with a better known actor who had just returned from Toronto with the road company of the popular Green Pastures. When the cast discovered this proposed change, Harvey and three other leading actors requested a meeting with the authors and the director to voice their objections. The delegation importuned them to reconsider. They expressed their faith in the young actor and the conviction that he would grow in the role. They also pointed out that the new candidate had just returned from a profitable four-year tour while the penurious Ingram had been unemployed for a long time and needed the exposure. Blankfort, Peters, and Sklar conceded. They deferred to her wishes and judgment.[1] The actor did render a powerful performance. In another instance, after a taxing runthrough, Blankfort thoughtlessly insulted the cast by telling them bluntly, "You didn't try hard enough." The cast was livid and threatened to strike. Harvey again intervened and privately explained to the errant director how deeply offended the cast was. Blankfort redressed the outrage by apologizing to the entire company individually.[2]

The Theatre chose not only to ignore the defamatory racial myths about black actors, it took upon itself the task of unmasking the lies

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978; George Sklar, "Negro Actors in the Theatre Union Play 'Stevedore,'" Daily Worker, 9 May 1934, p. 5.

[2]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

and shameful calumnies that freely circulated among the wise and sophisticated administrators of New York's entertainment houses. The Theatre Union's mission did not stop with its plays, it infused every particle of its being. A few days after Stevedore opened, Blankfort wrote:

> A familiar canard of the white chauvenists is that Negro casts are "unreliable" and that many weeks are required to ready a Negro show. My experience with the thirteen Negro actors and actresses in "Stevedore" disproves this libel. Not only has our cast proved faithful in attending rehearsals and learning lines; the Negroes are responding to the play warmly, and contributing to its richness with lines and business of their own. They are competent and they work very hard at rehearsals--their approach to the acting problems of the play is intelligent and sensitive.[1]

A few weeks later, Sklar followed this up with an article entitled, "The Negro Actors in 'Stevedore'" which debunks misrepresentations about black performers in a similar vein.[2] Both Blankfort and Sklar also imply that Broadway managers (and audiences) are guilty of a far more subtle, insidious form of prejudice. Part of the reason the Theatre Union has gained the cooperation and trust of the blacks, they affirm, is that they could embrace the play as their own. Rex Ingram, expressing the view of many in the cast, wanted to be in the play because "I can be natural in this one." The play dealt forthrightly with the problems of the black man in America. It did not dance around the issue by being "picturesque" or "quaint." It eschewed the "stock 'mammies' or night club jazz babies or comic butlers, or any of the other false characters which Negro actors and actresses are called on to play in the bourgeois

---

[1]Blankfort, "Behind Scenes," p. 5.

[2]Sklar, "Negro Actors," p. 5.

theatre."[1]

Rex Ingram was a case in point. For ten frustrating years in Hollywood he could find no other roles except cannibal chiefs and nubian slaves in such films as The Ten Commandments, King Kong, and Trader Horn, or funny pullman porters and butlers for Mack Sennett.[2] On Broadway, too, there was little effort made to deal seriously with Negro life. The only exception was Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom, an admixture of tragic realism and folk drama showing a black man's hopeless struggle to improve himself and his race. More popular plays in the genre were Dorothy and Duboise Heyward's Porgy, a panoramic view of life in the Negro ghetto of Charleston, South Carolina, and Marc Connelly's refashioning of Southern Baptist biblical stories in The Green Pastures. Both were long runs readily accepted by white audiences because they peddled the innocuous familiar stereotypes. Stevedore offered the black actor a different opportunity--for once he could play a hero. Not all black actors, however, welcomed this chance. Leigh Whipper, for example, was nervous about the revolutionary impact and direction of Stevedore. On the other hand, a few like Georgette Harvey, were still disappointed with the play's ideology. The play did not go far enough in elevating the stature of the Negro, she felt, because it showed him dependent on the good will of sympathetic whites.[3]

---

[1]Blankfort, "Behind Scenes," p. 5.

[2]"Colored Actor in Stevedore has P.B.K. Key," Post, 23 June 1934.

[3]Michael Gordon interview with Jay Williams, Jay Williams Papers, Mugar Memorial Library Special Collections, Boston University, Boston Massachusetts.

A total of thirty-two actors were cast in Stevedore. Of the speaking roles, fourteen were black, nine were white. (Nine extras were racially mixed.) Among the whites, only Millicent Green and Jack Williams had appeared in Peace on Earth. Many of the blacks in the cast were veterans of Porgy and another "Negro Show," Hall Johnson's Run Lil' Chillun. John Hammond's perennial visits to Harlem's jazz world, provided him with many connections which were fruitful in bringing talent down to Fourteenth Street.[1] The leading roles of Lonnie Thompson and his girlfriend Ruby Oxley were taken by Jack Carter and Edna Thomas. Both had played in the Porgy company. (Carter created the role of Crown). Both frequently played opposite each other in Harlem's Lincoln Theatre with the Lafayette Players, and both were brought up and educated in New England.[2] Leigh Whipper, who took the role of Jim Veal, the obsequious white man's nigger, had been the Crabman on Cat Fish Row and had credits on the New York stage from as far back as 1905 when he stopped his law studies to become an actor. Others in the cast included Al Watts, a well-known black vaudeville star who had appeared in Shuffle Along, Lucky Sambo, and Savage Rhythm; William C. Elkins, the director of the Elkins Dextra Singers; Carrington Lewis of the Hall Johnson Choir; and Ray Yeates, formely the director of music at the Waters Institute in North Carolina.

Rehearsals began on 20 March 1934, four weeks before the scheduled opening. At first things progressed smoothly. Blankfort had the actors

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]"Two Players Glad of Chance to Quit Acting as Whites," Herald Tribune, 8 July 1934.

on their feet after the first readthrough and was systematically working through the play scene by scene. By the last week, however, some serious problems had developed. The production appeared stilted, uneven, and flat. Peters and Sklar blamed Blankfort, faulting his inexperience. He lacked the capacity, they said, to motivate the actors and inspire them with the requisite vitality. Blankfort, in turn, accused the authors of sitting on his back, thus compromising his authority. One night after a runthrough, ironically, the same night Blankfort made his faux pas with the cast, the Executive Board convened an emergency, closed-door midnight meeting to diffuse everyone's frayed nerves. As Blankfort approached the door of the room, he could hear Sklar insisting "Mike has got to go." The evening did not augur well for Blankfort. At the meeting, Sklar and Peters itemized the faults of Blankfort's direction which he tried to defend. After a lengthy, sometimes acrimonious exchange, the decision was made to compromise. Walker recommended that Blankfort continue directing but that the production committee, which consisted of the authors and Charles Friedman, take a more active part in rehearsals. This was done; tensions were immediately reduced, and, over the weekend, the production came together in time for previews.[1]

A far more severe problem facing the Board was raising the production "nut." Peace on Earth had left the Theatre Union a deficit of $4871.82. To raise the money, the Theatre Union had to dip into the gift funds that Walker and others had provided and to resort to its "technique of poverty." The production costs for Stevedore were set at $4,654.68, nearly $1,200 less than what it had cost to mount Peace on

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978; Maltz, 15 July 1978; Peters, 20 August 1978,

Earth. Other figures illustrate the extent of the enforced belt-tightening. Only $1,000 was spent on designing and constructing the scenery, plus and additional $70 for transporting it. A volunteer committee performed miracles, raiding junk shops, Salvation Army stores, and pawn shops, collecting 750 props for a total of $123.15. Publicity and newspaper advertising was kept at a low $870, which included a $115 bill from the telephone company, no doubt incurred by the many direct contacts made with organizations. Salaries, too, were just barely subsistence: for five and a half weeks, the technical director received $137.50; for four weeks, the production manager and the stage manager each received $160; and for the same period, the audience manager and the general manager, each received $100.[1]

Another factor which helped the cash flow was the money from advance ticket sales. Before the first performance, Sylvia Regan had lined up 138 theatre parties, representing 30,000 sold seats and a guaranteed run of six weeks. Three dates were set aside for previews and a special effort was made to encourage Negro organizations to buy benefits: "Just as the Theatre Union went out and organized its white worker audiences, so it is now concentrating on Negro organizations and Negro clubs to bring them into the theatre from which, as a rule, they have been barred either by Jim Crow regulations or by high prices."[2]. Ida, the box office attendant, a staunchly conservative, Brunhilde type, was given strict orders to give blacks the best available seats in whatever area they wished, not to shunt them into a distant corner

---

[1]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[2]Sklar, "Negro Actors," p. 5.

of the balcony as was common practice everywhere else on Broadway.[1] The Theatre Union went so far as to refuse tickets to any white organization which objected to their innovation. Later in the run, in fact, the Board and the cast spurned a request for a benefit from the Stage Relief Fund because that welfare agency had withheld aid from needy Harlem actors.[2]

In an effort to acquaint black leaders with the Theatre Union and the play, the Executive Board held a reception at the home of C. Hartley Grattan on Sunday afternoon, 8 April. Heads of organizations and clubs in Harlem were invited to listen to musical numbers rendered by Georgette Harvey, William Elkins, and Margaret Larkin.[3] This activity resulted in multiple dividends. The first preview, on Saturday, 14 April was bought by Harlem's League of Struggle for Negro Rights and with that came glowing advance notices about the production:

> The production of "Stevedore" marks a tremendous advance in the realist [sic] portrayal of the life of the American toilers in the theatre. Vividly portraying the stark life and bitter struggles of the Negro and white longshoremen on the docks of New Orleans, this vital drama effectively smashes through the false and vicious tradition of the commercial theatre which deliberately portrays Negroes only as prancing clowns, docile slaves or horrible criminals.[4]

Richard B. Moore, general secretary for the League, spiced these comments

---

[1]Regan, 28 June 1978.

[2]"Actors' Dinner Club Official Bars Colored," New York Age, 2 June 1934; Herbert Kline, "Stevedore Cast Votes 'No,'" New Theatre, 1 June 1934, p. 15.

[3]Daily News, 7 April 1934.

[4]Daily Worker, 16 April 1934.

with his organization's endorsement, "This play should be greeted with the enthusiastic support of the broad masses of Negro and white workers and of all elements sympathetic to the liberation of the oppressed Negro people."[1]

Four days after Peace on Earth closed on Times Square, April 19, the Theatre Union opened Stevedore at its own theater on Fourteenth Street. April was proving to be a bland month for openings on Broadway. The only excitement was generated by S. M. Chartock who revived five Gilbert and Sullivan operettas in repertory for a limited run. Otherwise, Broadway audiences were treated to a mundane play about the Bronte sisters (Moor Born by Totheroh), a demeaning comedy about lazy, superstitious Negroes (Brain Sweat by John Charles Bronwell) and a brainless domestic comedy about a clever wife (played by Ilka Chase) who forces her husband to pay more attention to her (Wife Insurance by Frederick Jackson).

Stevedore begins in the backyard of a tenement in the white section of New Orleans. The scene is simply represented by a small fence piece placed across the turntable downright. While taking out the garbage, Florrie Reynolds, a white middle-class married woman, clandestinely meets her raffish lover Bill Larkin. In a sotto voce scene, he accuses her of deceiving him. A fight errupts. Bill socks his back alley stumpet on the jaw and flees. Attracted by hysterical screams, her husband and a crowd of neighbors (all male) gather around the whimpering, prostrate Florrie. "What happened?" Eager to protect herself and unwilling to implicate her lover, she concocts a story about being

---

[1]Ibid.

attacked from behind. "Who was it?" the crowd demands. "It was--(weeping desperately)--a nigger."[1]

The gears of Southern "justice" immediately sprung into motion. A white woman has been viciously violated by some marauding black buck. No matter that she is adulterous and a liar. Her "honor" demands retribution. In the blackout that followed Florrie's accusation, the crisp, cold amplified voice of a police radio commands that "all suspicious Negroes in the neighborhood" be picked up. When the lights come up again, we find Florrie seated next to a flat-top desk stage left. A large calendar on one wall, several wanted notices pasted on another, and such props as a blotter, a phone, and a card index file on the desk suggest the locale--police headquarters. For four days Florrie has been trying to identify her alleged assailant from line-ups of "suspicious Negroes." The sergeant, an imperious bigot, now interrogates six cowering blacks in an effort to jog her memory. Of course, it is to no avail and Florrie, now desperately frightened, breaks down in tears. Only one prisoner dares to object to his humiliating treatment: "You know none of us ever touch dat woman. She say she don't recognize nobody. What you holding us here fo'? Why don't you let us go?"[2] Irritated by the audacious Negro's impudence, the sergeant makes a mental note of his name, Lonnie Thompson.

The first two scenes are almost a self-contained play. They scorch the audience's memory with echoes of the headlines in the morning papers. The controversial trial of nine illiterate black youths in

---

[1]Paul Peters and George Skalr, Stevedore (New York: Covici Friede, 1934), p. 15.

[2]Ibid., p. 20.

Scottsboro, Alabama, concerned similar circumstances. There, too, the voracious hunger of racism, instigated by the false allegations of two foul-mouthed hussies, clamored for its scapegoat. The scenes gave Stevedore an explosive, topical opening while at the same time cogently establishing half of the play's theme. Only Jack Shapiro caviled that the scenes were an unnecessary appendage to the play, a vestige of the original work, which deflected the play from its main purpose. He allowed that "exposing the flimsiness and hypocrisy of the old 'rape' cry" is important, especially for the broad politically unschooled audience which comes to the Theatre Union, but, he asserted, the material should have been integrated into the play proper.[1]

Incidentally, Millicent Green, who played Florrie, did not find it difficult to motivate her crying fits. Once again she was the victim of impulsive, uncontrolled, amateurish acting. Every night when Jack Hartley hit her, he did not have the sense or decency to pull his punch. Every night the punch landed on Millicent Green's ear. This pummeling enhanced the realism of the play but it gave the hapless actress a chronic infection and mastoid of the left ear which led to permanent deafness on that side.[2]

Released by police officials, Lonnie returns to Binnie's lunch-room where Ruby, his girl friend, and her father, Sam Oxley, have anxiously been awaiting his return. The setting for this scene vividly creates the realistic atmosphere of the Negroes' favorite lunch counter. Peters spent hours with Maryn Meyers, the properties master, describing

---

[1]Jack Shapiro, "Stevedore," New Theatre, May 1934, p. 13.

[2]Green, 30 June 1978.

the objects and artifacts he had observed on the docks of New Orleans and in the homes of black longshoremen. The result was that:

> Binnie's Place . . . is the prototype of a real restaurant run by a real Binnie on the New Orleans waterfront. One hundred and thirty six items are in view of the spectator, from the water cooler and coffee machine to the lumps of sugar that Ray Yeates is scolded for putting in his coffee. There are cans of food on the shelf and beans and bread are served every night.[1]

The set is installed in less than ten seconds since the counter with all its accoutrements plus five stools with revolving tops are rolled on from the left on a single platform. The ambience of the place is completed with the tinny, discordant jazz rhythms emanating from the everpresent radio.

Lonnie is furious. He vents his anger, which he had been obliged to constrain at the police station, at a system which drops a dehumanizing net around the life and soul of the Negro, debasing and mocking his efforts to live and feel like a man. Sam and Cato, another grey-haired, stoop-shouldered Negro, recognize Lonnie's unbridled contempt, his youthful rebelliousness; they see it as an incandescent longing which, long ago, they, too, shared, but which the imperatives of time have snuffed out. They try to calm Lonnie, to talk some sense into him. They speak from years of experience. They have seen young colts like him impetuously trying to hurtle a wall only to fall and break a leg and end with a bullet in the back of the head. They can sniff the danger that hangs in the air when the black man talks about equality and rages about injustice. They counsel silence and submission. Think and feel what you like inside, they instruct Lonnie, but when you talk to "the man" you better say "yessah, boss" and "Thank you, Cap'n". Lonnie bristles:

---

[1]"750 Props Used in 'Stevedore' Cost only $113," Herald Tribune 3 June 1934.

"Dat's de whole trouble wid de black man. Always crawling, crawling on his belly." But "crawling on yo' belly's better dan hanging by yo' neck," comes the resigned reply.[1]

Lonnie is momentarily quiet. His conscience tells him Sam and Cato are wrong, but his respect for the old man, their bones bent into a perpetual, self-effacing, humble stoop, stops him. After a while, they are joined by half a dozen wharf workers who are on their lunch break. As they enter, they grumble about having been short changed in their pay by Walcott, their boss, the superintendent of the Oceanic Stevedore Company. Lonnie who has been attending meetings of the white longshoremen's fledgling union and who has been thinking about workers' rights is incensed by the boss's machinations. He insists that the men have the right to question the hours set down by the time keeper and to demand their due. The recommendation splinters the group. The men are angry, of course, but are they angry enough to challenge the boss? Jim Veal, the gang captain, scoffs at the idea; it is not only foolish it is impractical and dangerous. In the white man's world there are two kinds of Negroes. There is the "good nigger" who accepts the white man's assumed supremacy and lives. He learns to forget about his oppression; he becomes inured to the thousands of offenses that the black man's flesh is to heir to. He pads his tiny, impoverished vestibule in the white man's spacious mansion with a single principle--"Enjoy yo'self." " Dat's what you hyar fo'," clucks Bobo Valentine, a grinning, slick, sportive black man, "Good eats, good clothes, and loving

---

[1]Peters and Sklar, Stevedore, p. 25.

womans--dem's my principles."[1] You eke out the pleasures you can and remain content with that. After all, the white man will allow his black servants to frolic, he expects them to. The other kind of Negro is the "bad nigger," the pebble in the white man's shoe. He is the troublesome irritant who believes he should enjoy the same rights as a Caucasian. He ends up inevitably on the knotted end of a rope, dangling from a tree branch. Lonnie sees it differently. A "good nigger" is simply a "scared nigger," the white man's carpet. He upbraids the men for obsequiously acquiescing to such a repulsive code and specifically, to Walcott's whims:

> Well, here one black man ain't satisfied being just a good nigger. You wo'k like a mule, dey cheat you on pay, and all you can do is hush up and be a good nigger. Well, by God, I ain't gwine to hush up. I gwine to Walcott and tell him we work twenty-four hours and we want to get paid for it.[2]

His speech rouses the men. Their previously anesthesized will tingles with sensation again. They feel strength and courage as a group. With Lonnie leading them they march off to Walcott's office.

The noise of a winch and ship whistles suggest that the scene has shifted to the wharf. A roll-top desk turns into view on the turntable down right with Jeff seated on a swivel chair behind it. Lonnie and Sam, as spokesmen for the group, present their grievance. Walcott remonstrates at first but sensing the urgency of their demands, he thinks it wiser to defuse the tension by mollifying them. He magnanimously

---

[1]Ibid., p. 29.

[2]Ibid., p. 31.

promises to make good on the deficit. His false bonhomie soon evaporates, however. Before he dismisses Lonnie and Sam, he warns Lonnie that he knows about his fraternizing with Lem Morris, the union organizer. He does not want any "bad niggers" on his payroll. Lonnie defiantly hurls the insult back at Walcott, cooly saying that a "bad nigger" is a "nigger you can't cheat."[1] Walcott's blood boils at this audacity and he punches Lonnie in the face. The interview ends abruptly, but after Lonnie and Sam depart Walcott blurts out his virulent animosity for the black upstart:

> That damn shine's been hanging around with Reds, that's where he gets those notions! Organizing! Equality! Christ, those coons are just running riot! This country won't be fit to live in any more. Look at all the rapes they've been pulling in this town. Look at what they did to that Reynolds woman. And did they catch anybody for it? No. Where the hell are the cops? . . . If they don't do something about it, I'll organize a posse and go after them myself. It's high time those niggers were put in their place.[2]

The speech links the two dominant themes of the play. The black worker who stands up for his rights becomes vulnerable to overwhelming racial prejudice. Economic equality becomes linked to racial equality.

Once again the abrasive police radio orders a roundup of suspicious Negroes. What follows, however, was considered by many critics to be one of the most captivating moments of the production. In a decisive change of tone, the lights come up on the wharf at noon. The dock scenes utilized the full stage. Upstage, in front of the cyclorama, a permanent "string piece with two poles sticking up" impressionistically suggested the moorings of the wharf. (This was masked either by the wagons or

---

[1] Ibid., p. 39.

[2] Ibid., p. 40.

a drape for other scenes.)[1] Both downstage turntables loaded with props were revolved into view. Though there were not as many props in this scene as there were in Binnie's lunch room, there were heavier ones needed here. The scene used twenty-four heavy sacks, three barrels, two cotton bales, and one large wooden box plus an assortment of handtools like crowbars, shovels, axe handles, handtrucks, and bale hooks. The problem of getting them into place quickly was resolved mechanically. All the props were piled onto one of the large transverse wagons, the wagon was rolled on stage and the props were trundled into position. The wharf was readied in twenty-two seconds.[2]

The black stevedores seem to be randomly scattered about the stage, arranged in various realistic poses on or around the sacks, bales, and barrels. They are taking a lunch break. One of them is singing a lazy ballad. Others engage in a desultory debate about the efficacy and the prudence of Lonnie's promptings to organize jointly with the white dock workers. The points of the discussion emerge slowly and randomly for the real focus of the scene is the creation of a moving, humane portrait of Negro life. Brooks Atkinson rhapsodically described what he called the "lithographic color" of the scene:

> Many of the scenes are vital. But none of them is quite so hardy and virtuoso as the scene of noon time recess on Styvesant Dock when the Negroes are lounging on the bales of cotton--talking, laughing, singing, arguing, scuffling and breaking out into comic horseplay on the spur of the moment. No one could invent a scene as full of life as that one. Whoever wrote that had been there and had relished what it represents in the elemental saga of the Negro race. . . . They have produced a propaganda play in which

---

[1]Unsigned letter to Jelliffe, 9 February 1935.

[2]Peters and Sklar, "Stevedore," Promptbook, Act 1 Sc. 5, n.p.; "750 Props," Herald Tribune.

you can recognize the natural exuberance of living people.[1]

The leftist critics saw in the scene not only the depiction of homely episodes of Negro life but elements of proletarian significance. Harold Edgar insisted, "The whole of the Negro situation is lucidly, entertainingly, unforgetably drawn there. It contains the most creative work in the play and easily ranks as one of the leading pieces of dramatic writing in our steadily growing revolutionary literature."[2] And Michael Gold beamed, "We don't want the stale Belasco realism on our proletarian stage, that seizes surfaces and hordes soulless objects like a miser. The mechanics of photography are only a means to an end. In this dock scene . . . I believe a start has been made towards a new poetry of working class life."[3] The scene was compelling and had a true-to-life quality because its creators did relish it. Peters, as Atkinson presumed, had been there and had absorbed the essence of the place and its people. Blankfort's visit gave him a sense of the "music" of the scene.[4] Though only five of the cast had lived in or traveled through the South, they all had an ingrained awareness (Stanislavsky might call it a "racial memory") of the meaning of blackness. Every detail of the scene was lovingly attended to. For example, intricate bits of business concerned with the men's lunch pails were added to help suffuse the scene with spontaneity

---

[1]Atkinson, "Race Riot," 19 April 1934.

[2]"Play of New Orleans Negro Longshoremen Seethes With Struggle." Daily Worker, 20 April 1934, p. 5.

[3]"Stevedore," New Masses, 1 May 1934, p. 28.

[4]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

and vigor.[1]

The idyll is interrupted when Lonnie runs in bloodied and breathless. Coming out of the union hall, he had been beated by a gang of Walcott's goons. He grabs a crowbar and enjoins the others to join him in defending themselves against the approaching mob. They stand paralyzed in indecision until Lonnie stirringly lashes out at them for their cowardice and passivity, their racial mashochism:

> Look at 'em. Look at 'em standing dar. De white boss spit in their faces. De white boss make slaves out of dem--cheat 'em-- rob 'em-- laugh at 'em. And dey just stand dar. "Beat me some mo', white boss. Sho', I like it. Beat me some mo'." Lawd, when de black man gwine to stand up? Whe he gwine to stand up proud like a man?[2]

Now, for the second time Lonnie tries to jolt the men out of their inertia. Lonnie, disgusted with the bootlicking subserviance of his race, is portrayed as an implacable insurgent, a rebel who tirelessly seeks to brink a new awareness to his people. Lonnie's mission is fortified by its messianic overtones. Earlier and several times throughout the play, he is derisively referred to a "Black Jesus." He becomes the savior, the Great Black Hope, who acts and speaks not purely for personal motives but on behalf of the whole black race. His desire to bring an end to their exploitation is equated to the Savior's desire to end mankind's benighted vassalage to hatred and lies. Like Chirst, our Black Jesus has to contend with disbelievers and skeptics, the people whose hearts have been frozen against redemption, who pillory him as a false messiah. The apostate Jim Veal denounces the modern day crusader in terms that reflect his New Testament ideals, "Lonnie say! Lonnie say! What am dat

---

[1]"750 Props," Herald Tribune.

[2]Peters and Sklar, Stevedore, p. 48.

nigger, anyhow? De fo' gospel and de 'pocalypse." Bobo, his confederate then chimes in, "Lonnie say de moon am brown,/Lonnie say de square am roud'/Lonnie say just stick around./ And hear what Lonnie say."[1] The majority, though, are persuaded; they come to believe in the new gospel. They arm themselves with shovels and axe handles and are about to march out when the wharf whistle suddenly blows. A stinging silence arrests their excitement. Like the self-aggrandizing valet in Miss Julie who shrivels when he sees the master's boots, these stevedores are painfully reminded of their servitude. Their resovle withers stillborn. Walcott rushes in, hectoring the men back to work. With sullen obedience they resume "horsing" the cotton and "mobiling" the sacks. Walcott has brought with him two plainclothes detectives. They summon Lonnie. If a culprit needs to be found to close out the rape case, why not cure two birds with one stone and relieve the potential for trouble on the wharves. They brutally seize the "bad nigger." As the curtain descends, Lonnie is dragged off, shouting and struggling to free himself while the others stand tensely in helpless silence watching the crucifixion of the leader.

Lonnie eventually escapes from his captors and the remainder of the play treats of his flight and its repercussions. Crucial to the play's ideological platform is the opening scene of Act Two in the union hall. Lem Morris, the aggressive, capable white union organizer, has heard about Lonnie's arrest and begins to mobilize the union to help him. Al Regan, a stereotype of the loud-mouthed, beer bellied red-neck racist, opposes the use of union machinery to aid a "rape nigger." Lem retorts

---

[1]Ibid., pp. 44-45.

that the charges are specious, "Listen, you know damned well, the only reason they arrested him was to keep him from organizing the Stuyvesant Dock."[1] The strength of the waterfront labor movement, he insists, hinges on the solidarity of black and white workers. Only through the concerted effort of an integrated union can they succeed in accomplishing their common objectives and obtaining their rights. The immediate need is to cement the alliance between black and white and not give free rein to divisive prejudices. Regan remains doggedly unconvinced. Lem, committed to the cause and principles of the union, forcibly ejects Regan from the organization. The scene is a dry exposition of the "unite and fight" theme. Its set speeches and cardboard thin characterization are incongruously at variance with the warmth of the previous scenes. Even Michael Gold, who wanted to like the scene, could only manage to single out the mimeograph machine for honorable mention.

> The scene in the union office, with its single mimeograph machine, is another sketch full of vistas and instigations. No attempt was made to show the red banners, and pictures of Lenin, and the benches and tables one might find in such a union hall. Instead, there are two workers turning out strike leaflets on a mimeograph. To anyone who knows the revolutionary labor movement, there is something quite touching in this focus on the mimeograph. Nobody has yet written poems to this humble little machine. This primitive printing press that has called so many workers to demonstrations and picket lines, wounds, danger and victory. It has exposed many a horrible injustice when all the great milliondollar presses were silent; it has traveled secretely in the stokehold of many a ship, it lives in cellars in Hitler Germany, it is the voice of the Alabama sharecroppers and the friend of the coal miners. It was good to see it cast as one of the heroes of a proletarian play, with a glamorous spotlight beating on it, and making it a figure of the imagination.[2]

---

[1] Ibid., p. 60.

[2] Gold, "Stevedore," p. 29.

With the next scene, we return to the docks. It is night; a dark blue sky gives the scene a melancholy mood. Four men are loading the remaining sacks onto a boat whose lights twinkle in the distance. As they work, they chant; their doleful song setting the rhythm for the lifting and carrying: "Onn-nn-nnn . . . (reach, hoist, swing) . . . You. (toss as voice snaps charply)/Onn-nn-nnn . . . me!/ In the wing, in the hole, top off."[1] The songs were minutely blocked so that each of the fourteen sacks from the right turntable were swung or deposited on a specific line.[2] Other than the chant, there was a peculiar silence among the men, which lent the scene an air of suspense and forboding. Soon, Jim Veal finishes and departs and we discover the reason for their uncharacteristic reticence--Lonnie has been hiding under the dock since late afternoon. While the others stand watch, Sam pulls Lonnie up. Black Jesus is drenched in mud and exhausted from the day's escapade. He has been subjected to a public scourging and humiliation in the court of Pilate. Dragged off by the detectives, he was soon surrounded by a bloodthirsty lynch-mob who roared for his execution: "We make hamburger out of you, nigger." The experience is a revelation for Lonnie who discovers in his own fear and terror the fear and terror of his race: "Oh, Sam, every blackman that was ever lynched, I know how he feel, I know how he feel."[3] Suddenly, Ruby rushes in to warn them that Lem

---

[1]"'On You!' 'On Me' Sing Negroes Working on Dock in 'Stevedore,'" Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 15 July 1934.

[2]Souvenir Program, Stevedore, n.p., Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Peters and Sklar, Stevedore, p. 70.

Morris is looking for Lonnie and that he is coming to the wharf. When Lem arrives he offers to hide the fugitive in his apartment until things cool down. Ruby is fearful. Her distrust for the well-meaning white man is emblematic of the sharp cleavage between white and black. Lonnie, however, accepts Lem's help and arranges to meet him at Binnie's place later that evening when Lem will have procured a car. Before Lonnie and the others leave the dock they are accosted by two of Walcott's goons. A scuffle ensues, the hooligans are knocked down and the blacks escape.

At the lunchroom, the black men timorously sit at the counter. The atmosphere is charged with suppressed anxiety. Outside, gangs of white hoodlums, inflamed by radio news bulletins of Negroes attacking whites, roam through the black ghetto terrorizing its inhabitants, plundering and destroying property. A brick comes hurtling through the window shattering the uneasy silence. The scene, as Bernard Soble describes it, was "taut with suspense, by-play, human touches and catastrophe."[1] Lonnie is furtively brought into the place. Jim Veal and some of the others, frightened, chastized Lonnie for picking a fight with white men at a time like this, and inciting the whole white community. Lonnie ignores them. Betrayed by his brothers, he sits sullenly at the counter to eat his "last supper."[2] Lem arrives and is about to whisk Lonnie away when Mitch and his notorious gang burst into the lunchroom. Lonnie quickly hides under the counter; the others try to give the

---

[1]"'Stevedore' Gives Thrilling Session of Able Acting," Daily Mirror, 19 April 1934.

[2]Peters and Sklar, Stevedore, p. 84.

appearance of business as usual. Mitch is not fooled. He is about to discover Lonnie when Ruby turns off the lights. In the darkness two shots ring out; Ruby screams. Lonnie escapes, but Sam lies dead.

Act Three opens with the blacks gathered at Bertha Williams's attic for Sam's wake. The dolorous, plaintive melody of a Negro spiritual intensifies the emotional pitch of the moment. Throughout the play music and patches of ensemble singing embellish the texture of the Negro life depicted. The songs are all authentic, most of them having been transcribed by Peters when he was in New Orleans or found in collections of Negro work songs. (The funeral dirge, in fact, had been incorporated into Wharf Nigger.)[1] Members of the company, too, contributed songs, music and harmonizations. They were uniquely qualified; many of the black actors and actresses in the cast had begun as singers in church choirs. William Elkins arranged the spiritual in the wake scene. Harry Bolden improvised and embellished his part of the work song in the second dock scene. Ray Yeates, using traditional lyrics, composed the lazy melody for the snatch of blues he sang in the first dock scene.[2] Interestingly, he made up the tune at his audition, never changing it and never writing it down.[3] No new songs were composed for the play. All songs were sung a cappella with the only accompaniment coming from the pitch pipes which each of the actors carried and stealthily used at the start of a song.[4]

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2]Margaret Larkin, "Stevedore," Workers Club Review, June 1934, pp. 11-12.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin. [4]"750 Props," Herald Tribune.

To notate the music and to advise with the arrangements, the Theatre Union engaged a young graduate from Julliard, Jerome Moross. At twenty-one, Moross was a creative musician with impressive credentials. he had been musical director for the ill-fated Three-Penny Opera, at the Empire Theatre in 1933 and he was composing music for a play by Alfred Kreymborg.[1] His association with the Theatre Union, which came about through his friendship with Michael Gordon, was to continue through the end of the next year with the production of Mother. The musical score for Stevedore later disappeared when the Theatre Union moved from one office to another.[2] One last musical credit belongs to John Hammond who suggested some of the jazz numbers, such as the "Alligator Crawl," for transitions between scenes.[3]

The gospel song over, Blacksnake rushes in to report that the mob has grown more vicious. The assembled Negroes quake with fear. Their plight seems pathetic and hopeless. Some say they will flee to the next county while the preacher urges Christian forebearance. Suddenly Lonnie appears. He speaks to the group like a true prophet, alternately rebuking them for their pusillanimity and inspiring them with courage and militant determination:

> The lowest animal in the field will fight fo' its home. And all you can think of doing is running away. An supposing you do run a way? Whar you gwine to go to? Baton Rouge? Mississippi? Is it gwine to be different dar? You gwine to find jobs? You gwine

---

[1]Moross, 29 June 1978.

[2]Unsigned letter to Rowena Jelliffe, 9 August 1935.

[3]Peters, 20 August 1978.

> to get yo' self a home? Nassuh. You got black skin. You can't run away fron dat. Make no difference whar you are, dey hound you just de same. . . . Nassuh, you can't run away from yo' self, black man. Yo' been running away fo' two hundred years. We can't wait fo' de judgment day. We can't wait till we dead and gone. We got to fight fo' de right to live. Now--now--right now.[1]

For the third time Lonnie rallies his brothers to defend their rights. First, he prompted them to look out for their economic rights, then to protect their right to walk the streets safely and unmolested; now he, urges them to defend their right to walk the earth. Backs to the wall, one by one, they realize the seriousness of their situation and they accept Lonnie's resolution. At that moment, Lem enters to say that the gang is approaching. Lonnie informs him that they intend to fight; Lem promises to organize a militia of union members to reinforce their ranks. Emboldened, the dockwallopers shout, "Let's get going!"

The scene shifts rapidly to the courtyard below Bertha's flat. At first the court is quiet and desolate with only a decrepit peddler's push cart sitting in the archway upstage which opens into the street. Immediately, the scene bustles with activity as the blacks begin to erect a makeshift defensive rampart. With a resounding crash, several men overturn the wagon and form the center of the barricade. People spill into the courtyard from all directions, bringing an assortment of objects for the defensive wall--a ruined sewing machine, a large dented bureau, a section of an antique icebox, old mattresses, peeling iron bedsteads, and battered tables. Some collect a stockpile of makeshift weapons--horse shoes, baseball bats, bricks, chunks of coal, and cobblestones. One fortunate fighter whips out his trusty "hoss pistol,"

---

[1]Peters and Sklar, Stevedore, pp. 106, 109.

(a real challenge for Maryn Meyers, head of props, to locate). In ten minutes, 154 props are brought onto the stage, including forty-five large pieces of furniture.[1] Authenticity was guaranteed as much of the furniture was gathered by members of the company from Harlem Homes. Observing the squalor and crudeness of the items in the barricade, one critic remarked that the barricade itself was mute testimony of the exploitation suffered by the Negro: "Every fresh bit of furniture on that stage is a symbol of the oppressed Negro's poverty. The very souls of the colored folk go into the slight barricade."[2] The construction of the barricade before the eyes of the audience was for Blankfort "my big victory of that production." What could have been a technical nightmare became a tour de force of ingenuity. Someone came up with the idea of building the barricade backwards. Blankfort, Jack Williams (the assistant stage manager), and a crew of stage hands built the barricade in the manner they wanted it. It had to be higher than a man's head yet sturdy enough to support a man's weight since the action of the play called for Ray Yeates to climb over it twice and for Rex Ingram to lead a charge over the top of it at the end of the play. Each piece was numbered, in the order in which it was added to the pile. After the wall was constructed, the company was called in to dismantle it, everyone being assigned numbers for the pieces they were to remove, with the last, the bedstead,

---

[1]"750 Props," Herald Tribune; "Backstage View," p.6; Peters and Sklar, "Stevedore," Promptbook, Act 3, Sc. 2, n.p.

[2]Bernard Sobel, "Stage Properties Play Mute Parts as Play Moves," Daily Mirror, 30 April 1934.

going first. Having decided who moves what, the last problem was to determine from where and on what cue each piece is brought on.[1] The traffic flow was choreographed until it became "mathematically fixed, as though set to music."[2]

A lookout signals the approach of Mitch and the mob. The Negroes begin to panic, their will wilting, but Lonnie instills them with confidence. The showdown: Mitch slaps the blacks with an ultimatum, but the blacks stand firm. A shot is fired and Lonnie staggers. Blacksnake rallies the men to counterattack. Amidst the shouting and the fighting someone hoarsely cries, "Lem Morris coming! Lem Morris and dem union fellows coming!"[3] The melee intensifies as the white union members join the blacks in a charge over the wall. Down left, Binnie, standing on a staircase, aims a double-barreled shot-gun and fires into the mob. A howl of pain is heard from the street. Exulant, Binnie shouts, "I got him! That red-headed son-of-a-bitch. I got him! I got him!"[4] Their leader fallen, the mob quickly retreats. The curtain then slowly descends on a tableau of the triumphant black and white stevedores mournfully gathered around the slain Lonnie, lying Pieta-like, in the arms of the bereaved Ruby. Lonnie will never live in the promised land he envisioned, but his brothers will.

The play's unself-conscious, melodramatic ending generated the

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978: "'Stevedore' Barricade a Good Engineering Feat," Bronx Home News, 10 June 1934; Souvenir Program, Stevedore.

[2]"Backstage View," p. 6.

[3]Peters and Sklar, Stevedore, p. 122. [4]Ibid., p. 123.

greatest critical controversy of the production. First, there were those who accepted the emotional fervor of the last scene and took delight in the dexterity of its presentation. Brooks Atkinson characterized it as a "stirring scene of the resistance."[1] Gilbert Gabriel gave only qualified approval saying,

> . . . that's childish authorship . . . But the Theatre Union is obviously producing for an audience which wants its plays authored like that, insists on endings like this one, and I for one hasten to scramble out of the way of the rushing hoofs [sic] of the stampede . . . This is a propaganda play, a complete undisguised and unpretending one, and in quite all ways the best one we've had this year.[2]

Bernard Sobel added, "Highly original was the ambuscade scene in the last act . . . the audience seemed to be on the firing line."[3]

Several critics, on the other hand, believed the stale in-the-nick-of-time rescue was a facile device which weakened the play's impact. John Anderson regretted the diminution of the drama: "In franker and older melodramas this graceful duty was always performed by the crew of the U. S. S. Olympia. It is one of the naive touches which makes 'Stevedore' for adult playgoers less effective in the theatre than, for the sake of its cause, it ought to be."[4] Richard Lockridge concurred: "The final scene is exciting as battle scenes always are, and the old galloping to the rescue technic is used with unblushing naivete and is, of course, thrilling as always. The thought, and to a degree the effect-

---

[1]"Race Riot," p. 33.

[2]"'Stevedore' An Exciting Plea by the Theatre Union Shakes Up Fourteenth Street," Journal American, 19 April 1934.

[3]"Thrilling Session," 19 April 1934.

[4]"Tense and Exciting," 19 April 1934.

iveness of the indictment, go out of the play when the melodrama comes in, however."[1] No less than five critics compared the union's climactic rush into the courtyard to the appearance of the United States Marines during the third act crisis of the old fashioned melodramas.[2]

The authors, however, argued that the ending was not inappropriate or far-fetched, but was, in fact, the very core of the drama:

> The opinion has been expressed that it would be preferable to see the Negroes fight it out with Mitch's gang themselves, rather than see white union men "come over the top like the U. S. Marines." Both of us believe that the Negroes cannot fight it out alone, for that would spell only certain doom. We believe that the solution of the Negro problem lies in the unity of blace and white workers--a unity which under the starvation of black and white alike, is being welded in the Deep South much more rapidly than most people dream. . . . To us it seems not only logical thinking but sound drama xhat white workers, realizing how it is essential to their bitter struggle for wages and half-way livable conditions, should champion the rights of their Negro fellows.[3]

The ending, they affirmed, was probable and necessary. It was probable to the extent that Negroes and whites had joined forces in the past and were currently doing so, sometimes with successful results. In program notes and in feature articles about the play, the authors never failed to cite the historical precedents for the unity depicted in the play. As far back as 1913, a united front of whites, Italians, Mexicans, and blacks fought the bosses of the Brabow, Louisiana, saw mills. During the 1919 strikes at the Bogalusa, Louisiana, lumber mills, Lum Williams,

---

[1]"'Stevedore' a Drama of Race Conflict, Opens at the Civic Repertory," Sun, 19 April 1934, p. 22.

[2]Percy Hammond, "Stevedore Objects Skillfully to the Plight of the Negro in the Sunny South," Herald Tribune, 20 April 1934, p. 14. Brown, "Union Takes to Soap Box," 21 April 1934; Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama on the Barricades," Nation, 2 May 1934, pp. 515-516: Gabriel, "Exciting Plea," 19 April 1934; Garland, "Violent Vitality," 23 April 1934.

[3]Anderson, "'Stevedore' vs. 'Wharf Nigger,'" 28 April 1934.

the white union organizer, was murdered for defending Sol Dacus, the leader of the blacks. More recently, racial prejudices were forgotten by the coal miners of Bell and Harlan counties, Kentucky; mixed demonstrations for unemployment relief were mounted in Chattanooga, Birmingham (led by Angelo Herndon), New Orleans, and Atlanta; white sharecroppers led by Cliff James, who died in the effort, came to the aide of the Negro sharecroppers of Camp Hill, Alabama, when they attempted to protect their mules against seizure by the sheriff; and in January 1933, one thousand whites and blacks marched on the city hall of Fairfield, Alabama, to force the revocation of a town ordinance prohibiting inter-racial meetings.[1] Such facts make the action of the play's ending seem less preposterous. Moreover, the ending was necessary to fulfill the didactic purpose of the drama. The aim of the play was to convey the Marxist message that victory over the bosses can be achieved only through the active solidarity of all oppressed classes. This, the authors asserted, was theatrically represented in the ending. If it seemed cliched or smacked of melodrama, so be it. The class struggle, with the proletariat pitted against a powerful capitalist group, is itself melodramatic, but it is a reality. Peters made this very point when he pleaded, "the sheer struggle for bread, the struggle for the simple essentials of life, is always 'naive.' A class struggle play must necessarily be melodramatic. You can't have a strike without clubbings and shootings by the bosses' police."[2] The drama which reflects

---

[1]Garlin, "Peters," 15 May 1934; Sender Garlin, Paul Peters--Revolutionary Playwright--An Interview," Daily Worker, 16 May 1934, p.5.

[2]Garlin "Peters," 16 May 1934, p. 5.

such conditions will inevitably contain touches of structural melodrama but this does not nullify its credibility. Furthermore, a small dose of melodrama, if properly administered, can be a useful dramatic strategy for forcing the audience to assume a militantly offensive stance; that, after all, is the paramount function of good social drama. In second thoughts about the play, Richard Lockridge realized this:

> They are trying to stir people to fight against injustice . . . The authors of 'Stevedore' are incidentally writing a play; primarily they are carrying a battle. As playwrights they would deny themselves certain instruments; as agitators, as fighters, they ought to use any weapons that come to hand. If the oldest hokum in the theatre's stock is the best weapon to arouse the audience, . . . they are not only permitted, but required to use it. . . . For its purposes, 'Stevedore' is very nearly perfect. It makes the audience get mad and yell.[1]

Sklar and others of the Theatre Union, conceded that the "melodrama" criticism was legitimate, but they shrugged it off as text-bookish and irrelevant. The play was designed to stimulate political action and had a seasoning of melodrama, but it adhered to the internal logic of the play and was not improbable. Pragmatically, the technique worked. Anderson remained unpersuaded. The ending, he opined, was melodramatic before it was political. Its banal, hackneyed appearance vitiated its cause despite the sincerity with which it was offered. He preferred Wharf Nigger.[2]

The left press, needless to day, had no difficulty accepting the ending and interpreting its ideological import. Harold Edgar considered the ending,

> . . . the moment which symbolizes for them [the blacks] in the most

---

[1]"Get Mad and Yell," Sun, 21 April 1934.

[2]Anderson, "'Stevedore' vs. 'Wharf Nigger'," 28 April 1934.

> inescapbly graphic terms the possibility of achievement, the break from suppressed discontent to the flame of combat and triumph. The final scenes of "Stevedore" and the whole spirit of the acts which precede them have a forward rhythm, a forceful movement toward what, one feels, cannot but be a decisive confrontation of the issues with the sense of victory in the very act of that confrontation.[1]

In a lengthy tribute to the play and the production, Michael Gold hammers home its hortatory moral:

> The white boss-gangsters arrive and yell their foul taunts. But the Negro workers stand their ground like men; and when the gangsters begin shooting they answer them. It is a tremendous battle scene that is staged here, exciting because it falls into no mock heroics. These are plain, hard-working good-humored people such as you and I know, and they are fighting for their lives. You want to help them, and when big, lovable, motherly Binnie . . . picks up an old gun and pops off one of the gangsters, the audience cheers. It cheers not only because a brute is dead, but because something has happened in the soul of a working class mother.
>
> Lonnie is killed. But Blacksnake, a powerful giant assumes the leadership. The white boss-gangsters are winning in the uneven battle of bricks against automatics when Lem Morris . . . arrives with white stevedores. And black and white workers units, for the first time on the American stage, to beat off their common enemy. . . . The play ends, but this powerful image of Negro and white working-class unity is stamped upon one's mind forever. This is what has happened in life; and this is what must be made to happen. It is really one of those unforgettable experiences in the theatre, the thing that makes the theatre, in its high moments, a supreme teacher of the masses.[2]

Aside from the ending, the play was enthusiastically received by even the "bourgeois" critics. Sklar and Peters had no need to be apprehensive, as they were, that Stevedore would run a similar critical gauntlet to Peace on Earth. Some critics did have qualms about the strained propagandistic tone or the ingenuous dramatic construction of some scenes, but most concluded their assessment with a statement that

---

[1]"Negro Longshoremen," p. 5.

[2]"Stevedore," p. 28.

reflected approval of the total work. The following is a representative gallery of the accolades the production garnered:

> Atkinson: . . . a highly exciting workman-like drama . . . There is a ring of authenticity about the story and characterization.
>
> Hammond: Being myself a white man and a capitalist, I ought to resent "Stevedore" as an assault upon me and my class. But Mr. George Sklar . . . and his collaborating crusader, Mr. Paul Peters, write so theatrically and with such fascinating violence about wrongs and rectifications that I am lost in admiration of their craftsmanship.
>
> Garland: . . . a heady experience, an evening of unquenchable excitement, a sincere tumultuous production worth anybody's while.
>
> Whitney: . . . an audacious play, a play written with grimness, performed with chill sincerity and presented with fury.
>
> Ruhl: As a piece of dramatic construction the play is naive and repetitious, but the writing, as such, in the sense of dialogue, of scenes visualized and moods created, rings true . . .
>
> Burr: . . . written with ardor and blugeoning effect. . . . It is a grueling and exciting melodrama . . . and whether or not its loudly screamed propaganda affects you, its fast, furious and absorbing action is bound to leave you limp.
>
> Bowen: "Stevedore" was written with intensity. It is presented with a simplicity that is all but austere. Many will find its theme, its implications and a phrase or two unpleasingly strong. Others will say its melodrama and violence in word and deed are commensurate with its essential dignity. The authors of "Stevedore" have evolved honest and strong elements of character that we should all be bound and glad to respect, regardless of "color"--respect the more, no doubt, on account of all the various feelings about "color" that does exist.[1]

The black press was likewise commendatory, stressing the view that Stevedore, unlike previous plays about Negroes, presented an accurate, unromanticized portrait of the blackman:

---

[1]Atkinson, "Race Riot," p. 33; Hammond, "Stevedore Objects, p. 14; Garland "Violent Vitality," 23 April 1934; John Whitney, "Stevedore," Newark Evening News, 19 April 1934; Arthur Ruhl, "'Stevedore' a Play About Negro Labor at the Civic," Herald Tribune, 22 April 1934, p. 2; Eugene Burr, "Stevedore,'" Billboard, 28 April 1934; Stirling Bowen, "The Theatre Union Play," Wall Street Journal, 20 April 1934.

> While "Stevedore" is frankly a propaganda play, its authors do not indulge in the maudlin romanticizing of the Negro that slops over in "Porgy", "The Green Pastures" and the plays of Paul Green. In their eyes the Negro is neither a carefree child of nature nor a tragic cross-carrier, except in so far as it is tragic to be overworked and underpaid, which is the lot of working men the world over, whether they be black, white or yellow. The faithful portraiture of the Negro men in "Stevedore" is the best thing of its kind that has yet appeared in American drama.[1]

Blankfort's direction, despite his difficulties in rehearsal, was acknowledged by some critics as contributing to the overall success of the production. The critics especially liked his deft handling of the mass scenes--the two wharf scenes and the final battle--writing that they were well orchestrated, well composed, and played with an ensemble zeal. George Joel found these scenes "impressive."[2] John Mason Brown noted, "Mr. Blankfort . . . has directed its violent mob scenes with a turburlence which befits their action."[3] Stirling Bowen concluded, "All the voices are well placed and are well mixed and matched, throughout a variety of moods. Most of the casting is expert and the direction is superior, the crowds being treated with unusual flexibility."[4] The only reservation voiced about the direction came, interestingly, from Opportunity, The Journal of Negro Life. Its critic, John Lyman, believed that though the production was kinetically stirring, it lamentably missed the mark:

> . . . while the direction admirably catches the progressive physical movement of the play, it frequently misses the inner action and illumination of character. Violent external noise

---

[1]Theopilus Lewis, "Harlem Sketchbook," Amsterdam News, 28 April 1934.

[2]"Another Play of Protest," Jewish Daily Bulletin, 19 April 1934.

[3]"The Theatre Union Presents the Messrs. Peters's and Sklar's 'Stevedore' Down at the Civic Repertory," Evening Post, 19 April 1934.

[4]"Theatre Union Play," 20 April 1934.

> and excitement, while theatrically effective in its impact upon the audience, is often less genuinely moving than the feeling of inner struggle, of awakening compreshension and final inevitable self-assertion.[1]

Stevedore, however, was a thrilling production and for his work Blankfort was voted one of the ten best directors of the season, sharing that distinction with such directors as Guthrie McClintic, John Houseman, Jed Harrin, Lee Strasberg, and Phillip Moeller.[2]

The unqualified champion of the production was the cast of black actors. They acted with "unctuous relish and understanding," with "tremendous gusto."[3] Their performances were "highly convincing and impressive," as they churned up "an emotional head of steam and a desperate sincerity."[4] Again and again, the black actors were extolled for unparalleled virtuoso performances. Blacks, it was discovered, could be tremendously persuasive performers who could magically transport an audience to a far away place and make it believe in its reality: "They make you believe, they make you forget Manhattan, Fourteenth Street, the subway and taxis just outside the door and for long periods on end you are standing on the docks of New Orleans, an appalled spectator of the grisly doings there. The whites, alas, are merely actors."[5] Robert Benchely was so taken with the fiery naturalness of the black actors

---

[1]"Stevedores and Saints," Opportunity, May 1934, p. 148.

[2]Post, 1 June 1934.

[3]Garland, "Violent Vitality," 23 April 1934.

[4]E. J. H., "'Stevedore' a Vibrant and Dynamic Play of Fiery Racial Prejudice in the South," Brooklyn Citizen, 19 April 1934.

[5]Whitney Bolton, "'Stevedore' Docks in Fourteenth Street, But Its Acting Belies Humble Berth," Morning Telegraph, 20 April 1934.

that he swore that they could act the preamble of the Constitution and make it seem spontaneous and crackling with emotional vitality.[1] Singled out for special attention were Lonnie Carter who played with "splendid force, tempered by a reasonable restraint"; Rex Ingram who was a "righteously venomous black rattlesnake"; Georgette Harvey who played the "lunchroom empress" with "broad beamed callousness"; and Leigh Whipper who created an incisive portrait of the timid, ignorant white man's nigger.[2]

Aside from the criticism of the ending, the major negative reaction to the play dealt with its unabashed propagandistic form and style. Almost all critics judged the play as propaganda, but found in it a judicious balance of exciting theatre and social philosophy. An editorial in the World Telegram stated with regard to Stevedore, "Undoubtedly propaganda and drama can be successfully merged to produce a high form of entertainment and should, we believe, be so merged far more often in the American theatre."[3] A few critics, however, measuring the play against traditional theatrical aesthetic standards, found it wanting. Arthur Pollack, for example, termed it "an obvious sermon."[4] John Anderson suggested, "those who are using the art of the theatre for ulterior purposes might remember that it is an art, with patterns of its

---

[1]"Just One," New Yorker, 28 April 1934.

[2]Burns Mantle, "Drama of New Orleans Docks Exictes a Sympathetic Audience in Fourteenth Street, "Daily News", 19 April 1934; Hammond, "Stevedore Objects," p. 14; Atkinson, "Race Riot," p. 33; Maurice Dancer "Gripping Drama of South Stars Jack Carter," Pittsburgh Courier, 28 April 1934.

[3]"Stevedore," 4 May 1934.

[4]"'Stevedore' a Play About Negroes and Injustice in the South Opens at Civic Repertory," Brooklyn Eagle, 19 April 1934.

own, and that even the best causes in the world can be weakened by plays which fall into such old patterns that they are beneath notice."[1] John Mason Brown, who devoted two essays to the production, assailed it as a "soap box harangue:"

> As ardent propagandists, they seem to think the surest way of making their points is to insist upon having everyone know at every turn that what they are writing is propaganda. . . . They work as cheap orators when they ought to be working as dramatists. Their eyes and ears are forever trained on the mass meeting responses of their audiences.[2]

Such criticism was like slaughtering cows on the Ganges. It again provoked that tempestuous and unending controversy of Art vs. Propaganda. It elicited from Mike Gold's staunchly proletarian pen a hail of brimstone. Gold scathingly scorned such "objective art criticism" as camouflaged anti-working class bias and unmitigated Fascism. He reserved a special thunderbolt for Brown:

> What contempt he has for the workers, this "pure" esthete. How he hates every needle-trade worker, sailor, ex-serviceman, and unemployed father of children who goes to Union Square to express the misery and injustice of our time. . . . And this is supposed to be theatrical criticism, this fascist blast against the working class! We are the propagandists and he is the champion of art. Thanks Mr. Brown, we know where you stand, and to hell with you and your ''art'' criticism.[3]

The left wing press welcomed Stevedore. "Revolutionary drama is not evolved out of thin air," chortled Jack Shapiro:

> It springs from a deep sense of exploitation and revolt. It is an exposition and a weapon. It is true and poignant and rousing. Stevedore is all of that . . . [It is] a great step

---

[1]"Tense and Exciting," 19 April 1934.

[2]"Theatre Union Presents," 19 April 1934.

[3]Gold, "Stevedore," pp. 28-29.

> forward, a tremendous victory for the revolutionary theatre. It not only deserves the full support of the working class and the broad masses, but will undoubtely get it on the basis of intrinsic merit.[1]

Mike Gold, inflated with pride, crowed:

> The Theatre Union . . . has established the fact that here at last the American revolutionary movement has begun to find itself expressed adequately on the stage . . . isn't it a glorious thing to be able to say to bourgeois Broadway: here, from the depths of our poverty, without your resources of high-salaried stars, and publicity men, and hundred-thousand-dollar budgets and all the rest of the rhinestone-studded machine, working against all the odds of class prejudice and the skepticism of bourgeois critics, the struggling revolutionary theatre has matched you technically?[2]

The leftist critics, however, despite their belief that Stevedore was the apotheosis of all their dreams of a revolutionary drama, or perhaps because it was just that, could not refrain from elucidating on some of its weaknesses. The leftists offered their criticism in a spirit of collaboration, to strengthen the work and give constructive advice to future playwrights contributing to revolutionary theatre. Stevedore was impressive, but it was only a stepping stone toward the Hamlet of the movement. Such criticism was part of the unending dialogue, often erudite and visionary but at times strident, petty, and trivial, that sought to define an aesthetic for the revolutionary theatre. The basic problem which playwrights and critics had to contend with, as some of the "bourgeois" critics had noted, too, was not to permit ideology to mutilate the drama. Most revolutionary playwrights were revolutionaries, first, and playwrights, second. Because the message was so important, the author, would bend and twist the action into bare schematized structures

---

[1]"Stevedore," p. 13.

[2]"Stevedore," p. 28.

and the characters into Marxist puppets. The challenge for the revolutionary playwright was to "integrate a profound and complex Weltanshauung with character and situation," with the emphasis on the word integrate; to create a play where the message is grafted onto the medium and not ostentaciously hovering above it.[1] The leftist critics chided the freshman playwrights of the movement, as the "bourgeois" critics did, to synthesize ideology and treatment into an organic unity, but they tempered their chiding with lavish, ingratiating ego stroking.

Stevedore, it was felt, was guilty of excesses in this vein. The chief flaw was the inclusion of set speeches, delivered mostly by Lonnie and Lem. Gold, though he blasted John Mason Brown, could not help but paraphrase the "enemy's" judgment that the authors deliver their message with unnecessary deliberateness:

> Stevedore is crowded with those set "propaganda" speeches that are really a technical blunder, in any playwright's play. It is not the content of these speeches that one objects to, but the fact that they are not worked into the action skillfully enough. We are just beginning to learn things in America, and one of the things a crystallizing Marxist criticism of literature is teaching us is that the dialectics of action and imagery are the tools of literature, and not the "idealistic" speeches that are superimposed like decorations; in other words, the structure must be functional, it must teach its own moral. . . . Stevedore has this structure, but did not seem to trust in itself or the intelligence of its audience sufficiently, at various points.[2]

Harold Edgar identifies this same weakness when he urges the playwrights to trim speeches that become tautological when they reiterate ideas that are already cogently expressed in the action.[3] Other comments on the

---

[1]Blankfort and Buchwald, "Social Trends," p. 133.

[2]"Stevedore", p. 29.

[3]"Negro Longshoremen," p. 5.

play's structural deficiencies include Jack Shapiro's wish, referred to earlier, that the first two scenes be eliminated because they delay the action; John Lyman's complaint that the play is inordinantly laced with the old-fashioned contrivances of theartical melodrama (i.e., pistol shots in the dark, hair-breath escapes, and hysterial death-bed scenes) which make its "spirit of revolt seem at times superimposed by the authors rather than coming inevitably from within the characters and the situations themselves"; and Claire Sifton who finds the "picturesque wake" dispensible padding which interrupts the play's dramatic thrust, impeding the flow toward the climactic battle and mitigating the meaning of Lonnie's death.[1]

Another of the play's defects which these critics pointed out is one which effects the meaning of the play, its political thrust--over-simplification. John Gassner, sounding like the critics who disparaged the marine resuce, persuasively argues that the easy joining of black and white workers constitutes an "unjustifiable over simplification." At the core of Stevedore is the coalition of black and white workers, but by arbitrarily engineering this amalgamation the play merely states what it should dramatize. Gassner refuses to take this alliance on the authors' say-so preferring instead to have a "fully realized presentation of how the masses of white workers overcame their prejudices to the extent of coming to the resuce of the beseiged stevedores."[2] Because the authors manipulate the situation, they fail to penetrate the essence of the

---

[1]"Stevedore," p. 13; "Stevedores and Saints," p. 148; "A Play Against Lynching," ILD Press Service, 21 April 1934. p. 7.

[2]"A Playreader on Playwrights," New Theatre, 1 October 1934, pp. 10-11

question they raise, even hazard falsifying it. Joseph Shipley points out that because Stevedore takes the easy route with characterization it can mislead the audience about the real problems and the real solutions. This play, he observes, falls into the trap of many social plays when it caricatures the antipathetic characters, making of them dyed-in-the-wool villains. Shipley wants to see authors showing that:

> . . . they, too, are the product and the victims of their environment Then we should have no deep-eyed villans, but a scene in which all elements are the inevitable result of a system; therefore we should work not against the individual villains, but the system which makes them inevitalbe. Which means education instead of shotguns.[1]

Late in the run of Stevedore, yet another complaint was lodged against it from the left. The question was nothing less than the political substance of the play. John Howard Lawson, beginning with the premise that the yardstick for determining the effectiveness of revolutionary drama is "its ability to force partisanship upon the audience," measured the success of Stevedore (and Peace on Earth and They Shall Not Die). His conclusion was that Stevedore, though rating hihg on the political effectiveness scale, was ultimately inadequate because it lacked the political specificity that would, indeed, force partisanship. Lawson held that audiences, even worker audiences, inherently wish to "evade the emotional impact of the class struggle." To countermand this proclivity the playwright must, "in strictly dramatic terms," spoonfeed the audience with every particle of political pablum: "it seems to me that the necessity of being specific in regard to party and political questions is the first obligation of the revolutionary writer; the propaganda effect of his work depends on his ability to grapple . . . with the detailed reality of economics and

---

[1]"Theatre Union Wins Again," New Leader, 5 May 1934.

politics."[1] Thus, in Stevedore there should be no question about the identity of the white stevedores' union. What union were these men affiliated with? Because of the authors' vagueness, some might suspect, as indeed some did, that the union herewith represented was an American Federation of Labor union.[2] Lawson asserts that questions concerning the complexion of the union are "the very blood and bones of the play." By focusing on the critical issues, the playwright would succeed in making his conclusions inescapable. He should shortcircuit the purely humanitarian responses audience would prefer to have, and replace these with clear, crisp political responses.

This allegation of political equivocation elicited a firm response from the Theatre Union. Lawson's comments were viewed by the Executive Board not as a criticism of Stevedore but rather as a challenge to the United Front policies of their theatre. Lawson, an avowed Communist, was instructing them to have their plays follow the party line. Liston Oak replied. He declared that the Theatre Union was faithfully dedicated to a non-sectarian, United Front policy. It was committed to dramatizing social problems and solutions that could be espoused by all platforms of the left. Most importantly, its functions was to be a theatre not a political party. Its plays, Peace on Earth and Stevedore, dealt boldly and without vagueness with the struggle of the workers and the relationship of class forces: "Political accuracy and ideological clarity

---

[1]John Howard Lawson, "Straight From the Shoulder," New Theatre, November 1934, p. 11.

[2]Anne Holtz, "Race and Labor Issues in New Play 'Stevedore,'" World Telegram, 7 May 1934.

does not necessitate specific organizational labels. Both Theatre Union plays have this clarity, neither is guilty of the charge of 'literary romanticism' nor of vague humanitarianism, mysticism and liberal sentimentality."[1] Finally, he asked Lawson to accept the fact that a play is a play and not a political essay. Its scope, because of its nature is perforce limited. This play focuses on the need for black and white solidarity, not on the fight against the reactionary conservatism of the American Federation of Labor.

Oak and the Executive Board should have had very little to worry about. They had already received accolades from Mike Gold and Jack Shapiro acclaiming Stevedore for its revolutionary plainness and limpidity. Furthermore, unbeknownst to the Board at that time, Stevedore was to become one of the classics of American Socialist Realism and a model for that style of drama which was quickly adopted by all workers' theatres when the agit-prop was once and for all invalidated.

In America, the term Socialist Realism was not regularly used in literary criticism until the fall of 1935.[2] In the Soviet Union, however, it was fast becoming the official technique for literature and drama, originiating as early as April 1932, when the Union of Soviet Writers replaced the outmoded Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. By August 1934, its theoretical tenets were so well established that the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers issued an edict, proclaiming

---

[1]Liston Oak, "Theatre Union Replies," New Theatre, November 1934, p. 12.

[2]Rideout, Radical Novel, p. 316.

the meaning and purpose of Socialist Realism and endorsing it as the only appropriate style for proletarian writers. It said in part,

> Socialist realism, being the basic method of Soviet literature and criticism, requires from the artists truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, truth and histroical completeness of artistic representation must be combined with the task of ideological transformation and education of the working man in the spirit of Socialism.[1]

Socialist Realism was an attempt to cloak revolutionary literature with a mantle of theoretical certitude and respectability. It also served, crucial from the Central Committee's point of view, to harness the imagination of the artist to the objectives of the revolution. With a clearly defined set of precepts, the methods and goals of literature could be monitored and enforced. Deviations would be readily identified as counter-revolutionary and could be censured quickly.

The first prerequisite of Socialist Realism is its purpose--to stimulate, enhance, and direct the movement toward Communist Socialism. As Abram Tertz put it many years later, Socialist Realism is a totally teleological art.[2] It is as "audience-tropic" as a television commerical. It is evangelical. Everything about it, all aspects of its form and content, is designed to convert the reader, auditor, or spectator to the spirit of Socialism. It achieves this end by borrowing the method of psychological realism, or bourgeois realism as its advocates preferred to call it, but altering its axis of concentration. The focus should be on the inevitable outcome of the historical process. Much like psychological realism, Socialist Realism insists on a concrete, photographic

---

[1]Cited by Oscar G. Brackett and Robert R. Findlay, Century of Innovation: A History of European and American Theatre and Drama Since 1870 (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973), pp. 341-42.

[2]On Socialist Realism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1960), p. 25.

rendition of reality. It differs in its demand that the artist penetrate the "real laws of nature" that determine the historical process. History, as Marx postulated, is in a state of perpetual flux. It heaves and adjusts itself under the stresses and counter-stresses of the class struggle. The world is unavoidably in a state of dialectical crisis which will resolve itself with the triumph of the proletariat. It is incumbent upon the artist to observe such conflicts and struggles, to explain, chart, and participate in the dialectical cross-currents of human history. Where bourgeois realism, "the art of the classes which have stopped and desire to stop the development of society," is content merely to interpret the world, Socialist Realism endeavors to remake it.[1] One is static, the other is dynamic. At the center of this dynamic world is the new hero, the positive hero. Leonid Leonov, the first writer to be awarded the Lenin prize, saw the protagonist of the Socialist Realism document as "a peak of humanity from whose height the future can be seen."[2] This ideological colossus is imbued with the conviction, determination, and courage to lead the masses. He is keenly conscious of the social forces which motivate the individual and, whether he realizes it or acknowledges it at the outset of the story, he is destined to be the instrument of historical inevitability. A. V. Lunacharsky, the first Commisar of Education of the Soviet Republic, tersely explains in one of the earliest English-language explications

---

[1]A. V. Lunacharsky, "Problems of Style in Socialist Art," International Theatre 5 (1933): 4.

[2]Tertz, Socialist Realism, p. 148 .

of Socialist Realism the qualities the positive hero must display:

> Socialist Realism . . . portrays (must portray) the creative subject as a living part of reality, as a definitely triumphant subject which may be destined to go through a torturing struggle and suffer serious partial defeats that will be followed by certain victory. Hence the cheerful readiness to struggl, the couragious tone, the clear understanding of reality and the definite program.[1]

In this summary, Lunacharsky also alludes to the last important ingredient of Socialist Realism. The work should conclude with the fact or the implication of triumph. History is moving toward the supremacy of the working masses, and it would be false to show the workers as helpless and defeated. The hero may die, the strike may be lost, but these are temporary set backs. The play or novel must suggest victory at some time in the not to distant future and the establishment of a classless society.

As Morgan Himelstein stated, Socialist Realism, though it was touted as a new literary genre, was, in fact, a refurbishment of traditional melodrama decked out in the overalls of revolutionary ideology.[2] Both are didactic and purposeful. One urges moral probity, the other insists on the virtues of socialist philosophy. Both envision a magnetic world split by positive and negative forces that dictate an us-against-them ethic. In the former it was the good guys against the bad guys, in the latter the hero-villain dichotomy is transmitted through the struggle between the workers and the bosses. Both melodrama and Socialist Realism rely for their effect on the concatination of stirring events. In melodrama

---

[1] Lunacharsky, "Problems of Style," p. 4.

[2] "Theory and Performance in the Depression Theatre," Modern Drama 14 (February 1972): 430-31.

the spectators are swallowed up in the swift race of incidents that describe the arc of the power struggle between the two sturdy adversaries. The Socialist Realist drama is characterized by the same emphasis on the chronology of events to the point were it, too, will periodically punctuate the action with instructive, expressive tableaux. Each engages the audience emotionally, seeking to reinforce its lesson as much through the heart as through the mind. Finally, both insist on the triumph of virtue, whether it be the stiff-collared virtues of Victorian morality or the crimson colored vitrues of the Communist revolution.

Stevedore exemplifies the attributes of Socialist Realism. It is historically accurate; first, because it bases its depiction of the class struggle on verifiably accurate facts, second, its form is graphically real. There is hardly a false note in the play. The only departure from Socialist Realism is the inclusion of hymn-singing at the wake. One carping critic stated that the Negro spirituals in the play were a sentimental nod to a mythical tradition, thrown in to "catch the fancy of the upperclass."[1] Stevedore, of course has its positive hero who, as noted, assumes a messianic stature. The play's didactic speeches leave little doubt about its revolutionary purpose, and the ending, filled with the promise of a positive future, confirms the message.

By September 1934, motivated as much by the conciliatory spirit of the United Front as by the dramaturgical recommendations of Moscow, the American workers' theatre, through its official voice, New Theatre Magazine, called for repudiation of the agit-prop form and the old

---

[1]Eugene Gordon, "From 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' to 'Stevedore,'" New Theatre, July 1935, p. 23.

aversion toward borrowing anything remotely related to the bourgeois art of Broadway, encouraging the revolutionary playwright to use the skin and bones of bourgeois realism but to transfuse it with the blood of Marxist Socialism; to move, in short, toward Socialist Realism:

> There is a call for work cast in the already established theatrical forms. . . .
>
> The day of cliche and mechanical statement has gone by for the workers' theatre. The brilliant polemic of Lenin may be intensely dramatic to the writer, but is so much Esperanto to the worker who wants that polemic presented in terms of flesh and blood--not to mention a little thunder. An animated symbolic pantomine in a whirl of top-hats and red-front fists punctuated with appropriate slogans, may clearly illustrate to the intellectual the theory of surplus value, but the worker would prefer a vivid dialogue between a worker and a boss in terms of cash and cabbages. The class struggle has many channels and facets. A prevailing monotony apparently assumes that a worker has no life outside his place of work . . . <u>This theatre calls for characters that breath, in situations that are real.</u> As compared to the bourgeois theatre, which stresses its "liberty of action" but forbids as a matter of course even the mention of nearly every serious thing, the workers' theatre offers the writer freedom of vision and form.[1]

The Theatre Union, independently, had already begun just that. In succeeding productions it perfected this style, prompting Mike Gold to say, "Dynamic socialist realism, applied to the American scene--this seems to me the natural line of the Theatre Union."[2]

If the litmus test of a socialist realist drawn is the reaction of the audience, <u>Stevedore</u> was a bona-fide success. Night after night, as numerous critics testified, the performances ended to unabated, thun-

---

[1]"Send Us Scripts," <u>New Theatre</u>, September 1934, p. 26.

[2]"Change the World," <u>Daily Worker</u>, 6 December 1935, p. 9.

derous applause.[1] Just as Socialist Realism has the character of melodrama, the audience's response to it had the flavor of the rafters-shaking, old-time blood and thunder plays. The integrated audience at the Civic Repertory Theatre roared with approval at Lonnie's tough, hortatory utterance, jeered the temporary gains of the villains, and was whipped up into a state of delirious excitement at the frenzied finale. The theatre had the appearance of a revival meeting. The wooden floors of the balcony resounded with the thumping of shoes, the air was filled with hoots, catcalls, and cheers. Stevedore, Richard Lockridge claimed, based on the vociferous shouting and handclapping in the auditorium, was less a play than an "emotional experience."[2] It is almost as if the onlookers were taking part in it," observed another critic, "as if the forbidding barrier of the footlights had been magically removed. You wouldn't be surprised to see an embattled onlooker leap up on the stage and help those downtrodden Negroes defend their homes."[3] That, of course, was precisely the point. The aim of the play was to enlarge the spectator's revolutionary consciousness. If the play could get him to stand up and denounce the treachery of the bosses or recognize the determination of the worker portrayed in the drama he would then be prepared to defend his rights in the world outside of the theatre. The

---

[1]Edgar, "Negro Longshoremen," p. 5; Garland, "Exciting Play," 19 April 1934; Mantle, "Drama of Docks," 19 April 1934; Bolton, "'Stevedore' Docks," 20 April 1934; "Trouble Down at the Docks Portrayed," Literary Digest, 5 May 1934, pp. 23, 38.

[2]"Race Conflict," p. 22.

[3]Garland, "Violent Vitality," 23 April 1934.

play was designed to serve as both an object lesson and a pep-talk. The revolutionary playwright wanted to involve the audience--as does any playwright--and also to activate him, to make him do something. When he leaves the theatre he should not just be thinking about the ramification of the drama he witnessed, he should be prepared to take definite action.

In this theatre the audience becomes a dynamic factor in judging the merits of the play. In a series of three essays in New Theatre entitled "Facing the Audience," Michael Blankfort tried to elucidate the role of the audience and its mode of responding to the play so as to better understand the mechanism of a revolutionary play. Blankfort dug into the psychology of the audience--his background prompting his inclination to weave connections between psychology, aesthetics, and Marxist philosophy. He found that the nub of the theatre's appeal is in its ability to satisfy the conscious and unconscious "wishes" of the audience. An individual goes to a theatre performance because of a wish:

> When John Jones goes into the theater to forget, or to remember, or to made other than he is, he is expressing some sort of wish . . . he and the myriad personalities which compose the audience have this [wish] in common; they have a wish to see themselves as they were, or as they would like to be . . .[1]

Such wishes may be either personal, internal conflicts, conflicts with other individuals or conflicts within society. Though the conflicts may give the appearance of being psychological or mystical, they are rooted in socio-economic conditions and class biases, asserts Blankfort. When John Jones becomes overwhelmed by these conflicts, he turns to the theatre

---

[1]Michael Blankfort, "Facing the Audience," New Theatre, June 1934, p. 11.

to give him either a nostalgic those-were-the-good-old-days view of the past or a salubrious, hopeful prophecy for the future. He wishes, in other words to escape from the "disgust and weariness" of the present. The bourgeois theatre, Blankfort notes, has devised three methods of satisfying John Jones's wishes, each of which allows the spectator to eschew social reality. To explain these, Blankfort borrows the terminology of classical psychology. One way, "sublimation," involves forgetting the real conflicts by exchanging them for fantasy conflicts which have no connection with the way man lives in the real world. "Purgation," another mode of wish-fullfilment, subdues Mr. Jones's anxieties temporarily by ending the play with a release of emotional energy which exhausts him (i.e., the ancient concept of catharsis). Lastly, with "consolation" the bourgeois theatre offers Mr. Jones a picture of a fictitious utopian world and tells him this could be yours, go on, persevere and good fortune will smile upon you. Jones leave the theatre secure and re-assured.[1] Blankfort demonstrates how bourgeois theatre arouses the spectator emotionally only to release that emotion either through purgation, sublimation, or consolation. He maintains, furthermore, that by serving such mild analgesics, such temporary sedatives, the theatre perpetuates the bourgeois culture of the status quo. The theatre becomes a vehicle for imposing the power of the ruling class.[2] Social plays must take another route, he asserts. Social plays are guided by the wish fulfillment needs of the worker; proletarians are motivated bo

---

[1]Michael Blankfort, "Facing the Audience," New Theatre, July-August 1934, p. 14.

[2]Ibid., p. 15.

attend the theatre to satisfy anxieties just like the bourgeoisie. But while the bourgeois theatre arouses emotions only to embalm them, the revolutionary playwright must end his drama with a "call to action." He must channel Mr. Jones's emotional energy toward an implementable program of action. Blankfort emphasizes, and this is a significant indication of the degree to which realism (Socialist Realism, of course,) had supplanted the old agit-prop, that the effectiveness of the call to action is contingent on the author's ability to engender a bond of identification between the spectator and the characters and situation of the play. Identification is the key to emotional stimulation, which in turn, determines the effectiveness of the call to action. If the characters and situations are realistically portrayed in terms of the spectator's experiences and expectations, he will identify with the characters, which Blankfort defines as "living in the characters."[1] He will respond to the call to action. In this aesthetic, Bullough's concept of aesthetic distance is summarily rejected: "There is no place for 'psychic distance' in a revolutionary esthetic. If it were possible, the whole audience ought to be aroused enough to jump on to the stage."[2]

In fact, such an arousal occurred at one performance of Stevedore. As the besieged black dock workers were hurling bricks at Mitch's gang, a dapper gentleman, wearing brown and white shoes and dressed in the latest fashionable clothes, leapt out of his seat, dashed behind the barricade, and began flinging bricks. The man turned out to be Bill

---

[1]Blankfort, "Facing the Audience," November 1934, p. 25.

[2]Ibid.

"Bojangles" Robinson. He took a curtain call with the cast and in a short speech to the audience he explained that his action was impulsive and that he could not help himself.[1] Not all spectators were as demonstrative or uninhibited as Robinson, but Stevedore's call to action generally elicited the desired response. Audiences would gasp audibly when the battle began. One playgoer observed that the audience, forgetting that this was a play, would rise as a body when the white reinforcements arrived and chant in unison, "Give it to 'em! Kill 'em!" When the curtain came down, everyone would fall limply into their seats, hoarse from shouting.[2] At other performances the applause would continue undiminished for some time after the curtain fell, or the audience would show they heard the message by singing "The Internationale."[3] Joseph Wood Krutch, explaining the play's impact, astutely states:

> If "Stevedore" is uncommonly effective both as melodrama and as propaganda, the reason probably is that it sticks with uncommon persistence to a single purpose--which is to inflame the passions of its audience and to sweep that audience forward on a wave of fighting hate. . . . [The authors] business, like the business of any mob leaders, is to get the crowd going somewhere, and "Stevedore" becomes an incitement to riot of the first order.[4]

Again, as with Peace on Earth, most of the audiences were

---

[1]George Ross, "Bill Robinson Takes Impromptu Part in Brick Hurling Scene at 'Stevedore,'" World Telegram, 28 June 1934; Gordon, 14 July 1978; Peters, 20 August, 1978.

[2]Clipping, Source Unidentified, Stevedore Scrapbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Wilella Waldorf, Evening Post 5 July 1934.

[4]"Drama on Barricades", p. 516.

Stevedore opened, guaranteeing it at least a five week run. Of these, thirty-five groups had bought blocks of seats for Peace on Earth After opening night, Sylvia Regan and her staff could hardly keep up with the demand for block bookings. Within ten days another thirty groups had booked benefits, and by 14 May a total of 124 theatre parties had registered to see Stevedore.[1] The character of the groups was similar to that of the groups which came to see the Theatre Union's inaugural production. There were radical political organizations, unions and workers clubs, fraternal orders, students and alumni associations, and reading circles. Most came from New York City and the metropolitan area. Some even commuted from distant cities like Providence, Boston, Scranton, Bridgeport, and Newark. From Philadelphia, sponsored by the local branch of the International Labor Defence, a battered truck brought twenty-eight indigent, unemployed blacks to Fourteenth Street. Gladys Heath, the secretary of that Internation Labor Defense branch, thanked the Theatre Union for producing the militant play and reported that the production spurred excited discussions among the membership, drawing into focus "the vital factors of the class struggle as we, Negroes, must need to know it today."[2]

Like the International Labor Defense group from the City of Brotherly Love, many political groups and labor organizers bought blocks of tickets to Theatre Union productions in order to radicalize its membership. Instead of pleading and cajoling, union organizers would send

---

[1]Larkin, "Building Audience," p. 26.

[2]Gladys Heath, "Truck From Philadelphia to Bring Workers to see 'Stevedore,'" Daily Worker, 5 May 1934.

reluctant workers to see the play and let the Theatre Union convert them to unionism. At union meetings, after viewing the play, the political issues involved (the war in Peace on Earth and racial equality in Stevedore) were examined and analysed.[1] Stevedore, for example induced waterfront workers to join a union.[2] Before and after curtain time, the sidewalks of the Civic Repertory Theatre attracted an army of "unkempt pamphleteers" who hawked papers and leaflets in seven different languages.[3] On occasion, the political temperature inside the theatre rose for reasons other than the play. On 10 May, the mothers of four of the Scottsboro boys and Ruby Bates (one of the plaintiffs in the case who retracted her accusations) were the honored guests of the Theatre Union. Whey they were introduced, the celebrities were greeted to ten curtain calls and wild, unrestrained applause accompanied by a chorus of "The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die" which began in the galleries and spread rapidly through the entire theatre. When the furor subsided, Paul Peters and William L. Patterson, the National Secretary of the Internation Labor Defense, addressed the audience.[4]

The same promotional practices that were developed for Peace on Earth were employed with increased effectiveness for Stevedore.

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]Larkin, "Building Audience," p. 26.

[3]Rowland Field, "'Stevedore' in Three Acts, Ten Scenes, Offered at Civic Repertory," Brooklyn Times Union, 19 April 1934.

[4]"'Stevedore' Crowd Lauds Four Scottsboro Mothers," Afro American, 19 May 1934.

Speakers were sent to unions and cultural groups. Peters and Blankfort, for instance, spoke at the Labor Temple on 18 May on the subject of Stevedore and the Negro Problem."[1] Speeches from the stage on behalf of the Theatre Union, like the one Millicent Green was observed giving in July, became habitual.[2] The radio broadcasts on WEVD were continued. Programs included a reading of Firetrap, a one-act play, on 22 April; an evening of spirituals and Negro work songs sung by Georgette Harvey and Ray Yeates on 6 May; a talk on the workers' theatre movement in America by Lee Simonson the next Sunday night; and a program of work songs performed by the The Stevedore Singers (six members of the Stevedore cast) on 20 May.[3] The additional box offices throughout the city were maintained and, to encourage blacks to attend, a special box office was opened in Harlem at Lowenstein's Drug Store at Seventh Avenue and 135th Street. A courtesy bus for Harlem patrons was considered, but was not implemented.[4] Finally, Margaret Larkin, the Theatre Union's indefatigable press representative, collected and published reams of positive endorsements from eminent political, literary, and theatrical people, and with Stevedore, she was even able to use blurbs from an array of newspaper critics. Among those whose

---

[1]Post, 18 May 1934.

[2]Journal, 6 July 1934.

[3]American, 21 April 1934; Post, 5 May 1934; Bronx Home News, 12 May 1934; Mirror, 19 May 1934.

[4]Clipping, Source Unidentified, Stevedore Scrapbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

opinions were cited were James Ford, the Communist candidate for vice-president; Clarence Hathaway, the Editor of the Daily Worker; Angelo Herndon; William L. Patterson; writers like Erskine Caldwell, Sidney Howard, John Dos Passos, Elmer Rice, Carl Ven Vechten, Anita Block, and Bennet Cerf; and, most significantly, black leaders like Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, James Huber, director of the Urban league, and W. H. Davis, president of The Amsterdam News; and black artists like Ethel Waters, Rose McClendon, Hall Johnson, Bill Robinson, and Countee Cullen. Even Groucho Marx hopped on the bandwagon. In a monent of uncharacteristic sobriety, he told Emanuel Eisenberg, "Look at the whole business down South. The Negroes have been submitting passively to abuse for almost two hundred years. Fighting is the only thing that can change the situation; fight and protest . . . [Stevedore] is without question the best propaganda play I've seen in my life."[1]

Stevedore was a box office hit in Broadway terms. The New York Times said, "'Stevedore' has become one of the city's hits. They are selling out down at the Civic Repertory Theatre, and customers are standing at many performances. There is some talk of moving it uptown."[2] The cash register rang continuously. After six weeks, the Theatre Union proudly announced that Stevedore was "off the nut." It had paid back the $4,654.68 in production costs and showed a profit of $3,205.41.[3]

---

[1] Daily Worker, 23 May 1934.

[2] 29 April 1934.

[3] Financial Report, 1933-34.

For the first time, but alas for the last time, the Theatre Union was able to keep its promise to the actors to distribute half the profits. $1,600 was disbursed to the actors according to the prominence of their roles, with only the extras not sharing the bonus. The balance of the profits was placed in a sinking fund for the theatre.[1] Because Stevedore continued to show profits weekly--one week 8,782 people attended the play, the highest attendance figure the Theatre Union ever recorded--the Theatre Union announced at its 100th performance on 13 July that it would continue to run indefinitely instead of closing on the 14th (because of the summer heat) as was previously announced. A new summer benefit policy was instituted extending group rate to parties of twenty or more.[2] Within two weeks, however, Stevedore did succumb to the heat. After losing nearly $1,000 in that time, it closed on 28 July 1934 after 111 performances. With $64,081.81 in gross box office receipts, Stevedore netted $2,451.33 in total profits.[3]

At the end of its first season, the Theatre Union had $5,820.23 in the bank, a sum comprised of gifts and the Stevedore profits, enough to get it going the next season.[4] But more, much more had been proven. A professional worker's theatre, producing social plays with a workers' viewpoint was not part of America's theatrical terrain. The Theatre Union was a force to be reckoned with.

---

[1] New York Times, 22 May 1934; Harald Tribune, 22 May 1934.

[2] Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3] Financial Report, 1933-34.

[4] Ibid.

The "bourgeois critics" had even admired the Theatre Union's professional quality, and had nominated Stevedore as one of the best plays of the season.[1] As far as Michael Gold was concerned, the Theatre Union was the centerpiece of the workers' theatre movement:

> The streak of shoddy liberalism that stultified such fellow-travelers' ventures as the New Playwrights' Theatre is absent from this organization, also the groping amateurism that hung like a doleful curse over many of the first worker's theatre groups and blighted their sincere will-to-revolutionary-drama.[2]

Granville Hicks summarized the Theatre Unions' contribution to the culture of the left, assessing the strides made in revolutionary literature:

> The drama has made the most startling advance. The amorphous rebelliousness of the New Playwrights has yielded to the strong, clear-cut, revolutionary intelligence and discipline of the Theatre Union, depending for its support not on the whims of dilettantes but on the eager enthusiasm of workers and their organizations. Founded in 1933, the Theatre Union not merely achieved popular backing in 1934, but demonstrated maturity in authorship, directing and acting. The eloquent but confused Peace on Earth was followed by Stevedore, rich in its conception of character, firmly integrated in construction and method, and revolutionary in its understanding of social forces. Melodrama, the bourgeois critics called it, unable to deny the effectiveness of Peters' and Sklar's writing and Blankfort's directing, but they could point to no distortion of character or event for the sake of sensation. The term was their unconscious tribute to an alive and exciting play.[3]

If the Theatre Union continued to find, nurture, and produce "alive and exciting" plays like Stevedore, its future was assured. It was a hard goal to live up to.

---

[1]Robert Garland, "Poll of Twelve Critics Reveal," World Telegram, 9 June 1934.

[2]"Stevedore, p. 28.

[3]"Revolutionary Literature of 1934," New Masses, 1 January 1935. p. 36.

CHAPTER V

THE SECOND SEASON:

THE SAILORS OF CATTARO AND BLACK PIT

Stevedore was so well received that the Board decided, when it closed the play in July, to revive the production in the fall for a limited run. It also decided to expand the theatre's workers' audience by taking the highly acclaimed drama, after it had been refitted in New York, on a tour of several eastern and mid-western cities, and perhaps even traveling with it to the west coast. The big question was what new play would the theatre produce in the second season? Shortly before Stevedore was put into rehearsal, the Theatre Union announced that its next production would be chosen from the following list: To Make My Bread, The Third Parade, Viva Pancho, The Fourteenth Street Revue, and The Sailors of Cattaro.[1]

The first play was an adaptation by Albert Bein of Grace Lumpkin's strike novel of the same name. It came to the Theatre Union in the form of a rough draft in the early summer of 1933 probably through Hammond who had produced Bein's drama about conditions in reform schools, Little Ol' Boy, on 24 April 1933. In mid-March 1934, Bein was busy preparing final drafts of the play for the Theatre Union.[2] There was little chance that The Third Parade, whose theme, now that the New Deal was taking hold,

---

[1] New York Times, 7 March 1934.

[2] Clipping, source unidentified, 14 March 1934, Peace on Earth Scrapbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

was passe, would ever be produced. It was mentioned only to pad the list. Viva Pancho was written by the Theatre Union's star actor from Peace on Earth, Robert Keith. Besides his ten years of experience on the Broadway stage, the versatile Keith was an aspiring playwright and screenwriter. In 1927, his first play, Tightwad, was produced by Lee Shubert. Between 1927 and 1933, he wrote some scenarios for Universal's massive film factory. Occasional Sinning, another stage drama, was taken as far as an out-of-town try-out by Brock Pemberton in 1932 and Singapore, his next play, ran for twenty-four performances in November 1932.[1] Viva Pancho was a weak play about Mexico's agrarian problems. The Theatre Union optioned it for $195, with the intention, no doubt, of having Keith revise it.[2] The Fourteenth Street Revue was a satirical musical revue that Peters and Sklar were planning, to demonstrate that humor, too, can be used as a class weapon. The project was only in the conceptual stage at that time, with serious work not beginning until late spring once Stevedore was well on its way. The last play mentioned, The Sailors of Cattaro, was also on the Theatre Union dockets in its early gestation period. The play, which gives a Marxist interpretation of the mutiny of Austrian sailors during the first World War, was supposed to have been directed by Blankfort at the aborted summer camp session in Abingdon, Virginia. The play strongly appealed to the Executive Board. Wolf, with six plays already produced, was one of the foremost German playwrights of the time. He was a Communist whose credentials in the left were unimpeachable. The Sailors of Cattaro, originally produced by the Berlin Volksbuehne in 1930, played throughout Germany and in numerous European

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Financial Report, 1933-34.

capitals. It won the Kleist Prize in Germany and it was honored with an array of prizes in Moscow. In America, the Theatre Guild took an option on it in 1931, but decided against a production. In April 1933, the Theatre Union acquired the rights to the play.[1] During its first season, the Theatre Union incurred $126 in advance expenses on the play and would have been the first to give the play an English-language production, anticipating England's Left Theatre which premiered the play in April 1934, if it had not been for some confusion over rights.[2] The play reached the Board through Peters whose friend, Keene Wallis, the author of Bands and Rebels, gave it to him (in 1933) when he heard that the Theatre Union was being formed. Wallis had translated the play almost by accident. One fine spring day in 1932 he descended into the cool chambers of the New York Public Library in search of a play he could translate. He was looking for a German version of a Russian play. He found none, but scanning though the repertory of the Berlin People's Theatre he chanced upon The Sailors of Cattaro. He worked on it for several months than put it aside until he could find a suitable theatre. The Executive Board, which had been reading Dr. Mamlock's Escape, liked The Sailors of Cattaro very much and was about to prepare it for production when it discovered that Wallis had never secured Wolf's permission to do the translation. In a flutter, the Board cabled to Wolf in Germany, but the half-Jewish playwright had fled the Hilter regime and left no forwarding address. When they finally traced him to Paris, where he gave his consent, it was too late to go ahead with production plans since they had committed themselves to Stevedore in the interim. The muddle about the rights

---

[1] New York Times, 21 April 1933. [2] Financial Report, 1933-34.

to the play did not end here. When the Board resumed serious comtemplation of the play, Keene Wallis had disappeared without giving the Theatre Union authorization to use his translation. Eventually, he was located in Washington D.C., absorbed in a new narrative poem. He gave his permission and the way was clear.[1]

There were several factors favoring the play as the Theatre Union's third production, but the most important was the fact that the play was not written by a member of the Theatre Union. The Board did not want to appear to be a close-knit coterie producing only its own dramas. Though many of the Executive Board members were playwrights and did organize the theatre so that they could have their plays done, they also wanted the Theatre Union to serve as an incentive for others to write social plays. They repeatedly stressed the point:

> Our first two plays were written especially for the Theatre Union by members of our own group, but this does not mean that we intend to produce only plays that we ourselves write. We believe that the existence of the Theatre Union will stimulate the writing of social plays that make no compromise for Broadway box-offices; that deal boldly and honestly with the problems of today; that are dynamic and militant in intent.[2]

The Sailors of Cattaro fit the bill perfectly. It was a strong revolutionary play with a crisp Leninist line, written by a playwright with a wide, well-respected reputation. Its subject matter, its style, and its message would add a tantalizing pinch of diversity to the Theatre Union's repertory. Furthermore, it was a reasonably "safe" play. With the theatre's precarious finances, where a bad play might be its last, The Sailors of Cattaro had the benefit of a long list of previously successful productions.

---

[1]"A Playwright Who Disappeared," Sun, 25 January 1935.

[2]Margaret Larkin, "'Problem' Plays Theatre Union Policy," Villager, 7 June 1934.

Everyone on the Board voted in favor of it. Even Fox, Friedman, and Wolfson, the Socialists, eagerly participated in the consensus for it despite the fact that Wolf was an avowed Communist and the play took a hardnosed, Communist political tone, a tone, in fact, which harkened back to the bristling militancy of the Third Period.[1]

Though The Sailors of Cattaro was not yet confirmed as the next production, the Board took two steps in the early summer which indicated a strong commitment. First, Blankfort was asked to adapt the play. Wallis was not a dramatist. His translation was a rough draft which needed some tightening up. Blankfort, whose interests were shifting from directing to playwriting, worked on the structure and the characterization, providing clearer development for some of Wolf's schematic characters, even modifying the motivation of the central character.[2] Next, Charles and Adelaide Walker went to Europe, sailing for London on 5 July 1934 aboard the S. S. Berengaria, to confer with Wolf about the play. The purpose of their trip was actually three-fold, taking them to three European capitals. The first stop was London where they spoke to Mrs. Paul Robeson concerning the possibility of a West End production of Stevedore with her husband taking the leading role. The Robesons were interested. On 8 August 1934, having received word from Walker, the Theatre Union conveyed to the Robesons its delight about the prospects of an immediate London production with such a highly esteemed performer.[3] Their delight

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978; Wolfson, 22 June 1978; Maltz, 15 July 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

[3]Theatre Union to Mrs. Robeson, 8 August 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

was premature for in October Robeson cabled that other commitments made it necessary for him to postpone the production until April (1935).[1] Next stop for the Walkers was Berlin where they sought to enlist the directional services of Erwin Piscator for The Sailors of Cattaro. They were unsuccessful. There is no indication they ever even met with Piscator. The final leg of the voyage took the Theatre Union's roving ambassadors to Moscow where Wolf had established residence. Walker apprised him of the Theatre Union's strong desire to produce his play and they discussed the work. Their conferences were amiable, with Walker and Wolf becoming close friends as a result, Walker hosting Wolf when the latter visited New York the next year. While in Moscow, Walker also spoke with Sergei Eisenstein about a film version of Stevedore. The great film director, who was actually more interested in Gertude Stein's Four Saints in Three Acts, agreed to direct the play, but was side-tracked from the project when Stalin insisted that Alexander Nevski was more germane to Russian revolutionary art than was Lonnie Thompson.[2]

With The Sailors of Cattaro more or less confirmed as the third production, the Theatre Union prepared the revival of Stevedore. As an appetizer, part of the cast, including Jack Carter, Edna Thomas, and Leigh Whipper, did a one week engagement, beginning 17 August 1934, at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. They played the wake scene in conjunction with a stage revue called "Holiday in Harlem".[3] On 3 September, re-

---

[1]Paul Robeson to Theatre Union, 22 October 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Walker, 9 September 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978; George Ross, "Theatre Union Oils Its Propaganda Machine to Present 'Stevedore' in New Run," World Telegram, 14 September 1934.

[3]Post, 17 August 1934.

hearsals for the reopening began. Michael Gordon, who had served as Blankfort's assistant director, took charge of the production. There were thirteen replacements in the cast, the most significant being Abie Mitchell, Canada Lee, and Juanita Hall who took over the roles created by Georgette Harvey, Rex Ingram, and Susie Sutton, respectively. Gordon remounted the production with only minor modifications in the staging. Apart from making the necessary adjustments in interpretation to fit the new actors in the cast, he restaged the wake scene, "mirror-imaging" it. He applied one of the techniques he had picked up from Alexander Dean at Yale and had one of the leading characters make an entrance from the other side, forcing the group congregated in the attic to turn suddenly enmass giving the scene greater force.[1] The critic from the Daily Worker picked up some additional revisions in the staging, remarking, "The changes in the direction have given some of the play's high spots a more subdued and consequently more intense pitch, as for example, the scene in which Lonnie Thompson is dragged by his friends from his hiding place under the wharf."[2]

Stevedore's reopening on 1 October 1934 coincided with an impending marine workers' strike and union organizers were urged to bring the rank and file to the play since the production could serve as a means of "welding the unity" of the workers.[3] Even the New York Times greeted the revival with a warm embrace: "For a month, and perhaps longer, those who missed last April's liveliest theatrical bomb may make up for their

---

[1]Gordon, 17 July 1978.

[2]Philip Sterling, "Stirring Labor Play 'Stevedore' Reopens at Civic," Daily Worker, 4 October 1934, p. 5.

[3]Ibid.

negligence. For those who did see it then, its stormy and tearing rhythms are here again to be recaptured."[1] The audience for Stevedore was not yet exhausted. Workers and Broadway regulars returned to Fourteenth Street. In four weeks the box office brought in a profit of $4,075.58, enough to cover all but $154.03 of the reopening production costs.[2] With demand so high, and because arrangements for the road tour had run into some snags, the Theatre Union extended the run of the return engagement through November.[3] The next four weeks, however, were a little slower. Of these, the first three showed a combined net loss of $678 and the last showed a net profit of $1,161.61. Because of the profits of this last week the total net profit for the reopening came to $329.57.[4] When Stevedore closed on 24 November, after an additional sixty-four performances, it had accumulated a total of 175 performances. In its 23 week run in New York, over 200,000 people saw the play; an amazing track record for a social play and for a theatre organization which had the experience of only one previous play.

By October, no definite decision had yet been made on the third production. A brief item in the New York Times on 7 October stated only that the Board will give Charles Walker a week to revise his play Crazy American. If he does not finish in that time, The Sailors of Cattaro would be the next production.[5] The Theatre Union had officially ac-

---

[1] J. K. H., "'Stevedore' Reopens in Fourteenth Street," New York Times, 2 October 1934, p. 18.

[2] Financial Report, 1934-35.

[3] Clipping, source unidentified, 24 October 1934, Stevedore Scrapbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[4] Financial Report, 1934-35. [5] New York Times, 7 October 1934.

quired Walker's play in August and during the summer it had been considered as another possibility for the second season's opener.[1] Walker wrote the play in 1932. Through his friend Edmund Wilson, he had submitted it to the Group Theatre. Harold Clurman was intrigued by the play and its story, "a realistic parable of America's quandry in the early thirties," about a youthful, imaginative inventor whose useful invention is neglected and buried by the barons of industry. Despite its flaws—"It wasn't an altogether clear play; the writing had an elusive nervous quality as if in constant flight from a fixed point"—Clurman promised Walker that after some reworking which they would do together Crazy American would open the Group's 1932-33 season. Walker left for a trip around the country. When he returned, he had reconsidered Clurman's offer and withdrew the play, giving it instead to Henry Potter to try-out at Southampton and perhaps take to Broadway. Walker explained to Clurman that the Group Theatre was neither fish nor foul; it had neither the advantages of a commercial theatre nor was it "a real revolutionary theatre" for which he might be willing to make some sacrifices.[2] Another factor in his decision was the Group's casting policy in which they insisted on putting only members of their own company in the leading roles. Walker wanted wider latitude.[3] The play was eventually presented by the Hampton Players on 20 July 1932 and ran for two weeks at Southampton and one-night stands at East Hampton, West Hampton, and Quogue.[4] Afterwards, Potter returned

---

[1] Post, 13 August 1934; Theatre Union Prospectus [Summer 1934] Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2] Clurman, Fervent Years, p. 83. [3] Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[4] "Second Play Opens at Southampton," New York Times, 21 July 1932; Program of Crazy American, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

the play to Walker. When Walker proffered it to the Theatre Union, after having revised it some, he inadvertently forced the Board into a deep artistic and personal predicament. On the one hand, many on the Board thought the central idea, the theme, even the title were superb. But, on the other hand, the play just did not cohere. The cognizance of all that Charles Walker had done and was doing to make the Theatre Union a reality made the decision to reject the play all the more painful. As much as the Board strongly wished it could accept Walker's play, it realized that, in its present form, the play was not solid and would inevitably be a flop.[1] Needless to say, Walker never met his October 15th deadline, and The Sailors of Cattaro became the next production.

As the first non-Theatre Union author the Board chose to produce, Wolf's play could not have been bettered. Wolf was the exemplary revolutionary playwright. His stormy life reflected a growing awareness and concern for the plight of the workers. His plays, natural accretions from his experiences, were bold, well-crafted mainfestations of his leftist ideology. Wolf was born in Stuttgart in 1888. His father was a merchant and his mother was a descendant of a wealthy, deep-rooted family from Freckenhorst. At the age of eleven, anxious to assert his independence, Wolf ran away from home. Possessed of a youthful infatuation with the sea, he spent four years working as a cabin boy on a ship plying a route between Rotterdam and England. Retrieved by his parents to Stuttgart, he studied art briefly before turning his attention to medicine. he became a doctor in 1912 and resumed his life on the sea by serving as a ship' surgeon. These were to be his last placid years, for with the

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978; Maltz, 15 July 1978.

outbreak of war in Europe, his life was destined to become enmeshed in momentous events. He joined the army in 1914 as a battalion physician and he was himself wounded and shellshocked several times. Though he was five times decorated for valour, he began to harbor a violent resentment toward war and its insane butchery. In March 1918, he acted on his growing pacifist beliefs and refused to serve the Kaiser's army any further. He was immediately court-martialed and dispatched to an insane asylum, gaining his release only though the intervention of friends.[1] By this time, war weariness had spread from the front and the factories to the population as a whole. In September 1918, Wolf joined the Independent Social Democrats. As a member of this party and its executive committee, Wolf took part in the so-called November Revolution, the culmination of the peace movement occasioned by the sudden collapse of the German army. Wolf's post-war political activism was brought to an abrupt end 15 January 1919 with his arrest when government forces brutally supressed the Spartacist uprising and murdered Rosa Luxemborg and Karl Liebknecht. Upon his release, as part of a general amnesty, Wolf departed for Remschied in the coal-rich Rhine Ruhr. There he was elected city physician. Specializing in pediatrics, he established five municipal clinics for the care of the infants of the indigent coal workers.[2]

In March 1920, Wolf was again drawn into the whirlwind of events, this time nearly losing his life. On 11 March, disgusted with the concessions of the Weimar government at Versailles and emboldened by the

---

[1]Bosley Crowther, "Dr. Friedrich Wolf—Bad News to Hitler," New York Times, 24 March 1935, sec. 7, p. 1; Morris Groce, "Friedrich Wolf: Exiled German Worker and Brilliant Revolutionary Dramatists," Daily Worker, 7 December 1934.

[2]Ibid.

government's reliance on them to squash the insurrestionist left, the military and industrial leaders made a rash bid to regain their power. Under the leadership of Wolfgang Kapp, one of the founders of the nationalist Vaterlandspartei, a rightist militia marched through the Brandenburg Gate and proclaimed control. The coup lasted one week before it was toppled by workers in Berlin who in an unprecedented demonstration of solidarity paralyzed the insurgent government with a one hundred percent effective strike. In the Ruhr, pitched battles were fought against the Fascists. On 17 March, one day before the Kapp Putsch was terminated, Wolf, who fought on the barricades along with the unorganized workers, was captured and summarily sentenced to be shot. The next morning, the workers staged violent demonstrations outside the jail where Wolf was being held and managed to secure his release.[1]

From Remschied, the itinerant Wolf moved to a rural commune near Bremen. This was a Communist inspired experimental settlement headed by the painter Heinrich Voegler, designed to rehabilitate disillusioned war veterans. The erstwhile soldiers built a colony themselves and worked the land. Wolf was assigned to dig peat. He lived there for a year and a half before the government withdrew its subsidy forcing the settlement to close. Wolf spent the next few years as a physician among the weavers and farmers in the mountains of Wuertenberg. By 1928 he was back in Stuttgart, practicing medicine and participating in the local labor movement.[2] By this time, Wolf had, as Piscator said of him, attained "a political maturity."[3] He had fought beside the workers against the in-

---

[1]Crowther, "Wolf," p. 1 [2]Ibid.

[3]Erwin Piscator, "The Work of Friedrich Wolf," New Masses, 11 June 1935, p. 23.

sidious encroachment of Fascism, he had witnessed the workers' hardships, and he had come to realize that the help the workers needed extended beyond immediate medical attention. Sometime prior to his return to Stuttgart he joined the Communist Party.

By this time, too, Wolf had written one novel (Creatures), a book on physical therapy, and four plays. His first play, This is You, was first produced in 1919 at the Dresden State Theatre. It is a play in the expressionistic mode dealing with the lamentable circumstances of wounded young army recruits dying in a military hospital (much like the one Wolf served in in Dresden) because of inadequate facilities and meager supplies.[1] His second play, Black Sun, also produced in Dresden, was a slight comedy with music. These early works were useful etudes which provided Wolf with the craftsmanship he was later to apply to his work once he gained his "political maturity."

In his next play, Poor Conrad, Wolf abandoned the formalism of expressionism and turned instead to realism, his own special brand of realism which he would use and develop through his succeeding works. First presented at the People's Theatre in Berlin, Poor Conrad is a historical play dramatizing the peasants' rebellion of 1514. It was written while Wolf lived in the Wuertenberg region, the location of the revolt. According to Piscator, the drama describes history "along the lines set down by Engels" and in no other play "do we find any such clear analysis of social lines of force."[2] The play's appearance, in fact, followed the publication of Friedrich Engels's monograph "The German Peasant Revolt."[3] Wolf's reputation grew with his fourth play, Kolone Hund, his

---

[1]Crowther, "Wolf," p. 1. [2]Piscator, "Wolf," p. 23.

[3]Groce, "Wolf," 7 December 1934.

first major success, produced in Hamburg in 1926. The play grew out of his sojourn at the veterans' commune and it describes the futility of establishing such cooperative settlements.[1]

Wolf's next play, Cyankali, written in 1929 and his greatest success, again brought him into difficulty with the government for it precipitated his third arrest. The play concerns the tragic death of a young girl following an illicit abortion. The play advocated a sound birth control program and the repeal of the state's anti-abortion laws. The play may have grown from the lingering memories of the destitute workers of Remshied, burdened by large families they could not support.[2] In November 1931, Wolf was arrested and charged with performing illegal abortions. The major piece of evidence presented against him was Cyankali. The frame-up was proof of his effectiveness as a proletarian writer. The Sailors of Cattaro had been presented in 1930 (playing in Berlin, Dresden, and Munich) so that his plays, combined with his novels and stories, had earned him a place high on the Nazi's hit list. Again workers rallied to his defense, mounting mass protests which forced the government to back down. Upon his release, Wolf stopped practicing medicine altogether and devoted himself exclusively to the workers' theatre movement. He helped organize an agit-prop theatre company, Troupe Southwest, which toured the southern provinces of Germany. For this group, Wolf wrote revue sketches with such titles as "How is it on the Front?", "From New York to Shanghai," and "Farmer Baetz."[3] The latter, dealing with the farmer peasants of Baden and Swabia, was later extended into a full

---

[1]Richard Pack, "Dramatist in Exile," New Theatre, December 1934, p. 5.

[2]Ibid. [3]Ibid.

length play which shows the unorganized efforts made by the abused farmers of the region to resist the authorities and survive.[1] Within weeks of Hitler's coming into power, Wolf's works were officially banned and his property was confiscated. Being both a Jew and an active Communist he was in double jeopardy. In April 1933, his position became untenable and he fled his homeland for Moscow where he was greeted in the streets by cheering workers chanting the optimistic epigraph from The Sailors of Cattaro, "Comrades, the next time better."[2]

What vexed the Nazis was Wolf's outspokenness and his popularity. He had become the leading proponent of the form of dramatic realism which came to be known as Zeitstueck, the timely play. Prevalent in the Germany of the late twenties and early thirties, the Zeitstueck sought to examine contemporary issues by depicting topical events from post-war German life. The intention was not simply to document history but rather to interpret, analyze, and probe actual occurences. In an article entitled "Dramatizing Out Times," Wolf outlined for American readers the aims of the Zeitstueck. A play's responsibilty, he contends, "must primarily be an interpretation of the historical situation of the Western world."[3] For historical situation, read political actualities. It is the playwright's duty to present the facts of tomorrow's history in such a way that the audience will perceive the forces at work in molding this history. This demands that the drama should not be a mere journalistic account of an event but rather a distillation of its essential truths. Wolf argues that the playwright can take the liberty to depart from his-

---

[1] Piscator, "Wolf," p. 23. [2] Pack, "Exile," p. 5.

[3] New Theatre, February 1934, p. 24.

torical naturalism in order to get at these truths:

> The dramatist can and must shape historical raw material. He must leave out, bring together, condense. He must analyze personalities. This is his poetic freedom allowed by the laws of the stage. But through the medium of poetic license historical situations must never be falsified, emphasis must never be misplaced. Historical connections and the perspectives must at all time be correctly presented.[1]

In this regard, Wolf offers Shakespeare's Julius Caesar as the model Zeitstueck. The confrontation between Caesar and Brutus in the murder scene, though it is historically inaccurate, "epitomizes the historical reality in accordance with the laws of drama."[2] By rearranging the facts, Shakespeare explains the event in dramatic terms. He may be unfaithful to the preceise history, but he is not unfaithful to its significance.

The common criticism of the Zeitstueck was that it lacked objectivity, that the proximity to an event strangled the capacity to perceive it truthfully. Furthermore, how is it possible to interpret the meaning of an event before one could be certain of its conclusion. Wolf himself poses the question, "Can [the playwright] venture to begin the performance while the burning beams are still glowing, and smoke still clouds the eye?" But he glides over it as a problem that should spur the dramatist rather tham stymie him: "We need not discuss here this claim to objectivity and neutrality. . . . At no time must the dramatist surrender to this difficulty, especially now when the historical present is pregnant with the upheavals of tomorrow."[3] This imperative gives the Zeitstueck, especially Wolf's, an urgent, throbbing quality. The event is bounded by the insight of the artist and, reciprocally, the artist's understanding and temperament are conditioned by the event. Piscator

---

[1]Ibid. [2]Ibid. [3]Ibid.

noted this phenomenon and has remarked on the autobiographical character of Wolf's plays.[1] Wolf himself acknowledged the connection between his life and his work, stressing not only the need for involvement (engagement, Sartre might say), but also how this involvement benefits the verisimilitude of the play:

> I believe that a realistic dramatist should not touch any material which he does not master completely and in the minutest detail. In all my plays, starting with Poor Conrad and going through Kolonne Hund, Bauer Baetz, Mamlock, Cyankali, Sailors of Cattaro up until Floridsdorf, I have always experienced the material of my plays myself, have spent years experiencing the material.[2]

It was out of this personal involvement with history, in fact, that The Sailors of Cattaro emerged. Wolf, as we noted, had a boyhood fascination with the sea. Though this experience gave color and veracity to the dialogue, characterization, and action of the play it was not the motivating force behind it. The core of this play lay in his experience in Remchied and his participation in the left's struggle to assume control in the early days of the Weimer Republic. Wolf considered the play a "historical parable of the revolution," using the dismal episode at Cattaro allegorically in order to examine the difficulties of the Ruhr battles under the nose of the Hindenberg government. Referring to the triumph of the workers over the Fascists in 1920, Wolf said,

> But this victory was not the decisive factor. The most difficult battle began after the victory, when it was necessary to substantiate this victory ideologically, when it was necessary to "go to the end," as Lenin expressed it. And here, in the historical analysis on the situation of the western proletariat of 1920—in self-criticiam and with perspective—was the motive for the "Sailors." In the question

---

[1] Piscator, "Wolf," p. 24.

[2] Friedrich Wolf, "Weshalb Schrieb Ich 'Die Matrosen von Cattaro,'" in Aufsaetze Ueber Theater: Ausgewaehlte Werke in Einzelausgaben, Herausgegeben von Else Wolf Und Dr. Walther Pollatschek, vol. 13, (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1957), p. 336.

> which occupied our minds day and night: Why did we lose the victory of November 1918, despite the heroic battles of the Berlin proletariat on the Marstall and Neukoelln, why did we lose the victory of 1920 in the Ruhrgebiet; why did we lose later in 1921 and 1923 in Beuna and Hamburg? Because despite all of our victories and heroic battles we lacked the political leadership, because the German proletariat was thrown back and forth between the reform-minded SPD and the factions of the left, because not until after 1928 did the German Communist Party, under Thaelmann's leadership, become a Bolshevistic party.[1]

The German proletariat, Wolf contends, suffered the same deficiencies as the sailors in the Bay of Cattaro. They organized committees and debated whether or not to attack or to wait: whether or not to join forces with the moderate Socialists. Those who demanded decisive, immediate action were reviled as provocateurs. In the end the workers lost control, betrayed by the moderates, compromised by their own vacillation. The play, then, was intended as an admonitory statement about the practices and pitfalls of revolution. Once ignited, the fires of a revolution must be stoked or the still smoldering smoke will smother the rebels. Lenin's statement on the subject, which Wolf used in the preface of the German edition of the play, encapsulates the play's message: "You can't play with revolution. Once it starts you've got to follow it through to the end."[2] The November Revolution failed, just like the mutiny at Cattaro, because of a woeful lack of an all-or-nothing resolve.

The allegorical framework of the play closely adheres to the actual event. As part of his research Wolf scoured the records of the court-martial proceedings and interviewed some of the sailors and officers of the ships involved. Wolf used the real names of the four leaders of the mutiny--Franz Rasch, Anton Grabar, Jerko Sisgoric, Mate

---

[1] Ibid., pp. 366-367.

[2] Friedrich Wolf, The Sailors of Cattaro, adapted by Michael Blankfort (New York: Samuel French, 1935), p. vi.

Bernicevic—all of whom were found guilty of violating military code and were executed, despite having received written guarantees of amnesty one week after the revolt was suppressed. The grievances claimed by the sailors were explicitly woven into the fabric of the play. A note in the Theatre Union program, excerpting the court-martial record, transcribes the primary complaints of the mutineers:

a) complete disregard by the officers for the wants and need of the crew;
b) bad food for the men; fine food for the officers;
c) resentment on the part of the crews because the provisions which belong to them were directed to the use of the officers;
d) insufficient clothing;
e) excessive punishments for light breaches of discipline;
f) insufficient shore leave; most of the sailors have been in service six to eight years; families are ill-provided for;
g) no right of petition or method for airing grievances.[1]

These issues were either dramatized in the action or referred to in the dialogue.

The play begins in the crews' quarters of the battleship Saint George. The sailors are discontented and edgy. Browbeaten by the officers and tormented by their own loneliness, they are testy toward one another. A few speak quietly of skipping ship. They are waiting for Franz Rasch, the stout boatswain, to return from shore leave. Just as tempers reach a peak, Rasch enters with news. The workers of Vienna and Trieste are planning a general strike for 1 February to protest the continuation of the war and the government's persistent imperialistic policies. The sailors, Rasch insists, who are after all only workers with guns, must demonstrate their solidarity with their organized comrades on shore by initiating a strike for peace on the same day. The crew agrees and they draw up a manifesto enumerating their demands: immediate

---

[1]Program for The Sailors of Cattaro, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

overtures for peace, representation during the peace nogotiations, eight hour day in the factories, release of political prisoners, identical rations for officers and enlisted men, and self-governance with regard to punishment, leaves, food, and clothing.[1] Determined about their cause and content with their demands, they adopt the slogan "Stick it out" as their motto. Without warning, the iron-chinned Lieutenant marches into their quarters. He reproves the men for not eating their "perfectly good food." They bridle at his sharp commands. Bred in the severe traditions of Prussian military protocol, the Lieutenant chides Rasch for allowing so much laxity among the men. He is about to leave when he discovers the workers' newspaper on the floor. For this breach of discipline they are punished with two weeks extra duty chipping rust.

In the next few days, as the men labor on the decks of the Saint George, the mutiny advances. The crews of the other cruisers and destroyers berthed in the bay review and sign the manifesto. On 1 February, timed to coincide with the workers' action, the mutiny occurs. Rasch strides into the chart room with a guard detail. Toni Grabar is to be taken to the brig in the fortress on shore. The day before, during a frisking, a copy of the manifesto was discovered in his possession. He ate the portion of the paper which contained the signatures and he refused to divulge the names of his confederates. The Lieutenant hands Rasch ropes to bind the prisoner's hands. Rasch hurls the ropes out the porthole and orders the guard detail to take the Lieutenant into custody. The red flag is hoisted and the ship is taken virtually without bloodshed. Instantly, the rebellion spreads to the other ships as one after the other raises the red flag. But the success of the action, as

---

[1]Wolf, Sailors, pp. 19-21.

Stonawski (the aviation pilot and Rasch's right hand) confirms, hinges on uniting the Cattaro fleet with the Pola fleet, thus paralyzing the entire navy. Rasch knows this to be true, but because he wants a peaceful, democratic rebellion, he decides that the Sailors' Council should decide the next step. As the representatives of the Council gather on board the Saint George, the thumping rhythms of "The Marseillaise" are heard throughout the bay as the jubilant sailors rejoice in their easy victory.

The next morning, the fleet is still in the bay. The Council has decided to do nothing until radio contact was made with Pola. Meanwhile, the pressures mount, gradually chipping away at the strength of the rebellion. First, the destroyer Czepel breaks ranks, attempting to defect. Next, the men, their homesickness piqued, lose sight of the long-term mission of the rebellion, wanting instead to abandon ship and return home. Then, the land batteries, manned now by "men the officers can rely on," opens fire on the Rudolf. Rasch, a born leader, cleverly counters or diffuses each of these threats to the rebellion. Again the Sailor's Council is convened. The ante has been raised. Rasch is certain he can persuade the men that remaining in the harbor will turn yesterday's victory into a disastrous debacle. Again the sailors wrangle and debate, putting self-interest before the goals of peace and solidarity. The question of sailing for Pola remains deadlocked. A deputation from the land commander delivers an untimatum demanding the cessation of the mutiny and the restoration of order. Rasch dismisses the ultimatum and urges the men to take a stand. Kuddel Huck, a rambunctious, doltish, loud-mouthed sailor, is self-appointed spokesman for the opposition and Rasch's foil. He tells the men to forget the rebellion and muster out otherwise there will be a rout of the fleet and they will all end up at

the bottom of the bay. Rasch prevails, however, and the Captain is brought up to be informed of the council's strategy. If the battery fires, the officers' cabins on all ships will be turned towards land so that they will receive the brunt of the fusillade. The Captain, however, proves to be a shrewed opponent. He is an unflappable, soft-spoken convert to the theology of phychological manipulation. Assuming an avuncular pose and a righteous tone, the Captian whittles away at the confidence of the men by pointing out the military folly of their reckless adventure. The men are shaken. The rebellion is then dealt a sharper jolt when the Pola fleet finally does arrive, flying not the red flag on its mast but the black war flag. Rasch makes one last effort to sustain the revolt. He orders the Saint George to sail for the mouth of the harbor:

> Sail, comrades, break through! Five minutes more and it's too late. See, comrades, the George made the first move two days ago, and forty ships followed her; the George will defend the red flag now, and forty ships will follow her again. Comrades, 'stick it out'! One more push and we go through, with all of them trailing right along in our wake.[1]

The men, now incapacitated by fear, insist on a council meeting. Rasch submits but he knows all is lost.

The next day, a heavy fog enshrouds the fleet. The men are tense but optimistic about a quick settlement of the stalemate. Another ultimatum is delivered, this one ostensibly more conciliatory, more receptive to the sailors' grievances. The Captain, egged on by the poltroonish Kuddel, patronizingly offers his assurances of an amnesty if the sailors end the mutiny. Rasch bursts out in a final appeal to the men. Now, however, he sounds less like a leader and more like a martyr.

---

[1]Ibid., p. 95.

Sardonically, he disparages the hollowness of the Captain's guarantees. Their surrender now will make the red flag and all it denotes a sham:

> Comrades! The red flag means the beginning of a new world! . . . It may take a very long time. Many blows, many steps, many stages, many mistakes. . . . But for that reason are you going to sit in a cell and wait for a miracle, or go back to the old cooly-drudgery, knuckling under, belly-aching, not daring to strike—<u>for the new world</u>! . . . Cattaro will be a name like Kronstdt, to rouse people of the world to fight for peace and freedom, when there is not a shred of us left. So, comrades, don't let them fog the issue. Keep it clear—and <u>decide it</u>![1]

The sailors are not convinced; they vote in favor of the Captain's "common sense" approach. The red flag is brought down and instantly the ring leaders of the insurrection are clapped into irons and hauled off. All that remains of the revolt is Rasch's terse, optimistic eulogy, "Comrades, the next time—better!"

The central problem of the play is developed in its latter half. Once the revolution wrests power, the play asks, how should it use that power with maximum effectiveness? There is a paradox in the practice of revolution which can extirpate any gains made by it. A revolution is begun in order to relieve a group from the tyranny of a coterie. Yet in order for it to succeed completely it must appropriate the same tyrannical methods it was meant to eliminate. The ends are different but the means are unfortunately the same. A mutiny on a ship demands that the mutineers exercise the same rigid discipline which caused them to mutiny in the first place. Otherwise, their effort is doomed. A rebellion must be a collective endeavor; once the confederation is splintered, the revolution becomes vulnerable.

Rasch falls victim of this paradox. Wolf places the blame for

---

[1]Ibid., p. 106-107.

the failure of the revolt squarely on Rasch's shoulders. His error in judgment leads to the ultimate fiasco. Rasch has the strength of will, the respect of his crew and the political and military acumen that justify his leadership. His failure, however, is his disregard for the paradox. One might even say there is a touch of hubris in his belief that this revolution would be different. Rasch placed his trust and faith in the sailors; the masses would now be given the power to determine their own destiny. During the general euphoria that followed the seizure of the ship, Stonawski, practical and always level-headed, spells out the next natural phase of the rebellion—"Start for Pola right away." Rasch's confident retort is simply, "The Sailors' Council will decide that."[1] He is certain the Council, in its wisdom, will see this necessity.

The Council, however, reads the situation differently. Instead of acting and thinking as a group, instead of advancing their cause, they become stalled with immediate concerns, concerns dictated by self-interest and self-preservation. They easily stray from their original zeal and fall prey to personal desires and small human temptations. The revolution comes to stand for different things. For Toni, a superstitious young puppy who drools with longing at every sight of a photograph of his son Marco, it means an imminent reunion with his family. For Sepp, who is fed up with the navy, it means freedom from the ship. For Alois, consumed with comtempt for his superiors, it is a chance to exact poetic justice on the officers—now they must eat the same beans they forced on the crew. The Sailors' Council becomes a capricious, motley group. They are like children, who, when given their freedom, exercise it foolishly. More accustomed to taking orders rather than giving them, they

---

[1]Ibid., pp. 54-55.

are insecure yet stubborn. Tasting the sweets of freedom they are suspicious of any form of control other than their own. They pigheadedly resist even Rasch's authority, dubbing him "Commandant Rasch" when he tries to impose the hard decisions.

That Rasch's confidence in the Council is a matter of volition is stressed by repeatedly presenting him with a choice. Several times he is forced to decide whether to allow the Council to deliberate or whether to impose autocratic power. It is in delineating this aspect of the action that Blankfort's adaptation makes its most significant departures from the original. The morning after the mutiny, Stonawski reports to Rasch on the radio silence from Pola. Unable to conceal his disagreement with Rasch, he says pointedly, "When a man <u>can</u> act and doesn't he's to blame for what happens." In the colloquy that follows, Stonawski warns his friend about the inadequacies of the council and the danger of procrastination: Rasch is steadfast in his loyalty to the Council:

Stonawski: Yes, I know the Council decided, but what if we never hear from Pola? Does that mean we stay here and surrender?
Rasch: We're not licked. The battle's just begun. But the Council voted. . . .
Stonawski: The <u>sailors</u> voted when they decided to strike. The sailors voted to go through to the end when they hoisted the red flag.
Rasch: You're talking of another kind of vote.
Stonawaki: I'm talking of the only kind of vote that means anything in times like these. We haven't got a real Council. The men were elected hit or miss. Some of us don't see the whole picture; what the strike really means.
Rasch: Gustav, listen to me. I know these men. I've lived and fought with them for four years, and some of them I know longer than that. I'm one of them, Gustav, and they know it. I argued my head off in favor of sailing at once, but I was voted down. The men voted me in command. They trust me. And I can't go against them even though I know they're wrong.
Stonawski: Well, if you know they're wrong, you should take things in your own hands.[1]

---

[1]Ibid., pp. 61-62.

This exchange is new to the English version. It established Rasch's allegiance to the Council despite his better judgment and it introduces Stonawski in the new role Blankfort gives him of being Rasch's confidant and well-intentioned adversary.

After the Czepel is restrained from deserting, Sesan, the sullen, embittered Ensign from the Dalmatians who joins the mutineers because the German officers malign his national origins, reiterates the need to take immediate action: "I tell you, comrades, if we don't get out at once, we'll have the Pola squadron blockading the bay tonight."[1] The land batteries, he states, are now definitely in the hands of loyalist troops who are waiting only for the propitious moment. Rasch's response—wait for the Council delegates to decide. Moments later, the battery does indeed fire. "What do you think is the next thing to do?" asks Sesan. "Keep our heads, persuade the Council to move even if Pola hasn't decided, and co-operate with the Vienna unions and arsenal workers." replies Rasch.[2]

When it is discovered that the radio is jammed, Rasch is given another opportunity to change his mind. Sesan, unscrupulous about engineering the necessary tactic, suggests that Rasch deceive the men into leaving the harbor by telling them that the Pola fleet has joined the movement and is signaling for help. Rasch is outraged: he will not betray the men. Stonawski intervenes with a more forthright recommendation: don't trick the men, just assume control and give the orders. To delay when one knows that action is imperative is a more shameful betrayal than tricking them. Rasch's response is fierce and final: the revolution's aim is "To put a stop to autocratic rule—one wise Goddamned

---

[1]Ibid., p. 68 [2]Ibid., p. 71.

ass commanding and bullying. To fix it so that all who fight shall have a say in what we do. . . . I will not go against the men." Stonawski makes another appeal:

> That's not going against the men, Franz. This way you're playing with their only chance of stopping the war. Let them make decisions about rations and shore leave; let them learn the trade of government as they've learnt the trade of sailoring, but for what we've got to do now minutes count, minutes count. Franz, today we can take all of them with us; but tomorrow half of them will be dropping out—day after tomorrow there won't be—[1]

Democratic theory is fine in peace time but during combat strong leadership is compulsory; one cannot debate under the shadow of the cannons. Stonawski is interrupted by the arrival of the delegates and Rasch leaves, saying only, "The Sailors' Council will decide." Rasch's commitment to the Council is through. Unfortunately, though, it is fatal because of his refusal to discriminate between his ideals and the exigencies of reality. This last scene was also modified in the Blankfort version. In the original, this encounter is between Rasch and Stonawski. Stonawski suggests the deception and then pressures Rasch with an alternate argument.[2] He speaks with two voices. Blankfort splits the disputation between Sesan and Stonawski. This way Stonawski's role remains consistent and is enhanced. Sesan's character, too, is opened up. Being an officer, his military training would prompt such a cunning recommendation. The alteration in the script also works to intensify the pressure on Rasch by forcing a choice. He is presented with two alternatives, deceive the Council or override it. His decision seems more binding.

The play, particularly in Blankfort's adaptation, treats Rasch

---

[1] Ibid., p. 73-74.

[2] Friedrich Wolf, Gesammelte Werke, vol. 3: Die Matrosen Von Cattaro (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1960), pp. 62-64.

with a great deal of compassion. He is no fool and he is certainly not a coward. His loyalty to the Council is seen as a strength not a weakness. Aside from the question of sailing to Pola, when strong action is called for he responds admirably. He can thwart the Czepel's desertion; he can silence the land batteries handily. He can even, when dealing with them in small groups, stir the men out of their defeatist lethargy and inspire them with the promise of revolution. With regard to the Council, however, he is shown to be walking an ethical tightrope. He knows it is wrong, but circumventing it, he believes, would undermine the legitimacy of the revolt. This awareness takes its toll on him emotionally. The stage directions trace the emotional conflict Rasch experiences as he defends a positions he fears. The following examples are drawn from his encounter with Stonawski and Sesan: "Biting his lips," "Sternly," "Violently," Bursts out vehemently," "Viotently to convice himself."[1] Blankfort even expands the sympathy for Rasch with an interpolated scene between Stonawski and Sesan. Stonawski, reacting to Sesan's denunciations of the Council, explains Rasch's position:

> Stonawski: Sailors' Councils are all right, they're necessary; without them this strike for peace doesn't mean anything; it would be like replacing one set of goldstripers with another, but, by God, you can't run a ship without knowing how to make it go.
>
> Sesan: If I had my way, I'd throw the whole Council in irons and order "full steam up."
>
> Stonawski: That's the officer in you, Sesan. No, that isn't the way to do it. In the long run, Franz is right. The only thing he doesn't see is that the sailors, the six thousand of them, voted to go through to the <u>end</u> when they turned their guns on the goldstripers. And he's let a sentimental sense of loyalty to the Council overcome his loyalty to the whole fleet. I'd rather have it his way, though, bad as it is, than yours.[2]

---

[1]Wolf, <u>Sailors</u>, pp. 61, 63, 64, 71, 73. [2]Ibid., pp. 78-79.

Rasch has the right cause and the right method, but paradoxically the two add up to failure. This is a situation, as Stonawski admits, where two rights make a wrong.

Wolf's thesis is that equalitarian ideals have their place after the revolution is over and won, when the masses can be educated concerning the meaning of the revolution. During the revolution itself the workers must be led even if it means imposing a harsh autocratic rule, as obnoxious as this is, since it ultimately will benefit all. Otherwise, the revolt will disintegrate. Indecisiveness, delay, and individual weakness will erode the gains of the initial surge of power. The opposition will win by default, through a process of passive attrition. Wolf's drama, though it is a postmortem of defeat, serves as a prescription for victory. It is intended as a negative lesson. A revolution will secure victory if it eschews certain basic tactical pitfalls.

Aside from the development of Stonawski's character and the changes noted above, Blankfort made few other substantive alterations of the original. The opening scene is modified and expanded some. Wolf opens the play with all the sailors on stage. Blankfort begins the play with Mate Bernicevic, a sailor from the Gaea, sneaking on board the Saint George. He had been sent to get instructions from Rasch. The scene dramatizes and helps stress the fact that unrest is brewing on all the ships. Blankfort then brings the sailors in and uses their entrance to provide some useful exposition about conditions on the ship. As they enter they gripe about the poor rations and the dysentary it causes. From that point on the scene in both versions follows the same course, except that Blankfort adds a few more lines about missed wives and girl friends, and Kuddel is seen as more of an outsider since no one

will play cards with him and he alone bad mouths Rasch. Blankfort's additions are well integrated and serve as prefigurements for the ensuing action.

With the exception of Stonawski and Sesan, Blankfort's modifications of character are minor. They amount to a few added brush strokes which sometimes enhance the drama, sometimes diminish it. Sepp, for example, the despondent veteran who wants only to go AWOL, learns the need for solidarity with the workers when he questions the need for including in their resolution demands relating to the factory workers.[1] Though he later votes against Rasch, his revolutionary consciousness has been raised and Blankfort allows him to scoop up the red flag at the end. The character of Toni, on the other hand, is spoiled somewhat in the translation. Blankfort has Toni pine for his son six times to Wolf's three times.[2] The talk of children and family, which Blankfort emphasizes through Toni, though necessary, becomes overdone. Toni is reduced to caricature with a one track mind. His sudden conversion at the end appears maudlin and bathetic, when it should be poignant and evocative.

Blankfort also shuffles some scenes, placing a few of them at a more appropriate juncture in the action. For instance, Alois's scene in which he complains to Rasch that the officers refuse to eat their beans appears, in Wolf's play, late in scene four when Rasch is hard-pressed to defend the Sailors' Council. Blankfort plants the scene earlier. Alois's trivial concern is meant to be an embarassment to

---

[1] Ibid., p. 19.

[2] Wolf, Sailors, pp. 11, 67, 82, 97, 98, 108; Wolf, Matrosen, pp. 10, 69, 91.

Rasch who has just expressed his faith in the Council. Where Blankfort puts it it serves that function without being obtrusive. Wolf's location for the scene after the more heated confrontation between Rasch and Stonawski makes the message too obvious; it becomes a tendentious manipulation by the playwright.[1] Futhermore, placing it where Wolf does impedes the flow of the action at the conclusion of the scene.

There are some other small additions and omissions, but they do not yield any noteworthy change in the meaning of the play. The only other aspect of the translation that should be mentioned is its language and tone. Several critics commented on the "overly scholastic" quality of the diction.[2] Brooks Atkinson observed, "Sometimes the literary style of Michael Blankfort's adaptation is too cultivated for its melodramatic theme; the impression some of the long speeches make is more collegiate than fo'c'sle."[3] Stanley Burnshaw excuses Blankfort, attributing the scholarly passage to the original.[4] However, a comparison of the two texts reveals that Wolf's dialogue captures the briney coarseness of the sailors whereas Blankfort's dialogue has the false ring of ersatz, stagey ship-talk. Such virtually untranslateable phrases and expletives as "Schnauze," "Schiet und Rotz," "Quatsch," "mistbeinen." "Scheiss auf den Matrosenrat!" bring out the full flavor of the char-

---

[1]Wolf, Matrosen, p. 64.

[2]Robert Garland, "'Sailors of Cattaro' At the Civic Repertory: Melodrama With World War Background is Produced Here by the Theatre Union," World Telegram, 11 December 1934; Kauf., "Sailors of Cattaro," Variety, 18 December 1934.

[3]"'Sailors of Cattaro' by the Theatre Union," New York Times, 11 December 1934, p. 28.

[4]"The Most Important Play in New York," New Masses, 25 December 1934, p. 29.

acters and the ambience.[1]

To direct the production, the Theatre Union chose Michael Gordon. Gordon, whose home was in Baltimore, side-stepped a career in law to study theatre at Yale. While there he met Sklar and Maltz. With a recently aquired MFA, Gordon headed for Broadway. His first job was as a walk-on in an E. Y. Harburg musical revue entitled Walk a Little Faster which opened at the St. James Theatre on 7 December 1932. The next summer, interested more in directing than in acting, he began working at the Theatre Union's Fifth Avenue office. He began his career as stage manager for Peace on Earth then moved on to become assistant director of Stevedore, directing its fall revival and its road company. He was entrusted with The Sailors of Cattaro probably because of the many constructive suggestions he made during the "collective criticism" deliberations on the script. In retrospect, Gordon recalls the production as one of the most creative efforts of his career, having accurately diagnosed the problems of the script and then finding effective remedies to fix them. One recommendation was to divide the play into two acts though the standard at the time was three acts.[2] The original was composed in six discrete scenes, but the cadence of the action fell into two units; Act One culminates with the mutiny and Act Two shows it burning itself out. For Gordon, this reinforced the thrust of the play, bringing into sharper focus both the strength and weakness of the revolt. Another problem that Gordon perceived involved the mutiny itself. The actual usurpation of control, Gordon believed, was limp and inadequate. Rasch defies

---

[1]Wolf, Matrosen, pp. 11, 18, 26, 27.

[2]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

the Lieutenant, throwing the ropes out the porthole then ordering the guard detail to take the Lieutenant to his cabin, while the sailors cheer outside. The problem is compounded by the illogic of a previous scene. Immediately preceding Rasch's entrance a delegation of sailors led by Sepp present the Captain with their grievances. The Captain, suave and urbane, wraps the committee around his finger. They leave, apparently subdued, as the Captain boasts to his subaltern about the advantages of "psychology" over arm-twisting-discipline. Four minutes later, however, the sailors have regained their strength and are actively engaged in the mutiny. The suddenness of the mutiny seemed awkward and psychologically inconsistent. To resolve the latter problem, Gordon reinterpreted the intention of the scene. He instructed the actors to talk to the Captain not as if they were simply begging for redress, but as if they were giving the Captain a last chance.[1] This change of motivation eliminated the senseless flip-flop that is apparent in the script. Gordon then utilized the set design to fortify this scene in theatrical terms and to heighten the drama of Rasch's take-over.

The designer for the production was Mordecai Gorelik. When director and designer conferred, they soon decided that the play demanded a unit setting which synthesized the three locations of the action—crews quarters, foredeck, and chartroom—rather than leaving them as separate entities. Gorelik began by designing each space according to the needs of the action. He explains his method as follows:

> I break up the play into scenes and parts of scenes, and analyze the movements that the actors are going to make. The action and story of "Sailors of Cattaro" told me that in one scene men must sit still talking. In another they seize guns and surprise their officers. In

---

[1] Ibid.

> the first case they need a smallplaying space, in the second they need the full stage. Their act of capturing the ship will take on added theatrical interest if they move up and down from one level to a higher one; for that scene the stage plainly needs to show as much of the ship as possible.[1]

Receiving the functional sketches for the three locales, Gordon asked Gorelik to combine them into a single contruct, a kind of collage. The designer did so. He built a model of the profile of a ship, but had misgivings about the results. "This could never float!" he complained skeptically to Gordon. Gordon assured him that it would only have to put to sea aesthetically, and in that repect it was admirably functional.[2] The design looked like the cross section of a destroyer. The three requisite locales were set on four different levels: the chart room was stage right, the fore deck was down stage in front of it occupying the full width of the stage and the crews quarters were left under a bridge. The chart room and the crews quarters could be masked with a sliding canvas panel which was painted a neutral color so that it appeared to be a wall.[3] Transformations of scenes were accomplished by light changes that could focus attention to some portion of the set or to the whole thing.

In the mutiny scene, Gordon made the entire ship come alive. While the delegation of sailors was petitioning the Captain, eyes were watching all over the ship. The entire crew anxiously awaited the outcome of the fateful interview. The mutiny was under way. The lighting sequestered the chart room from the remainder of the ship, where heads

---

[1]"Praise Offends This Stage Designer," Herald Tribune, 13 January 1935.

[2]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[3]Theatre Union to Contempory Theatre, 7 March 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

could be spotted peaking out from behind a bulkhead or peering from under a cannon. When Howard DaSilva, who played Sepp, walked out of the chart room, he nodded to a sailor at one side. This was the cue. As the Captain boasted to the Lieutenant about his success with the crew, there was continuous, stealthy movement surrounding them. Seen in silhouette, sailors ran to and fro, distributing guns, preparing for the mutiny which took place the moment Rasch threw the ropes out the window.[1] Thus, through a directional change of motivation and through an organic use of the scenery, the mutiny was not just a weakly dramatized concept but was actually staged, the culmination of considerable build-up of energy. In this scene, as in others, Gordon and Gorelik worked as a team to shore up the weaknesses of the script. The fact that the stage designs were an integral part of the production concept is underscored by Gorelik. In response to a request for his ground plans for the play from the Contemporary Theatre of Los Angeles, Gorelik insisted on compensation, saying, "My setting were from the first an integral and important part of the Theatre Union production, they determined the type of action, etc."[2]

One other significant change that Gordon made involved the ending of the play. In the original, Rasch has the last word. He delivers a short sermon, affirming that far from being squelched, the revolution has been ignited by the heroism and courage of the men of the Saint George. "Don't get plucky, Lieutenant," he says, "This is not the end, Lieutenant, this is only the beginning." With these last lines, Wolf intended to

---

[1]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[2]Mordecai Gorelik to Contemporary Theatre, 2 March 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

give a positive tone to the ending. Gordon abridged Rasch's lines and dramatized this point with a concrete dramatic gesture. After Rasch and the other leaders are taken away. Sepp, Alois, and Trulec are left alone with the red flag at their feet. Suddenly, Sepp picks it up, turns to the others and says with vigorous determination, "Comrades, next time better." According to Gordon, "That said more than any ringing speech, 'We will prevail, we will overcome.' That says it, you don't need speeches."[1] There were, nevertheless, some caviling leftist spectators who assumed a doctrinaire posture claiming that the defeat at the end of the play implied defeatism. It took the staunchly revolutionary Nathaniel Buchwald to silence these reservations. He wrote in the Daily Worker that Wolf could not falsify history by providing a fictitous victory, nor should revolutionary playwrights like Wolf restrict themselves to dramatizing only those events where the proletariat succeed. In the first instance he would be coddling his audience with concessions to their sentiment and in the second case he would miss crucial issues. "Sometimes defeat, viewed in historic perspective, may be as inspiring and instructive to the present generation of revolutionists as the victorious moments in the class strugle."[2] Buchwald had, of course, hit on the precise message Wolf intended.

As with previous Theatre Union plays, Gordon insisted on a realistic approach to the production. At the first rehearsal he arranged for a screening of Eisenstein's classic film Potemkin. He hoped that the scenes of the battleship would give the actors a sense of a ship of

---

[1]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[2]Nathaniel Buchwald, "Can 'Sailors of Cattaro' be Called A Defeatist Play?" Daily Worker, 5 February 1935, p. 5.

roughly the same period.[1] Gorelik was even more exacting about the realism of the environment. Though his design was suggestive, he was meticulous in his selection of details. Every area of the ship was appropriate for its inhabitants:

> I consider the people in each scene and what they have to do there. For instance, the chart house on board the St. George is a place for mental action. It belongs to the officers. It has beautiful brass fittings and complicated mechanisms—everything is delicate and sensitive. The rest of the ship, where the men live and the work of fighting goes on, is entirely different. Steel walls, massive machinery dreary, practical color and a sense of lack of consideration for the comfort of the men are needed.[2]

With regard to the "complicated mechanisms" Gorelik insisted on exact items not stage replicas. William Schapp-Kevisch, the properties master, hunted through four nautical shops before he could procure a proper, sea-worthy chronometer. The long, swishy mops which the saolors used to swab the decks were at last tracked down in a South Brooklyn waterfront shop and the large, colored maps that hung on the walls of the chart room were drawn to scale by Herbert Lutz, the stage manager. Altogether, more than one hundred props, like seabags, field glasses, tobacco poaches, rifles, sextants, and harmonicas, were assembled from Army and Navy stores and marine supply shops. The only concession to theatrical illusion were the barrels of sawdust bought in place of pumice which were used to holystone the deck.[3]

The costumes were likewise historically precise. Maryn Myers and her costume crew went to the public library to research the kind of uniforms, stripes, and decorations worn by Austrian sailors of that period.

---

[1]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[2]"Praise Offends." 13 January 1935.

[3]"Salty Sea Plays Tax the Wits of Property Men," Herald Tribune, 30 December 1934.

The sailors uniforms were bought from Battleship Max Cohen in Brooklyn and were then retailored to fit the appropriate specifications. They were then submitted to a process of weathering which involed bleaching and washing in salt water. As a final touch of realism, the firemen's dungarees were coated with oil and soot. The officers uniforms were rented from Eaves Costume Company.[1] All this verisimilitude, though elaborate, did not cost the Theatre Union that much by contemporary standards. The setting, exclusive of designer's fees and stagehands' salaries, totaled $1,983.54, the props expenses were $264.09, and the costumes cost $112.70.[2] But it was well worth the effort and expense for the setting, the props, the costumes in combination with the action evoked a strong sense of the place. Gorelik notes,

> In the case of 'Sailors of Cattaro,' the set contributes in this way, I feel, because the arbitrary cross-section of a ship that I built there leads the audience to imagine the rest of it. They only see a few feet of deck but they accept the presence of other decks, other cabins, other crews quarters, the landing stages, the offstage anchor, the mess halls. So when the whole stage is filled with hurrahing sailors, they feel that hundreds of sailors are doing the same thing in other parts of the battleship. I constructed a piece of stage machinery that actually bears little relation to a battleship, but it fulfills the needs of the play; therefore audiences accept it as a battleship.[3]

The all-male cast of thirteen was supplemented with ten extras drawn from the Theratre Union's Experimental Studio. Among the leads were Fredrick Roland, James McDonald, Robert Reed, Martin Wolfson, Howard DaSilva, George Tobias, and Ernest Gann, all with various degrees of Broadway experience. Four of the actors had performed in previous

---

[1]Theatre Union to Janet Ross, 18 December 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Financial Report, 1934-35.

[3]"Praise Offends," 13 January 1935.

Theatre Union plays. The role of Franz Rasch was originally given to John Litel, an experienced professional who had begun the season in a leading role in the Emmet Lavery drama The First Legion. During the third week of rehearsals, however, Litel was striken with pnuemonia. He was hospitalized for an indefinite period and had to withdraw. Ten days before the scheduled opening it was announced that Tom Powers would replace Litel.[1] Powers (who was an acquaintance of Walker's) had played Charles Marsden in Strange Interlude as well as appearing in such other productions as The Wild Duck, The Apple Cart, He, Mackeral Skies, and The Pure in Heart. He also wrote and directed a melodrama called Bridal Quilt which ran for five performances after it opened 10 October 1934. Physically, he looked the part. During the war he had been a Lieutenant in the British Royal Air Force and his plane had crashed near the North Sea while flying a patrol. He broke his nose, his hip, and both legs in the accident. Afterwards, he had a broken-looking face, what the French call a grille case. Unfortunately for the Theatre Union, Powers was a homosexual. His physical mannerisms, though he tried to disguise them, interfered with his portrayal of the character.[2]

On 16 November 1934, more for the sake of public relations than fund raising, the Theatre Union held its second annual costume ball. The Friday evening celebration at Webster Hall was hailed as a birthday party. It featured the music of the Andrade Orchestra and a "Puppet Parade" with representations of Mae West, Cab Calloway, and "Smokey Joe."[3]

---

[1] Post, 1 December 1934.

[2] Gordon, 14 July 1978; Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[3] Handbill for Ball, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

Among the notables in attendance were such Theatre Union boosters as George S. Kaufman, Moss Hart, Lee Simonson, John Gassner, Anita Block, Paul and Claire Sifton, and Bill Robinson.[1] After expenses were paid, there remained only $129.61 in profit out of the $849.75 in receipts.[2]

In an effort to reduce its production expenses, the Theatre Union ran three preview performances of The Sailors of Cattaro. The first, on 6 December, was attended by various labor and anti-war groups such as the American League Against War and Fascism, the District Youth Committee of the International Workers Order, and the Classroom Teachers Group. The second night the house was split by the New Workers School and the Little Red School House. The last preview was held as a benefit for New Theatre Magazine.[3] The $1,338.62 in income from those three nights cut the total production expenses to $6,822.20.[4]

The Sailors of Cattaro opened on 10 December. On that day The New York Times reported that hostility between Hungary and Yugoslavia following the assassination by Hungarian terrorists of a Slavic dignitary threated the tenuous peace in the Balkans; that the residents of Harlan County, Kentucky, were threatened with military rule unless order was restored; and that the New York State Committee of the Socialist Party forbade its consituents from entering into a United Front with Communists, the action of the National Executive Committee to the contrary. Thus, while war was brewing in Europe and unrest stirred at home, Broadway could claim only three socially relevant plays--Rice's Judgment Day, Hellman's The Childern's Hour, and the Group Theatre's Gold Eagle Guy--

---

[1] Daily Worker, 10 November 1934. [2] Financial Report, 1934-35.

[3] Sun, 6 December 1934. [4] Financial Report, 1934-35.

out of the sixty-seven which were premiered up to this date in December of that season. The critics' dockets for that Monday evening were crowded for besides The Sailors of Cattaro the Theatre Guild opened Maxwell Anderson's pageant of George Washington and the American Revolution, Valley Forge, and Eva Le Gallienne presented Sierra's Cradle Song with herself in the lead.

For the Theatre Union 10 December was a red letter day in another respect as well. To coincide with the opening of The Sailors of Cattaro the Theatre Union could boast that its road company of Stevedore opened at the Garrick Theatre in Philadelphia, that Peace on Earth opened at the Left Theatre in London under the direction of Andre van Gysegham, and that the Maltz/Sklar play was presented on the west coast by the semi-professional workers' theatre group, the Contemporary Players, in Los Angeles.[1]

The verdict from the critics was generally positive. Though most referred to the play's propaganda intent and its melodramatic shadings, they accepted it as a mature, provocative piece of theatre. They were impressed with Wolf's craftsmanship though they could not, or would not be persuaded by his theme. The production was often compared with Stevedore, which was still fresh in the critics' minds, sometimes disparagingly as a slower, more deliberate drama, lacking the emotive verve of its predecessor, sometimes favorable just because it was cooler, more detached, and more balanced in its treatment of character and situation. There was widespread agreement about the overall quality of the production and where its weaknesses lay.

---

[1]"Strength in the Theatre Union," New York Times, 9 December 1934, sec. 10, p. 2.

Though The Sailors of Cattaro was dubbed a melodrama, it was considered a complex one, where the simpleminded hero-villian dichotomy was abjured for a more meaningful treatment. John Mason Brown explained how this approach intensified the impact of the play:

> It may not be as agonizing in its picture of the miseries of the "underdog" as was last year's "Stevedore." Its white actors may be lacking in the sustained excellence of the Negro players who were in that waterfront tract. It may deal with a condition which will seem more remote to the Theatre Union's agitated audiences than did the villanies of the munitions manufacturers which "Peace on Earth" depicted, or the race problem which offered "Stevedore" its theme. But it is much fairer in handling the two sides of the question with which it deals than was either of these plays, and for that very reason it gains considerably in persuasion as well as excitement. . . . It not only shows how hopeless to the cause of revolution are the wrangles of an executive committee of sailors when immediate action is needed but it also permits its pampered officers to behave almost as if they were human beings.[1]

Several other critics concurred with this opinion. Joseph Wood Krutch remarks that the play has "persuasive force" because "Herr Wolf, whatever his own convictions may be and however completely he had identified his mind with theirs, has managed somehow to aviod that dreadful two-dimensional flatness which makes so many plays with a purpose palpable cardboard to anyone not seated on the author's own line of vision." It is for this reason that he finds the play more absorbing and less "rambunctious" than Stevedore.[2] Brooks Atkinson states that

> "Sailors of Cattaro" is only in part a propaganda play. Dr. Wolf writes the second half with the critical detachment of a political strategist who sees where the blunders were made and recognizes the need for decisive leadership. . . . the Theatre Union has dramatic standards as well as political principles. Without pretentiousness or class conscious defiance, it has gone soberly about the job of

---

[1]"The Theatre Union's Production of 'Sailors of Cattaro' Down on Fourteenth Street," Evening Post, 20 December 1934.

[2]Joseph Wood Krutch, "Red—And White and Blue," Nation, 26 December 1934, p. 749.

staging the most trenchant melodrama in town.[1]

Gilbert Gabriel finds the play:

> . . . an interesting and staunch example of the propaganda play at its best--which means, at its most direct, its most persuasive, often --quite incidentally, I suppose--its most picturesque. . . . it is also a play, a genuinely honorable and desirable play, in the strictest and most classic sense of the rule of what a play must be, must do, must shun.[2]

And finally, Richard Lockridge finds The Sailors of Cattaro "not so simply the black and white propaganda favored by the group, it is more thoughtful and varied and should, one suspects, move and stimulate a wider and more varied audience than was captured by last season's "Stevedore.'"[3] Some critics found the "villains" so sympathetically written and protrayed that they were encouraged to identify with them. Grenville Vernon, who liked the production, was enthralled with the Captain:

> Distinguished alike in manner and in mind, utterly contemptuous of death and of the petty vanities and egotistic personal desires of most of the mutineers, he is the only man on the ship who knows where he is going or why. He is the one . . . man who can both think and act. Perhaps that portion of the opening night's audience who looked upon class struggle with religious enthusiasm was angered by this redoubtable figure, but for those who went to see it without preconcieved ideas their salute went to the Captain and not to the mutineers.[4]

And the theatre man from the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, who did not like the play, found in the Captain the only solace for the evening; he was "the most sane and sensible character in the play . . . He caught the sympathy of those not swayed by proletarian passions, and stood out as a figure

---

[1]"Sailors by Union," p. 28.

[2]"The Sailors of Cattaro," American, 11 December 1934.

[3]"The Guild Offers 'Valley Forge'—'Sailors of Cattaro' Opens Downtown," Sun, 11 December 1934.

[4]"Sailors of Cattaro," Commonweal, 21 December 1934, p. 236.

of a gentleman, who laughed at death just as did the nobles of the French Revolution.[1]

Negative votes against the production were prompted largely by its political message. John Anderson continued the ever simmering art-versus-propaganda contoversy when he declared, "It fails, I think, because it tries to present in the theatre a sort of substitute for drama, to wangle in some side target of its own in place of the one any dramatist must shoot at. It is propaganda first and drama afterward." To underscore the point he compared it to Valley Forge which was "drama first and whatever you want to call it afterward."[2] Arthur Ruhl was not as much concerned with priorities. For him The Sailors of Cattaro was unadulterated propaganda for which the only barometer of applause is how high the red flag is flown and with what vehemence if flutters.[3] For Sterling Bowen, though the production was well executed, The Sailors of Cattaro was eclipsed by the much more exciting Stevedore.[4] Other critics who disliked the production offered some construtive advice. Edith Isaacs believed that the Theatre Union had inverted the meaning of the play by misplacing the accent mark in the interpretation: "It is not a play about soft men who fail in a great but happy dream (as the Theatre Union plays it) but of strong men trapped by inexperience and lack of opportunity." Moreover, she opines, The Sailors of Cattaro

---

[1]"Striking Sailors: Peace Propaganda Sounds in 'Sailors of Cattaro,'" Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 11 December 1934.

[2]"'Sailors of Cattaro': Tale of Mutiny in Fleet and Revolution that Failed, Told in Play," Journal, 12 December 1934.

[3]"'Sailors of Cattaro' Friedrich Wolf Play at the Civic Repertory Theatre," Herald Tribune, 11 December 1934.

[4]"The Theatre Union," Wall Street Journal, 12 December 1934.

is a more subtle, demanding play which requires "first class ensemble playing" unlike the more accessible, emotionally appealing Stevedore which could pass with a "fair presentation and a good rhythm."[1] The well intentioned critic from Variety was troubled by the "let down" at the end and he offered to rewrite the conclusion, to spice it with tragic significance, thus making it "good theatre."[2]

The critics gave the Theatre Union high marks on its technical achievement and its sustained theatrical standards. "The Theatre Union," says Robert Garland, "continues to be one of the most significant forces in the American showshop of today. Knowing full well what it is doing, it also knows where it is going."[3] It certainly knew where it was going when it engaged Mordecai Gorelik as its designer. The raves for the scenery were steady and loud:

> Atkinson: Moredcai Gorelik's settings for three battleship scenes are extraordinarily vital in their use of lines and mass.
>
> Brown: The sinister steel outlines and interesting levels of Mordecai Gorelik's battleship setting are extraordinarily skillful in providing the melodrama with backgrounds which are an intrgral part of the action.
>
> Garbiel: The stark vivid architecture of his ship is so excitingly schemed, you almost taste salt-caked metal at first sight of it.
>
> Waldorf: . . . the unit setting designed by Mordecai Gorelik, permitting quick shifts from crew quarters to foredeck to chartroom, is remarkably effective.
>
> E. L. : The really worthwhile thing about this new production is the six scenes designed by Mordecai Gorelik.
>
> Burnshaw: Mordecai Gorelik's single set, used with variation throughout the play, is nothing less than magnificent.

---

[1]Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Ring Out the Old—Sailors of Cattaro," Theatre Arts, February 1935, pp. 100-101.

[2]Kauf., "Sailors," 18 December 1934.

[3]"Melodrama with War Background," 11 December 1934.

Alexander: Mordecai Gorelik's settings, reaching high into space, were impressive as well as highly practical.[1]

Gordon's stage direction was also given its share of praise. Brown said the "direction is quickening in its stress and particularly fluent in its handling of crowds."[2] Vernon liked the feeling of movement and the intensity of mood that Gordon conjured up; "in his evoking of the tortured febrile character of the sailors Irving Gordon proves himself a master director."[3] Stark Young also gave the fledgling director a gold star.[4] Brooks Atkinson no doubt confused Gordon by lauding him for his "centrifugal" direction, an enigmatic plaudit which Robert Garland took the liberty of modifying to "centripetal."[5]

The one element of the production that came in for the harshest treatment from the critics was the acting, particularly the performance of Tom Powers. Whether it was because he was handicapped with a limited amount of rehearsal time or because of his personality, he clearly failed in his portrayal of Franz Rasch. Wilella Waldorf was kind when she said simply, "The role is acted earnestly and occasionally with considerable force by Tom Powers, who does not seem entirely comfortable in the part

---

[1]"Sailors by Union," p. 28; "Sailors on Fourteenth Street," 20 December 1934; "Sailors," 11 December 1934; "'Sailors of Cattaro': Friedrich Wolf's play of Mutiny in the Austrian Battle Fleet is Produced by the Theatre Union," Evening Post, 11 December 1934; "'Sailors of Cattaro' is New Play of Theatre Union," Journal of Commerce, 12 December 1934; "Important Play," p. 29; "Stirring Play of Sailors' Revolt," Daily Worker, 11 December 1934, p. 5.

[2]"Sailors on Fourteenth Street," 20 December 1934.

[3]"Sailors," p. 236.

[4]"Congratulations," New Republic, 2 January 1935 p. 223.

[5]"Sailors by the Union," p. 28; "Melodrama With War Background," 11 December 1934.

as yet, but will probably grow into it as the play goes along."[1] Brown in a follow-up report in the same newspaper observed that Powers had unfortunately not made progress.[2] He was faulted because his voice lacked the "booming power" of a revolutionary and because physically he only "hunched his shoulders, hissed and glowered, and struggled desperately to act like a revolutionary bo'sun."[3] His very conception of the role, we are told, was weak and superficial: "Mr. Powers gave us nothing except the faltering and failure, impersonated nothing from the very beginning but a dyspeptic messiah who couldn't conceivably lead a hornpipe, no less a rebellion."[4] Where Richard Lockridge grudgingly allows that Powers manifested some competence in the later scenes Stark Young dissents, saying that it was at the end that Powers proved to be weakest:

> To this character of Franz Rausch . . . is entrusted a great range of emotional reaction, theory and practical problems. Mr. Powers plays his first scenes well, but does not put concentration and pressure enough into the rest of his performance. At the end of the first third of it he appears to give himself a bouquet and let it go at that. He shows more natural facility than condensed design, his resources and effects are all used up before he gets to his last scene. Towards this scene Mr. Powers' playing should have been a careful and profound graduation, for here we have the final insoluble human tragedy to which this drama's situation, pattern and argument must . . . constantly return.[5]

The rest of the company was often praised for its "convincing" acting,

---

[1]"Play of Mutiny," 11 December 1934.

[2]"Sailors on Fourteenth Street," 20 December 1934.

[3]John Chapman, "'Sailors of Cattaro': Theatre Union Stages Austrian Naval Mutiny," Daily News, 11 December 1934; Ruhl, "Sailors at Civic Repertory," 11 December 1934.

[4]Gabriel, "Sailors," 11 December 1934.

[5]"Guild Offers," 11 December 1934; "Congratuations," p. 223.

its "headlong playing" and its "professional quality."[1] Singled out for particular attention were Frederick Roland, James MacDonald, Harold Johnsrud, and Howard DaSilva.

The reaction from the left press was again strongly supportive, but not without some raised eyebrows and some wagging fingers. The New Leader, ever loyal and unstinting in its devotion to the Theatre Union, gave the production unqualified approval: "'Sailors of Cattaro', without the truculence of the Theatre Union's earlier 'Stevedore,' is fairly free from the stigma of partial or biased presentation, or propaganda, but is a truly dramatic unfolding of a sound point of view illumined by vivid historical illustration."[2] Leon Alexander in the Daily Worker was enamored of the play but hammered away at the Theatre Union's production of it. The direction, he believed, was inadequate. Not only did it fail to sustain the mood from scene to scene, but it failed at the more crucial task of developing a clear line of dramatic tension. The climactic scene of the taking of the ship, he complains, "which should have stirred the whole theatre, fell flat," After the intermission, he continues, the direction disintegrated into a confused blur, so much so that the action was hard to follow.[3] Since no one else expressed difficulty in following the action of the play, it seems likely that what so disconcerted Alexander was not the clarity of the plot, but the clarity of its meaning. In a second review, Alexander am-

---

[1]Burnshaw, "Important Play," p. 29; Atkinson, "Sailors by the Union," p. 28; Burns Mantle, "Tough Going for the Ladies of the Drama," Daily News, 16 December 1934.

[2]"Seeds of Revolution," New Leader, 15 December 1934.

[3]Alexander, "Sailors' Revolt," p. 5.

plifies his views and somewhat withdraws this reservation about the production. He focuses on Powers's misinterpretation of Rasch. Powers, the bourgeois actor, represented Rasch "only as a confused individual in a situation beyond his control." This was an egregious misreading of Wolf's intent, "Franz is a weak vacillating figure. If he fights for leaving the decision in the hands of the Sailors' Council, it is because of his revolutionary faith in the masses. If the masses are defeated it is only a temporary setback." All of the characters, Alexander observes, are not simply individuals, they are "prototypes of their class." they are imbued with a collective class consciousness that moderates and informs their actions. Powers, Alexander is saying, failed to infuse Rasch with any sense of the social forces that molded his behavior, but left him a mere human with attendant foibles and shortcomings. This leaves the play with a defeatist tone which Gordon and Blankfort barely countered with the characters of Stonawski and Sesan. Alexander concludes his analysis with an urgent solicitation to his readers to see the production:

> I did an injustice to the play, having seen it at a rough and unfinished preview. The production by now . . . had lost its ragged edges; the acting and the direction have become surer and more decisive. And Sailors of Cattaro is the most significant of the three plays which the Theatre Union has presented to date.[1]

Significantly, some weeks after the publication of Alexander's review in the Daily Worker, Gold gave his "Change the World" column over to Alfred Hayes, the poet and erstwhile member of the John Reed Club, in an effort to soften Alexander's comments and to help define the relevance for American workers of a European drama about a historical revolt. As a tonic to Alexander's criticism, Hayes delivers a lengthy panegyric of

---

[1]Leon Alexander, "Sailors of Cattaro and Gold Eagle Guy," New Theatre, January 1935, p. 25.

the play, extolling it as "the most important political play as yet produced in America." He compares it to Eisenstein's Potemkin, saying that Wolf's work is better because the working class characters are more vividly delineated. As for its relevance, its sophisticated stagecraft will serve as a model for America's apprentice workers' theatre and its theme illustrates the fundamental universality of working class problems.[1]

Stanley Burnshaw in the New Masses also expressed some reservations about the play and the production at the same time that he found it "engrossing and inspiring." His qualm about the production was minor. Gordon, he affirms, failed to create "the feel of masses of men marshalled in rebellion and collaborating in decisions." A larger cast would have helped to enforce the joys of victory and the menace of frustration. Burnshaw's second reservation is more serious. He is afraid that unpoliticized audiences will be muddled or will have the wrong impression of the "institution of collective decision." He wishes that Stonawski's character had been used to emphasize the fact that all collective bodies are not ineffectual just because this Sailors' Council proves to be so.[2] In a letter to Margaret Larkin, ("offered in the spirit of friendliest cooperation") Burnshaw urged the Theatre Union not to tour the play without first revising the second act, clarifying Stonawski's role to make the implications unequivocal.[3] Larkin politely replied that Blankfort had rewritten Stonawski's character to clarify his line, but that

---

[1]Michael Gold, "Change the World," Daily Worker, 26 December 1934, p. 5.

[2]Burnshaw, "Important Play," p. 28.

[3]Stanley Burnshaw to Margaret Larkin, n.d., Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

he evidently did not sufficiently remove all doubts.[1]

The politically astute theatregoers who were not making a habit of attending the Civic Repertory Theatre greeted the play with guarded enthusiasm. Inside the theatre there was still the cheering and foot-stomping that accompanied the outburst of revolutionary jingism which punctuated the play. Wilella Waldorf reports: "It is scenes like this one, of course, for which the Theatre Union audience has been waiting, and it roared and stamped and shouted and clapped itself exhausted and hoarse."[2] There were also endorsements from former sailors of the Cattaro squadron who attended the play and testified to its accuracy. One erstwhile mutineer who now worked as a waiter in a New York restaurant wrote, "In 1918, I was an enlisted man of the Austrian Battleship Saint Gorege—I was one of the mutineers. Last night I say 'Sailors of Cattaro.' Every incident in the play was acted exactly as it happened sixteen years ago."[3] But there were too few rousing moments in The Sailors of Cattaro and only 300 ex-mutineers from the Austrian squadron living in America. The audience building machinery was pressed into full service. By opening night enough theatre parties had been sold for a guarenteed eight-week run.[4] Pre-opening publicity expenses ran $1,027.12, fifteen percent of the nut, and during the run between $403 and $780 was spent weekly on newspaper ads.[5] Members of the Board and the staff continued

---

[1]Margaret Larkin to Stanley Burnshaw, 24 December 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]"Mutiny in Austrian Battle Fleet," 11 December 1934.

[3]"The Revolutionary Drama," Cue, 20 December 1934.

[4]Notes for Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[5]Financial Report, 1934-35.

to make speeches: Peters gave a talk at the New School on the purpose and activity of the revolutionary theatre and at the Brooklyn Academy on "Art and Fascism"; Sklar recited the history of the Theatre Union for the Dance Club Center, the Dome Center, and the Newark Theatre Collective; and Maryn Meyers brought members of the Studio with her when she told the Cooperative Arts Club about the "Modern Trends in Drama."[1] But all this effort produced disappointing results. The Sailors of Cattaro closed 2 March 1935 after a run of only ninety-five performances. This compares poorly to Stevedore which ran 175 performances, nearly twice as long, and Peace on Earth which ran for a honorable 125 performances. Though it had only one loss week during its twelve week run, the total net profit during the run could not pay for the production expenses. When the show closed it had a net loss of $945.38.[2]

For all of the talk of The Sailors of Cattaro as an anti-war play, as a play that shows the need for workers to unite, and as a polished example of the revolutionary theatre at its best, the Theatre Union could not interest its workers' audience in seeing it. The play confused its audience, not perhaps in the way Burnshaw expected it would, but in a more obvious way. The Sailors of Cattaro was different from its predecessors. It was an even-tempered drama of political analysis, it attenuated the melodrama and demanded a more thoughtful, speculative response. Richard Lockridge put his finger on it the morning after it opened:

I question whether it will make quite so simple and irresistable an

---

[1]Various short clippings, unidentified sources, dated October 1934 to February 1935, Stevedore scrapbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Financial Report, 1934-35.

> appeal to the Theatre Union's special audience as have other plays produced on Fourteenth Street. There will be talk of defeatism and, as was the case Saturday night, some of the more ingenuous will sit in stunned dismay at this disclosure that revolution is not, after all so simple to make. These very defects as straight out propaganda are largely, of course, what makes 'Sailors of Cattaro' mature and engrossing drama.[1]

The Theatre Union's previous plays depended for their success on the emotive power of their uncomplicated political assertions. They grafted the techniques of melodrama onto a political platform. The plays ended with a "call to action" that provided the same kind of cathartic release that occurs with the hero's triumph in the conventional melodrama. The action that was called for was simple and clear. In one case, end war by being militantly vigilant of capitalistic machinations which lead to war; in the other case, end the exploitation of the workers by the bosses through interracial solidarity. The first two plays were also pertinent and positive. The issues they addressed grew out of the experience of the spectators and were easily recognized. The plays said that such problems were soluble and, even though they were a little less than practical in showing the way, they were inspiring. The inspiration quotient of The Sailors of Cattaro, by contrast, was low. It promised success, yes, but success was three steps out of reach. Moreover, the subject matter of the play was alien to American audiences who were not as knowledgeable as was Wolf's German audience of the play's inner story. They therefore viewed the play as an anti-war play, which it was, but only peripherally. For the most part, The Sailors of Cattaro could only be viewed as a "curiosity piece" documenting a historical episode. This may explain its ready acceptance by the "bourgeois" critics. Whether

---

[1]"Guild Offers," 11 December 1934.

one takes the view that its propaganda content is subtle or diluted, what emerges for those unfamiliar with the circumstances that prompted its writing is a drama of two equally powerful forces pitted in opposition and of a reversal in fortune actuated by the protagonist's error of judgment. After all, harmartia can be illustrated as much through a political fable as it can through a psychological story. In other words, the drama was so compelling, the critics chose to ignore the political content of the play. In this regard it is interesting to note why the play appealed to Sidney Howard. In a letter to Walker he postulates why The Sailors of Cattaro did not enjoy the same popularity Stevedore did:

> It has neither the color nor the theatric quality and the edge was taken off it by the film Potemkin. . . . I should think also that the red element of your audience must have been confused by the inefficiency of the soviet of the sailors. I liked the play for just that reason, i.e., its dramatization of an impasse. But an impasse is always depressing.[1]

The implication here is ominous. If the Theatre Union were to produce other plays like The Sailors of Cattaro it might attract a more sophisticated and theatre-wise audience, but it would risk betraying its manifesto, losing the audience for which it began. If, however, it produced only plays with bold, obvious political platforms it would certainly retain its specialized audience, but it would ineluctably persist in being identified as a soap-box theatre. It might also risk losing all but the stalwarts of its constituency because of the predictability and redundancy of its repertoire. This vexing dilemma was to remain with the Theatre Union as we shall see later when we examine how

---

[1]Sidney Howard to Charles Walker, 27 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

the dearth of good scripts plagued the Executive Board.

The bountiful success of Stevedore, however, prodded the Theatre Union to consider a tour of the play outside of New York. It was a calculated gamble for the theatre to expand its audience, to became a national Marxist theatre. If it worked, it could become a practice with every Theatre Union hit. The first tour was to start in Philadelphia then move west to Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Boston. The play would run two to four weeks in each city, depending on the demand for tickets and the number of theatre parties sold. To insure that there would not be any competition, the Theatre Union restricted the rights to the play for theatre groups in these cities. The Gilpin Players of Cleveland, for instance, were denied permission to do Stevedore.[1] The second Stevedore company, directed by Michael Gordon, which had played eight weeks in the fall revival in New York was to travel and Liston Oak was appointed advance man and company manager.

In order to be certain that the tour paid for itself and, if possible, showed a little profit, the Theatre Union devised a plan which would implement their expertise with theatre party bookings in other cities. The first thing they did was to send a letter to key workers' organizations and political groups in each city. They inquired about potential local interest and support. From these groups and from contacts made through them they created a committee of sponsers and a working committee which did the leg work in selling benefit parties.[2] Oak guided their work and arranged for theatre rental, advertisting and pro-

---

[1]Theatre Union to Mrs. Jelliffe, 16 October 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Liston Oak to Kathryn McKenna, 6 November 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

motion, traveling accomodations, and lodging for the cast and crew.

The Philadelphia stop ran smoothly. A committee of thirty-nine sponsors helped sell theatre parties so that by 6 November thirty-five organizations had bought enought tickets to guarantee the Theatre Union an audience every evening of its two-week stay. Stevedore opened at the Garrick Theatre on 10 December, the same evening the Theatre Union premiered Wolf's play in New York. It was well received for its two-week run.

The next stop was Chicago and there the Theatre Union expected enough demand to sustain at least a four-week run. Things looked promising, indeed, for in October Kathryn McKenna from the Drama Union wrote to the Theatre Union asking if her theatre group could serve as the Theatre Union's sponsor and representative in Chicago. The Drama Union was one of many neophyte workers' theatre groups across the country which, modeling itself on the Theatre Union, sought to produce plays dealing with significant social problems. McKenna explained how her proposal would be mutually advantageous. The Theatre Union could expect the Drama Union's Executive Committee to wholeheatedly campaign for the production as well as attend to the necessary advance work. The 400 members of the Drama Union would also, of course, buy tickets. In return, the Drama Union wanted to share billing on the program and publicity material—"Presented by the Theatre Union in cooperation with the Drama Union of Chicago"—and permission to make front-of-curtain announcements to the audience following each performance regarding the future activities of the Drama Union.[1] After kicking-off its season

---

[1]Kathryn McKenna to Theatre Union, 17 October 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

with Stevedore, the Drama Union planned to produce Peace on Earth. If it could identify itself with the prestigious Theatre Union it would boost its chances of success. It also, no doubt, thought that if it could sponsor the Theatre Union, it would learn first-hand the Theatre Union's theatre party booking methods. The Theatre Union had had some earlier contact with the Drama Union—once when the Chicago group requested a speaker for its lecture series and another time when it inquired about royalty for Peace on Earth and warned the Theatre Union that that play was being considered by an amateur, "bourgeois" theatre group in Chicago.[1] But wary of false friends, they sought references on the Drama Union. Mary Fox checked with the Chicago Socialist Party which said it would be willing to work with the Drama Union and that it would cooperate in other respects by contacting such Socialist groups as the Workman's Circle, the Young Circle League, and other unions and fraternal orders.[2] Claude Barnett, director of the Associated Negro Press, also gave his blessing to the Drama Union and assisted Oak with names of contacts on local papers and advice on promotion.[3] The Theatre Union, gratified by the Drama Union's offer of cooperation and encouraged by reports from Chicago, agreed to McKenna's proposal. They asked the Drama Union to investigate theatres and they outlined how organizations sponsoring a benefit share the ticket price with the Theatre Union.[4]

---

[1]Drama Union to Theatre Union, 25 July 1934 and September 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Chicago Socialist Party to Mary Fox, 29 October 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Claude Barnett to Theatre Union, 7 November 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[4]Liston Oak to Kathryn McKenna, n.d., Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

The partners in the Chicago enterprise ran into a snag in trying to procure a theatre. The location, size and cost were crucial in the Theatre Union's economic considerations. The Theatre Union wanted a theatre with a capacity of at least 1,200. There were only four theatres available in Chicago. The Studebaker, with a capacity of 1,257, was excluded because it only rented on a four-wall basis and the Theatre Union wanted a rental to include front of house staff, stage crew, and lighting equipment. Furthermore, the theatre discriminated against blacks! The Blackstone and the Great Northern, both larger that the Studebaker, demanded high rental fees plus a percentage of the gross. That left the smaller Selwyn Theatre (800 seats) even though it too was expensive.[1] Offsetting the wrangling with the theatre owners, the Theatre Union received a theatre party order from the Chicago District Secretary of the International Labor Defense for the entire house on 28 and 29 December.[2] Soon, however, some friction developed between the two worker's theatre groups. T. C. Robinson, a member of the Drama Union's Executive Board, agitated by the slowness in signing a house, chomped at the bit to sell theatre parties, and perplexed by the Theatre Union's lapses in correspondence, vented his frustrations in an acriminious letter to Oak. He accused the Theatre Union of wanting to exploit Chicago by expecting to make money there. Chicago audiences, he affirmed, hate being treated as second class audiences who are merely part of the road. "Chicago as part of the road is theatrically dead," he said. He criticized the Theatre Union for raising its ticket price scale to 40¢ to $2.00. Robin-

---

[1]Kathryn McKenna to Liston Oak, 24, 25, 27, October 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]A. A. Newhoff to Theatre Union, 29 October 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

son also expressed resentment and a sense of betrayal because the Theatre Union had contacted organizations and agencies on its own before the Drama Union could, thus confusing those people and undermining the Drama Union's credibility. Finally, he states ambiguously, the Drama Union hopes "to get more than experience out of the venture."[1] Oak's response, addressed to McKenna whose judgement he trusted, was patient but firm. He answered each of Robinson's charges in turn. The silence was not deliberate. It was due to the work the Theatre Union's small staff was doing continuing Stevedore, preparing for the tour, and mounting The Sailors of Cattaro. He dismissed as ridiculous the charge that the Theatre Union wanted to exploit Chicago: "I think it is rather improper of him to impugn our motives." Theatre Union people are not "blood-suckers." The group operates on a poverty budget and must charge higher prices on the road to cover its expenses. The railroad fare alone from Philadelphia to Chicago was $1,000. The Theatre Union does not expect to get rich from the tour and if the Drama Union wants to "get more than experience" it is advised to buy a benefit like any other organization. Oak found the last complaint absurd. There was never any intention of circumventing the Drama Union; the Theatre Union sent letters to potential backers far in advance of its arrival in each of the cities it expected to visit.[2]

The squable was soon forgotten, however, when Stevedore opened 24 December 1934 at the Selwyn Theatre. About twenty-five organizations had bought parties but the press did not respond to the play. Two weeks

---

[1] T. C. Robinson to Liston Oak, 2 November 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2] Liston Oak to Kathryn McKenna, 6 November 1934, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

later the New York Times reported that Stevedore was "wobbling" in Chicago, "largely because its agitation of a racial problem which made trouble here fifteen years ago leaves a bad taste in the mouths of the sound citizens."[1] Box office business was negligible. To make matters worse, the Christmas eve opening coincided with a harsh midwestern storm that crippled the city. The production ran four weeks, with a slight increase in attendance at the end, but ultimately the Chicago run was a fiasco. The other stops on the tour were immediately cancelled. The Gilpin Players were advised that the rights to Stevedore were now available.[2] The total loss incurred on the tour amounted to $10,226.15.[3] Considering the Theatre Union's budget this was devastating. On behalf of the Drama Union, J. Bentkover, its treasurer, sent its commiserations:

> First, we want to express regret that Stevedore had such an unfortunate experience here. I'm afraid that won't be any help to your deficit nor help Liston with the headache he's going to get raising money. But it is a shame after getting so far, the Theatre Union should have to begin at the bottom again financially. We hope the job won't be too difficult, and that you can soon put the effects of your Chicago experience behind you.
>
> On our part, we feel that the Theatre Union has done considerable good by playing Stevedore [sic] in Chicago. It certainly gave the inhabitants of this town . . . a kind of theatre they hadn't experienced before.[4]

But this was little consolation for Liston Oak who was crushed by the outcome; he felt he had blundered.[5]

---

[1] "Renaissance of Art in Chicago," New York Times, 13 January 1935, sec. 9, p. 3.

[2] Theatre Union to Mrs. Jelliffe, 30 January 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3] Financial Report, 1934-35.

[4] J. Bentkover to Theatre Union, 7 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[5] Gomez, 8 October 1978.

Undaunted by the failure of the Stevedore tour, the Theatre Union stoically tried other ways to achieve a position of leadership in the workers' theatre movement. In September, at the start of its second season, George Sklar had claimed in an article entitled "Workers Theatre Advances" that the "tremendous burst of vitality in workers' theatres throughout the nation" was attributed first and foremost to the Theatre Union's successful first year.[1] Now, midway through its second year, it was working on many fronts to advance its role. First, it demonstrated that its advocacy of militancy in labor issues did not stop at the footlights. On several occasions members of the cast and crew joined striking workers on the picket lines. Second, it worked with the New Theatre League to foster the growth of the movement. Third, it made a manifold effort to ease the "script famine" that afflicted all workers' theatre groups. Finally, it continued developing its Studio with an eye toward achieving the dream of a permanent repertory theatre which would produce plays in the "new" revolutionary style.

The message in each of its three productions thus far was a call for solidarity with the workers. On 9 February, five members of The Sailors of Cattaro cast and three others associated with the Theatre Union demonstrated that they meant what they said.[2] The eight were arrested Saturday afternoon along with Robert Rice, the noted playwright's son, when they joined Ohrbach store employees on the picket lines. Mogens Petri, from the Theatre Union staff, rushed down to the Mercer Street Police Station with $580 in bail, but the prisoners were detained until

---

[1] New Theatre, September 1934, p. 8.

[2] Those involved included Robert Reed, Charles Thompson, George Tobias, Martin Wolfson, William Schap-Kevisch, Herbert Lutz, Maryn Meyers, and Ignatius Peters.

4:00 P.M., too late to play the matinee. When Margaret Larkin told the 1,000 spectators gathered at the Civic Repertory what had happened, they applauded the action and graciously accepted either a ticket exchange or a refund. Officially the Theatre Union disclaimed any participation in the picketing, stating only that the expression of sympathy was "an individual action."[1] This disclaimer was not intended as a censure of the actors involved, but was simply a means of sidestepping a potential rift in the United Front policy of the theatre. But there were some unpleasant repercussions nevertheless. The Ohrbach strike was complicated by the fact that it was organized and led by the Office Workers Union, a Communist union, reviled by Socialists for its attempt to subvert the work of the A. F. of L. by setting up a dual union. Sam Friedman, in an editorial in the New Leader, blasted the actors for cooperating with this "Communist 'union' mess" and for betraying the spirit of Actors' Equity, an affiliate of the A. F. of L. He was scrupulous, however, about separating the action of the actors from the creed of the Theatre Union:

> Incidentally, let no one think this paragraph is an indictment of the organization producing the show they acted in. The theatre had nothing to do with the romantic adventure on the Fourteenth Street barricades of its actors—nice boys and girls who got their knowledge of the labor movement from the so called "Daily Worker."[2]

Liston Oak, quick to the actors' defense, spurned Friedman's castigations. The Office Workers' Union, he said, is not a scab union organized for the sake of the Party. It is the legitimate voice of thousands of white collar workers. Oak continues:

---

[1] "Actors Arrested in Store Picketing," New York Times, 10 February 1935, p. 17; "9 'Sailors of Cattaro' Give Matinee in Police Station," World Telegram, 9 February 1935.

[2] Samuel H. Friedman, "The Editor Comments," New Leader, 2 March 1935, p. 8.

> I wish to state emphatically that Friedman's opinions are his own, not those of the Theatre Union Executive Board, of which I am a member. As a Communist, working in this association of individuals of varying political views and affiliations for the production of plays dealing with the class strugle from the point of view of organized labor, I repudiate this attack on the action of the actors in aiding the Ohrbach strikers.

The performers participated in the picketing on their own initiative. They believed that actors are laborers too, not "artists" who are exempt from the responsibilities of class consciousness:

> This was clearly a praiseworthy effort to help the underpaid, exploited workers, to demonstrate their sympathy and their solidarity, to protest against the injunction and police brutality, to defend the elementary right of workers to organize in a union of their own choosing and to strike for recognition of that union regardless of affiliation.[1]

This was not the first instance of activism on the part of Theatre Union actors, though it was the stormiest. In May 1934, the cast of Stevedore voted against doing a benefit for the Stage Relief Fund when they learned from Leigh Whipper of that organization's discrimination against Negro actors and its exploitation of them.[2] On 6 June 1934, cast members also appeared on the picket line in the Union Square area when they gave their support to the employees of the Macauley Publishers. Unfortunately, the actors missed all the excitement because they arrived on Fourth Avenue after the arrest of thirty authors.[3] The next day, thirteen more picketers were arrested, among them Millicent Green and Charlotte Severson (a member of the production committee for Peace on Earth).[4]

---

[1]Liston Oak, "Theatre Union Actors' Solidarity with Ohrbach Strikers Defended," Daily Worker, 21 March 1935, p. 5.

[2]Kline, "Cast Votes 'No,'" p. 15.

[3]"Cast of Drama Aids Strike," Journal American, 6 June 1934.

[4]"Macauley Strike to be Ended," New York Times, 8 June 1934.

Though the Theatre Union never had any organizational connection with the New Theatre League, it developed a cordial, cooperative relationship with it and many Theatre Union members were active in it. For example, Margaret Larkin often donated her services, giving advice and support to other theatre groups, sharing her experience in public relations and audience development which stretched back to 1931 and 1932 when she had been executive secretary for a film organization which booked quality films into art houses for a subscription audience.[1] In her role as spokeswoman for the Theatre Union, she not only built up the theatre's public image but served as mentor to new theatre groups. Her article for New Theatre, "Building an Audience," outlined the Theatre Union's methods.[2] For the New Theatre League School she offered a course in theatre organization and management where she dealt with everything from the nitty-gritty of committee responsibilities and organizational structure to fiscal planning and interpersonal relationships.[3] At the regional conferences of the League in Chicago and New York she lectured on the need for developing broad audience support.[4] Later, a monograph she wrote entitled Audience Organization was supposed to have been published by the League.[5] It never was. In response to the many inquiries that crossed her desk concerning the way the Theatre Union came into being, what its purpose was, and how it operated, she put together an eight page pamphlet, "Building a Social Theatre: The History of the

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978. [2]October 1934, p. 26.

[3]Theatre Union to Miss Schwartz, 17 December 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[4]Mark Marvin, "An American People's Theatre," New Theatre, December 1935, p. 25.

[5]Press Release, Malts Papers, Wisconsin.

Theatre Union."

There was another feature of the Theatre Union's association with the League which was mutually beneficial. Because the Civic Repertory Theatre was dark on Sundays, the Board instituted a policy of renting the theatre to other groups. Zelda Dorfman and Sylvia Regan managed this operation which brought in a little more revenue for the perpetually poverty-stricken group. A frequent occupant was the New Theatre League which initiated a series of Sunday Evening New Theatre Nights. The purpose of these presentations was to raise money for New Theatre Magazine and to provide a forum for showcasing new playwrights. On one night Alfred Kreymbourg's agit-prop piece "America! America!" was presented along with three other one-act plays.[1] The most famous new Theatre night, now legendary in the annals of thirties social theatre, was, of course, the presentation of Odets's Waiting for Lefty on 6 January 1935.

The matter of showcasing fresh writers was a serious one, indeed. It reflected the scant supply of dramatically sound, politically informed plays, that vexed all social theatres, the Theatre Union included. Emery Northrup understated the problem in his forecast of the Theatre Union's future: "Really good manuscripts that combine a clear grasp of social conflicts with tense dramatic writing are, undoubtedly, going to be hard to find."[2] The drought of good plays on the workers' theatre landscape came about, ironically enough, by the rapid success of the workers' theatre movement. Up to this point there had been few workers' theatres so there were few workers' plays. It is a simple capitalist fact of supply and demand. Playwrights, after all, cannot write in a

---

[1] Daily News, 12 May 1934; American, 14 May 1934.

[2] "Meet the Union," p. 8.

vacuum. Now with workers' theatres surging with energy, there was a sudden demand for plays but few trained playwrights to meet it. Even the "bourgeois" theatre recognized the boundless stamina and abundant vigor of the radical theatre. Brooks Atkinson, citing the achievements of the Theatre Union, Artef, the Group Theatre, the Theatre Guild (for They Shall Not Die), and New Theatre Magazine, said that the social theatre promised more than Broadway:

> In short, the drama of the Left is becoming increasingly dynamic, and is no longer a skirmish on the fringe of the theatre. For it has a coherent program, which the Broadway theatre has always lacked, and it is enflamed with the crusader's zeal. It knows were it intends to go; it does not doubt its ability to get there.
>
> Those of us who are neither Communist nor radicals find our needs less ably served. The Broadway theatre has no program and no convictions; and in the midst of a vast social upheaval it has little comment to make. Although the needs of the hour and the shape of the future are the topics uppermost in every one's mind, the Broadway theatre seems to be incapable of facing a situation squarely.[1]

Standing at the threshold of great achievement, the radical theatre lacked the wherewithall to proceed; it was the victim of an irksome Catch-22. The problem was aggravated by the left's offical shift in doctrine from the crusading agit-prop to a programmatic realism. Revolutionary playwrights were asked to adjust to yet another set of requirements.

New Theatre Magazine served as the beacon, stimulating new playwrights and guiding their development. There were calls for scripts, plays contests, and penetrating, indepth reviews which dissected a play's virtues and faults. The greatest problem was the devout novice playwright with more zeal than craft. To harness his talent to the cause of

---

[1]"Fiddling At the Old Tunes, The Broadway Theatre Faces a Chaotic World With its Head, as Usual, Resting Contentedly in the Sand," New York Times, 17 March 1935, sec. 8, p. 1.

the workers' theatre movement, New Theatre published articles which amounted to a catalogue of do's and don't's on playwriting. Two of the best in this regard are by John Gassner and Herbert Kline. It is instructive to review them because they shed some light on the dramaturgy of the movement and the demands of "revolutionary plays," and they serve as a primer for the new style the left had recently adopted.

Gassner and Kline note that, in terms of action, the plays seem to suffer from what Kline calls "carry-all plots," plots which embrace too much material and are therefore diminished to "animated cartoons." Gassner adds that the plots are further weakened by the heavy hand of the playwright who manipulates scenes and situations arbitrarily for the sake of the message. Characterization and dialogue are often faulty, too. Characters, even workers, are drawn schematically with little attempt at individuation; some are treated simply like "pawns on Marxist chessboards," according to Gassner. The effectiveness of many plays are hampered by their treatment of the opposition who are depicted as ossified theatrical villains. Kline calls for opponents who posses human traits and who are not simply stereotyped capitialists, scabs who are not always slinky rats. They both point out that the dialogue in these plays is pockmarked with rant, is wooden, hackneyed and almost always overwritten, and is lacking in peotic charm. Lastly, they show how many of these plays cannot shed their identity as political tract because they take the easy route of stating their theme rather than dramatizing it in action and stage images.[1]

---

[1] John Gassner, "A Playreader on Playwrights," New Theatre, October 1934, pp. 10-11; Herbert Kline, "Writing for Workers Theatre," New Theatre, December 1934, pp. 21-23.

That "Shakespeare in overalls" was yet to be discovered. The problems were many and good plays were as hard to find as a Marxist at a Daughters of the American Revolution meeting. The Theatre Union made an effort to help. First, its very existence and its chain of successes was an inducement for social playwrights to get to their typewriters. The Theatre Union assured playwrights that it would consider manuscripts by all authors not just plays by its own members:

> Two years ago no manuscript existed which the Theatre Union founders considered a possible play for the new project. It is significant that the first two plays produced were written especially for the theatre by members of its Board. These playwrights understood clearly what the theatre needed. The Theatre Union expects confidently that other manuscripts will be written which would fit into its program since it has no desire to produce only its own playwrights' work.[1]

Playwrights writing plays with social content at least knew where to send their plays, confident of getting a reading. By its second season the Theatre Union's play reading committee had perused 241 manuscripts. Some, of course, were from Theatre Union members. Gomez fumbled with a drama about Wall Street tentatively called The Reformed Bear. Unique among proletarian plays, not a single worker appeared in it. But it lost its direction mid-way through the second act.[2] Victor Wolfson submitted Lower than Angels, a play about West Virginia miners which was based on his experiences in that region.[3] And Blankfort adapted Myra Page's amusing novel, Moscow Yankee, into a play which took an uncharacteristic light-hearted view of an American auto worker who opts to work for the Soviet five-year plan in Moscow's Red Star truck plant over Ford's depressed production lines. For a time the play was being considered: "I am hoping that something will come of it for us. We feel

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978. [3]Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

the need of some lighter treatment and form in our program."[1] Many other plays were sent to the Theatre Union and the following is a representative list: Strike Song by Loretto and J. O. Bailey, a husband and wife team from North Carolina who wrote about the Gastonia mill strike; Five Foot Amazon by Langston Hughs, which examined the California fruit pickers strike; In New Kentucky by Samuel Ornitz which retold the story of the Harlan coal miner's strike; Young Ulysses by Savery and Plunket about the "wild boys" of America, adolescent, unemployed young men who aimlessly roamed the country; Mine Gang, a dramatization of the French novel Thirteen Men in a Mine by Wallace Waite; Birth of a Bolschevik, a play on relief by Philip Stevenson; and a crude, but diverting melodrama (title unknown) by Victor Albagi about post-war British imperialism in Egypt.[2] These plays were not produced because either they manifested some of the weaknesses outlined by Kline and Gassner, or they reiterated the familiar formula of the strike play or the depression play, or their authors refused to cooperate with the Theatre Union's method of collective criticism. In a letter to the directors of New Theatre in Philadelphia, Larkin recommends Young Ullysses, Mine Gang, and Albert Bein's Let Freedom Ring as meritorious works. She explains that the Theatre Union did not option them because the authors resisted the changes the Theatre Union requested.[3]

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978; Margaret Larkin to Barbara Nixon, n.d., Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Dorothy Walker, "A Critique of the Theatre Union," Barnard Quarterly (Christmas 1934): 24; Charles Good to Theatre Union, 13 February 1935 and Theatre Union to Mrs. Jelliffe, 25 May 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center; Walker, 9 September 1978.

[3]Theatre Union to Frieda Nurenberg, 21 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

A second action taken to help both playwrights and workers' theatres was the establishment of a script library. "In response to many requests from little theatre, amateur workers' theatres and college dramatic societies," announces the Theatre Union's fourth prospectus, "the Theatre Union has established a free information service on social plays. Long and short plays, both in published form and in manuscript are recommended with information on where copies and rights to produce may be obtained."[1] The script library was intended as a clearing house to facilitate the producation of social plays by matching playwright to producing unit. The Theatre Union itself did not furnish the scripts or control the rights; it simply disseminated information. An average of six people a week consulted it. Recommended plays included many of the manuscripts referred to above, some translations of Soviet plays, plays produced by the Theatre Union, the Group Theatre, the New Playwrights, and other socially oriented plays like Gods of the Lightning, We, the People, The Adding Machine, and The Hairy Ape. Also on the list were such European "classics" as Galsworthy's Strife and The Silver Box, Hauptman's The Weavers, Toller's The Machine Wreckers, Gorki's Lower Depths, and O'Casey's The Silver Tassie.[2]

The third thing accomplished was the creation of a one-act play competition which was conceived as a means of supplementing the list of one-act plays in the script library. First prize was publication of the script by the Theatre Union and a production by its Studio. The first winner, announced 19 July 1934, was God's in His Heaven by Philip Steven-

---

[1]Theatre Union Prospectus, [Spring 1935], Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]"Theatre Union Script Library-Recommended Plays," Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

son, a novelist from Santa Fe who had written The Gospel According to St. Luke and The Edge of the Nest.[1] The play was first presented 6 July 1933 by the Atalya Players of Santa Fe; and was published by the Script Library of the Theatre Union in December 1934.

The play was conceived as the second part of a trilogy of one-act plays that dealt with unemployment; the first was called Gentlemen from Hooverville, the last, Road Closed. God's in His Heaven treats the subject of vagabondage, one of the abhorrent repercussions of the depression which forced thousands of young boys and girls into a transient life, looking for food, shelter, and jobs as they journeyed in boxcars from one "hobo jungle" to another. Jimmy Clark is one of these boys. He comes from an All-American rural home some fifty miles from a midwest metropolis. His father, Bill Clark, is a burly shop foreman who believes thoroughly in the jingoistic platitudes propagated by the Hearst press: men are not starving in the streets of the U. S. of A. and what this country needs is a Mussolini-like leader who should be chosen by the size of his bank account—the richer, the smarter, naturally. Jimmy returns home with an entirely different outlook on the situation. His experiences on the road while looking for a job have forced him to abjure the pat moral beliefs and social ethics of his parents. The substance of the play is the clash of opposing points of view as exemplified by father and son. Bill insists that what he's read in the newspapers proves that unemployed hobos are lazy bums just like Henry Ford says. Jimmy's riposte is that the "best" people—salesmen, inventors, artists, movie actors—are hobos these days. He rails at his fathers's selfish indifference and narrow-minded complacency:

---

[1] World Telegram, 19 July 1934.

> That's right, cover your eyes! Don't let yourself see what's comin'! Oh no! Four years ago you were all sayin' there wasn't no depression! Two years ago you were thankin' God the banks was O.K. . . . Now you're crowin' because you still got a job and a roof over your head—and your women ain't had to sell themselves for a meal! All right—wait![1]

Jimmy then turns his back on the sanctimonious gestures of appeasement offered by his parents and, with his hobo sweetheart, heads for the "banana special" to California to rejoin the "wild boys of the road." Bill and his wife Ella are not converted but are left with gnawing doubts, their imperviousness to the crisis shaken. Jimmy's indicment leaves them vulnerable:

> Ella: Is there any danger of your losin' your job? . . . But suppose you do and things get worse instead of better and—Tom—suppose Tom—Oh God, I can't stand it.
> Bill: I can't stand it either. . . . Besides I don't believe it. . . . Nobody's starvin', and they ain't gonna starve—you hear me? Nobody.[2]

Through the father-son confrontation the drama paints a gloomy picture of the conditions of the vagabond-hobos, those shabby, undernourished wanderers, the flotsam and jetsam of the Great Depression. There are allusions to the demeaning charity of the Salvation Army, former professors "shootin' snipes" (smoking butts), old men freezing to death or falling off boxcars, young women whoring for food, runaway boys as old as eleven begging and stealing. There are references, too, to the various haunts of the hobo—deserted roads, trains, jails flop houses, hobo jungles, and charity hospitals. In this respect, the play serves as an expose, a bitter commentary of pervasive disillusionment. It falls short, however, from the point of view of the left in that it does not

---

[1]Philip Stevenson, God's In His Heaven (New York: The Script Library of the Theatre Union, 1934), p. 34.

[2]Ibid., p. 46.

offer any solution, any hope. New Theatre wanted to see a "stronger solution," "an affirmative note" in coping with the problem.[1] In its preface to the play, the Theatre Union offered producing groups the suggestion that they include a program note or a brief introductory announcement stressing "the militant struggle of the workers against the underlying social causes of this condition."[2] But the play was effective within the scope of its ambitions. The ragged setting is simply established, the characters are humanized and convincing, and the dialogue is crisp and vivid. The play was presented in New York at the Civic Repertory Theatre as part of a New Theatre night in February 1935. It was produced by the Theatre Union but the Theatre Collective Studio with Vincent Sherman (who replaced James MacDonald as the Lieutenant in The Sailors of Cattaro) directing it.[3]

The three measures taken by the Theatre Union to ease the play shortage were only marginally successful. Ultimately Bein (whose play was produced by default) and Lawson were the only American non-Theatre Union authors to be produced. By January 1936, the Theatre Union closed its script library, the New Theatre League Repertory Department having taken over this chore.[4] The one-act play competition quietly drifted into obliviation after the first award when the Theatre Union discovered that it was too busy scrambling to keeps itself afloat to manage the

---

[1]"Books Received: God's In His Heaven," New Theatre, December 1934, p. 23.

[2]Stevenson, God's, p. 3.

[3]Program, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[4]Theatre Union to Elizabeth Ann Hoff, 6 January 1936, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

contest.

For a time, however, the Theatre Union was the main hope of the workers' theatre movement. It was a professionally organized Marxist theatre that had made great gains over previous efforts in this direction and had even impressed bourgeois audiences. Critics on the left wished for only one thing more—a permanent acting company. Leon Alexander, commenting on the production flaws of The Sailors of Cattaro, urged the Theatre Union to pursue that goal:

> Now that its audience problem is in a good way to being solved; now that a growing body of enthusiastic supporters can insure for every play a moderately profitable run, it is time that the Theatre Union bent its energies to the creation of a competent and permanent acting company, that it strive to improve the technical level of what forces it already possesses, and that it seek to draw, even from the bourgeois theatre, new larger, technically competent forces who are in turn willing to learn from the Theatre Union what it can teach them: the purpose and the power of revolutionary, social dramaturgy.[1]

The Theatre Union, also anxious to assure its longevity and define its theatrical identity, focused on its Studio to provide some of the answers. The second season saw the greatest activity by the Studio. $630.00 was spent on it that year, with expenses for such items as linoleum, repairs, ceiling materical, and electrical equipment suggesting that a separate room was set aside for its use. Special gift income ($383.00) was generated for it.[2] Aside from this, a gala spring festival was held at Webster Hall on 13 April 1935 with the proceeds going toward a sinking fund for building up the Studio.[3] After expenses, only a scant $159.00 remained for the project.[4] Another indication of the Studio's activity that year was its participation in two extra-Theatre Union enterprises.

---

[1]"Stirring Play," p. 5. [2]Financial Report 1934-35

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]Financial Report, 1934-35.

Directors of the Studio joined representatives from thirty-one other organizations to protest the Sullivan Bill which threatened to impose state bureaucracy on schools of dance, theatre, and music by requiring teachers to obtain licenses.[1] Also, Studio members were engaged by the Film and Photo League in the making of a short proletarian film called Taxi, which dealt with the life of taxi drivers.[2]

The objectives of the Studio remained unchanged since its inception the year before, but they were somewhat clarified. In a letter to Herschel Bricker, Larkin succinctly defines its multifaceted purposes:

> Our purpose in maintaining the studio is to try to find talented people who are sympathetic to our ideas of the theatre and by using them in our plays whenever possible, to form the basis of a permanent acting group. Second, to experiment with scripts we are interested in. Third, to see directors and technical people at work. Fourth, to try to develop our own style of production—the new social plays demand new methods of production.[3]

The program of the Studio, headed by Sylvia Feningston now that Odets had left, consisted of classes in theatre crafts and workshop rehearsals of plays wherein new techniques were tried out. Among the teachers, all of whom donated their services, were Tamara Daykharkanove who conducted lecture/demonstrations in makeup; Morris Ankrum, an actor then performing in O'Casey's Within the Gates, who worked on improvisation; Helen Cross who taught diction; and Anna Sokolow who led some sessions in body movement.[4] James Light of the old Provincetown Theatre directed a modern dress version of Coriolanus and received $240.00 for his six week association with the Studio.[5] One personality who

---

[1] New York Times, 3 May 1935. [2] New York Times, 6 May 1935.

[3] Margaret Larkin to Herschel Bricker, 8 January 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[4] "Strength in Theatre Union," p. 2. [5] Financial Report, 1934-35.

could have given the Studio significance and maybe even changed the history of the Theatre Union itself, was Benno Schneider. Schneider had studied with Vakhtangov and had come to America with the visiting Habimah troupe. He remained in New York, working first with the Folksbuehne and then the Artef, developing the reputation of the latter by practicing his special brand of formalized realism. On 22 April 1935, the Daily Worker announced that Schneider was invited to direct one or two of the Theatre Union's productions for the coming season and that he would assume the directorship of the Studio in the fall. It was agreed, however, that Artef, for whom he had just directed L. Resnick's comedy, Recruits, would continue to have first claim on him.[1] Nothing ever came of this projected liason. Schneider taught some classes in improvisation for which he received $100 and he was approached about directing Mother, but nothing further developed.[2] After the close of the second season, the only reference to the Studio is the credit in Theatre Union programs in which Sylvia Feningston is designated its director; a vestigial remnant of a lost dream.

During the summer of 1934, Maltz embarked on an auto trip of the country, at that time the almost obligatory proletarian odyssey of any revolutionary author. His aim was to see first-hand the plight of the workers in depression-torn America rather than seeing it only from his distant vantage point east of the Hudson. His first stop was Toledo, Ohio, where a strike was in progress. From there he went to Library, Pennsylvania, in the soft coal district south of Pittsburgh. Originally, Maltz sought to prepare himself for a play on Mother Jones, the redoubtable union activist, heroine of the coal fields, who was arrested many

---

[1]Daily Worker, 22 April 1935. [2]Finanical Report, 1934-35.

times and endured rough treatment. He collected background material by living in a mining camp under the pretense of looking for a job. Each evening, for about a week, he stealthily ran out to his car to note down observations he had made of the actions and conversations of the men in the camp. One day, an unemployed ex-miner he had befriended who was organizing for the National Miners' Union took him to visit his brother in the coal camp of another town. The man had been a militant union organizer. During one strike he was arrested and framed on a trumped-up charge of blowing up a mine tipple. When he was released, after two years in prison, he wanted nothing more to do with the union. Maltz saw in this episode the basis of a play. The man who had once been a fighter, loses his courage after suffering, and disengages himself from the fight. Maltz added a further twist to this sad story by incorporating what he had heard at the camps about stool pigeons, making his protagonist an informer. What intrigued the author was how a decent worker could be forced to betray his comrades, and what social and ecomonic pressures might alter his long established convictions.[1]

He left the coal region not only with a situation for a play but also the idea for a short story. On his way through West Virginia he picked up a hitchhiker who told him how hundreds of miners were dying a slow, excruciated death because their lungs were full of silica dust which they had inhaled while working in the mines without the proper equipment.[2] Maltz used the account of this tragedy as the basis of "Man on a Road," a haunting powerful portrait of a miner afflicted with silicosis.[3] The next stop on his tour brought him to South Dakota where

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978. [2]Zheutlin and Talbot, "Maltz," p. 8.

[3]New Masses, 8 January 1935, pp. 19-21.

he was sent by the New Masses to cover the farmers' effort to establish the National Fram Workers' Union. Maltz hurt his arm in an auto accident and was forced to remain in the area while be recuperated and his car was repaired. This delay almost cost him his life. He was asked to speak about union work in the cities at a fair put on by the National Farm Workers. He did and he left town the next morning. The next night, gangs of American Legionaires mobilized against the farmers. The vigilantes, equipped with guns and clubs, attacked a dance and severely beat and brutilized the farmers. "What would have happened to me as a New York Jew—I'd have been killed?" mused Maltz. He ended his four month tour by swinging south toward the tip of Mississippi.[1]

When he returned to New York, he began writing The Pit, as it was first called. In early January 1935, Maltz completed a draft of the play and submitted it to the Executive Board. The Board considered The Pit along with two others, Strike Song and Parade (formerly The Fourteenth Street Revue) for its next production.[2] Each of the plays was problematic. Strike Song was a promising piece. It charted the bitter, bloody battle waged by the Communist National Textile Workers Union to organize the mill hands in the remote Piedmont town of Gastonia, North Carolina. It had some excellent material on the life of Ella May Wiggens, the indefatiguable balladeer whose nightly serenades sustained the strikers' morale through the bleak periods of the strike. The union's ministrel became the strike's martyr when she was murdered by vigilantes enroute to a strike meeting. The twenty-nine year-old mother left five orphans. Though the drama was rich in folk qualities and capable in its characterization, it did not fully capitalize on the political potential of its

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978. [2]New York Times, 4 January 1935.

subject-matter. It lacked, according to Peters, a "hard and sharp militancy."[1] The play was postponed pending revisions.

Parade was written specifically for the Theatre Union by Sklar and Peters with music by Jerome Moross. Sklar envisioned the piece as ground-breaking theatre, exploring new and different dimensions of social drama.[2] The central concept of the revue was a series of parade floats coming across the stage at intervals and freezing in place long enough for performers to descend from it and sing or enact a sketch about the current political or social situation. This very loose plot line was laced with a running gag about police pursuing the parade, trying to derail it but always losing track of it.[3] It would be fairer to say that Parade was more fresh than new. The chants and skits of the revue borrowed the tactics and satiric bite of the old agit-prop pieces and married them to the energetic tempo of the conventional Broadway revue. The Executive Board balked at the piece though. Aloud, some wondered about the exorbitant expense of a musical. But money may not have been the real concern. No elaborate chorus numbers were called for and the revue could have been staged very simply with two pianos. The hesitation about Parade was more likely due to a failure of theatrical imagination, a reluctance to break out of a mold that was slowly hardening around the Theatre Union. For all the so-called variety the Theatre Union claimed for its repertory, the productions selected and the plays it was contemplating for the future evinced a narrow range of subject matter and

---

[1]Peters, "Writing and Selecting," p. 5.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[3]Sklar, 14 July 1978; Peters, 20 August 1978.

treatment. There had evolved a recognizable "Theatre Union play." In this respect, Parade was neoteric. Here was a comic approach to rather grave issues. The Board was fearful about the responses of its proletarian constituency.[1] (The overwhelming success of Pins and Needles two years hence, however, seemed to prove them wrong.) The Board's timidity with Parade forced Sklar and Peters to seek other venues. It was offered to the Group Theatre but they hemmed and hawed about it.[2] Then Charlie Friedman, the Theatre Union's technical director, collected some of the singers from his Green Mansions troupe, a resort upstate where he mounted musical revues weekly, and auditioned the piece for the Theatre Guild.[3] The Guild accepted it for production later that spring.

That left only Maltz's play for the Theatre Union's spring slot. Even so there was some resistance to selecting it. For one thing, its first draft was rough and overwritten, being nearly twice as long as the final version. Maltz explained the length saying, "There is so much to say, so much warm life to put on the stage, that one play couldn't pack it all in."[4] Sylvia Regan's first impression of the play was that it should have been a novel, so elaborate was its detail, so complex its action.[5] But a play can be rewritten and edited.

What troubled some members of the Board more than its length was its statement. Sklar, for example, had strong reservations about the play because its central character would elicit the audiences' sympathy even though he commits an ignoble act: "I personally felt this was

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978; Sklar, 14 July 1978; Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

[2]Moross, 29 June 1978. [3]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[4]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin. [5]Regan, 28 June 1978.

very questionable because in the end he was the protagonist and your sympathies were with an informer."[1] Sklar insisted that the line separating compassion from comprehension is thin. Certainly, Maltz's intention was to expose the pressures that could be brought to bear on a worker to make him do something he knows is wrong. The play was meant as an indictment of a corrupt system that forces men into unprincipled deeds. But in the process of showing causes and conditions, Sklar contends, Maltz made the central character a pitiable, helpless victim. Instead of reviling the character for his dastardly betrayal, audiences might come to condone the action; as if to say, "He didn't want to do it, yet he felt he had to." Sklar questioned the propriety of a left-wing theatre courting such a proposition. Maltz claimed, however, that the betrayal by a labor stool pigeon was so fundamental that audiences would respond without ambiguity:

> I think you will love Joe Kavarsky, the blacklisted young miner who can't get a doctor for his baby. And when he capitulates—forgets the first commandment to be loyal to his fellow workers—I think you will hate him. When a fellow miner tells him, "Now you no better than rat. Now all miner got spit at you," he expresses the social attitude that all the mine camp would take and the attitude that all workers must take toward a traitor of the ranks.[2]

In the end, the Board decided to go ahead with it. On 18 January 1935, the Theatre Union announced that The Pit would be the next play and that rehearsals would begin 15 February.[3] Sylvia Feningston, Eleanor Fitzgerald, and George Sklar were appointed to the production committee. Maltz immediately began revising the manuscript, continuing to shave

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]"'Black Pit' Is a Modern Treatment of the Judas Story," Post, 16 March 1935.

[3]New York Times, 3 February 1935.

away chunks of it right through rehearsals. An entire scene in the third act was deleted from the stage manager's promptbook.[1] Even the title of the play underwent several changes. The original title was derived from the last line where the protagonist laments his lot: "Now everything black, black like pit be." But The Pit was a name used previously by Channing Pollock for his dramatization of a Frank Norris novel of that title. To avoid confusion, the play was for a time given the eponymous title Joe Kovarsky. But when the Theatre Union learned that people had difficulty pronouncing the slavic name they cast around for a new title. After considering over two hundred possibilities, among them Larkin's suggestion, Bottomless Pit which was rejected because it sounded too biblical, they settled on Black Pit. It was concise and retained the symbolic tenor of the original.[2]

Black Pit is a relentless gloomy, somber tale, applying the Judas theme to the circumstances of the worker. It is, to borrow from Blankfort's terminology, a "pendulum play" in reverse. The "pendulum play" depicts the swing of a worker or intellectual from a conservative un-class-conscious position to a militant, class-consciousness.[3] Peter Owens of Peace on Earth manifested such a metamorphosis as did the black dockwallopers of Stevedore. In Maltz's play we see the pendulum swing in the other direction. Joe Kovarsky, a Croatian immigrant miner, undergoes a transformation from solid union man to renegade and social outcast. This change, the inversion of the usual course of the revolution-

---

[1]Albert Maltz, "Black Pit," Promptbook, Loaned to author by Peter Xantho.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Blankfort, "Facing Audience," (November 1934), p. 25.

ary drama, occurs slowly and not without a little resistance on the part of the protagonist.

Initially, Joe was an advocate of unionism, energetically fighting for the establishment of a union at the Henrietta Mine Patch. So militant was he, in fact, that the bosses were forced to act against him. When a tipple was sabotaged, he was falsely accused of doing it. He was arrested, tried, and promptly imprisoned. Upon his release his troubles began. He returned to the patch to find his brother-in-law Tony invalided by a mine accident and no longer able to work. Tony, his wife Mary, their two children, and Iola (Joe's wife) all live in a dilapidated shack, surviving on the meager $10.50 a week which Tony received as compensation for his injury. Joe learns from Tony that there is a company union at the patch now and he has been blacklisted. He resolves to change his name and find work in another mine. This plan almost works. Joe's past catches up with him as his real identity is discovered and he is physically ejected from the boarding house. Now his fortunes plummet even faster. Iola is pregnant, making his need for some income even more pressing. Our hero searches other avenues but bumps into the stolid, immovable pillars of the prevailing social order. Relief funds are beyond his reach because he lacks the time and the skill to penetrate the tangled bureaucratic tangle that they entail. The one job he gets is at a steel mill but he leaves it quickly when he discovers a strike is due and that he was hired as a scab. The social stratification of society is driven home to him when he realizes that none of the big cars that pass him on the road as he walks the seventeen miles into town ever stop to pick him up. He is a worker; his identity is sealed. His clothes and his manner set him apart from others in society. His only solace comes from the

community of workers.

The fate of a worker is bleak, but the fate of a blacklisted worker is catastrophic. Out of work for months, the only future Joe can see for himself and his family is the dismal life of his friend Turko, another blacklisted miner. Turko resides in an abandoned coke oven on the outskirts of Pittsburgh. He and a hundred other unemployed workers, their wives and children, live in a polluted hole in the ground. "By God," Joe blurts out with raw determination, "I be scab 'fore I live in hole lak animal."[1] Joe's impetuous remark reveals the depth of the abyss into which he has fallen. Pushed into a corner, stripped of all hope, he refuses to relinquish his human dignity. But there is a price for salvaging ones dignity. "Man nevair can be scab, Joe. . . . Miner got be wit' odern miner," states Tony with deliberate emphasis.[2] The silence which follows reveals the import of the judgment. Joe might retain his personal dignity but his assertion amounts to a renunciation of his class identity without which there can be no dignity. Joe is weakened. He has placed himself before his class. This, Maltz tells us, is his fatal flaw.

Alone with Iola, he is pushed still further. Iola is terrified of childbirth. At thirteen she witnessed her mother die of a difficult labor without help only to have the doctor say later that he could have saved her. She desperately wants a doctor to attend her, but the company doctor will not come because Joe is no longer employed by the mine. She appealed to Prescott, the mine superintendent, who is her cousin. She

---

[1]Albert Maltz, Black Pit (New York: G. B. Putnam's Son's, 1935), p. 36.

[2]Ibid., p. 37.

pleads with him to give her husband some work. He agrees to talk to Joe. Joe buries his pride, and acquiesces to her plea. Prescott is a sly, bituminous figure. He is a direct dramatic descendant of Walcott, the reptilian, sadistic superintendent of the Oceanic Stevedore Company and the psychology-wielding Captain of the Saint George. These are the bosses: smug, unscrupulous, remorseless executors of capitalist principles. Prescott is not long in delivering his message. He will give Joe work provided Joe is "friendly." Joe's first response is automatic disdain, "You wan't me to be a stool pigeon, hah?"[1] But Prescott pushes on, dangling a carrot in front of a hungry man, alternately promising Joe a doctor and a steady wage while lecturing him on the ineluctable power and might of the company. With that, Prescott walks out knowing full well the outcome. Joe is torn in a terrible dilemma. On the one hand, he must assuage his sobbing wife, who, choking back her tears, lamely tells him to to forget Prescott's proposal. On the other hand, his ingrained fealty to the workers' ethical commands demands that he forswear any thought of yeilding to Prescott. His inner struggle is dramatized in a short, violent pantomine: "Christus! What I'm gone do? (Silence. He walks. Then he sits down. He starts to beat his clenched fist on the table with increasing force. Finally he brings his hand down with all his strength and then again there is silence.)" His first words betray his predilliction.

> Man got be man. Man got live lak man. Man got have eat, got have wooman, got have house (He jumps up) Man no can live in hole lak animal. . . . Company boss here, Iola! Man got help self lil' bit, hah? Iola, no can let Tony live in coak oven—live in hill. (In a whisper) No can let have lil' feller, maybe—you all time wear shawl, Iola. (He goes over to her) You wan' hide belly? You be shame—shame for lil' feller? I no be shame.[2]

---

[1]Ibid., p. 41 [2]Ibid., pp. 44-45.

He has momentarily put aside his conscience. He will take the job, get the doctor. He rationalizes away the odious implications of his decision with the forlorn hope that he can fool the super, "Tall heem lil' t'ing no matt'r."[1] Ingenuously, he thinks he can eschew the consequences of his decision.

Joe, however, is lost. He is no match for the clever bosses. In the next scene, at Prescott's office, where the bargain is struck, the diabolical super sets up a clandestine dictaphone to record their conversation and offers Joe a $10.00 "advance." Joe, inert with fear, trying to anticipate the trap, declines to drink with Prescott, refuses to sign any papers, but accepts the money as a loan despite himself. The trap is sprung. At this point the audience sees that Joe is doomed. He is trapped on a treadmill that will wear him down before he can jump off. Joe thinks he can sit on the fence, maintain separate public and private attitudes, but in the class strugle neutrality is impossible. By compromising his responsibility to his class, he abdicates his essential identity. In matters of moral ethics the law of all or nothing obtains. From the moment that Joe capitulates and forms his compact with the devil, the outcome is a foregone conclusion. There is no suspense or tension in the action, only the elucidation of a natural course of events. This, in fact, is the object of the drama. We watch with horror Joe's decline. Though Black Pit has its melodramatic elements, in method it is more akin to the morality play. It sets out to define and enforce a basic morality. In the Medieval morality play the moral was circumscribed by religious doctrine; here it is a matter of social doctrine.

---

[1] Ibid., p. 45.

In both instances, the aim is didactic and the strategy is to illustrate effects. The protagonist is offered a choice and the drama demonstrates the lesson by portraying the consequences, saying, in effect, "If you do such, this and this will happen to you."

The ensuing action shows Joe sinking deeper and deeper into the mire. Anetsky, his partner, is severely burned when a gas seepage explodes. This rallies the miners to walk out on strike. Prescott accosts Joe and commands him to circulate the word that the accident was Anetsky's fault; the mine is not hot, as the miners suspect, rather Anetsky foolishly walked into a condemned room. At first, Joe contradicts him, but Prescott twists the tourniquet and Joe relents. Later, at a "card game" strike meeting, Joe sheepishly delivered the super's message. The news deflates some the men's urgency for a strike. They postpone the walkout and instead plan for the big strike. Two days later, coincidentally the same night Iola goes into labor, Prescott pays Joe a visit. Seditious leaflets have appeared, there is talk of a new union, Prescott wants to know who is behind it. He mercilessly squeezes Joe for the name. Again Joe resists:

Prescott: Who's the organizer in this patch, Joe?
Joe: What organize'?
Prescott: Stop horsin'. This leaflet was put out by an organizer. An' you're the first man in the patch an organizer'd come to.
Joe: Nobuddy come for me.
Prescott: Who is he, boy?
Joe: I don't know, Mr. Prescott.
Prescott: (Grabbing him by the arm) Joe if you think you can pull me by the nose, you're a dumber Hunky 'n' I thought you was.
Joe: (Jumping up and wrenching free) I no gone tell. I no gone be stool pigeon. How you like dat?
Prescott: Uh-huh—befor yuh didn't know. Now yuh know but you won't tell.[1]

---

[1]Ibid., p. 80.

In the end, Joe does tell; he trades the name of the organizer, Hansy McCulloh, for the services of the company doctor.

Though Joe makes the wrong choice and commits a heinous crime, Maltz treats him with some compassion. It is the act, not the man that is condemned. The lesson becomes more harrowing as we watch a basically good man disintegrate before our eyes. In the beginning Joe is given a large measure of sympathy. The play's brief prologue engenders pity for Joe and arouses our indignation at a cruel, harsh social system. In a room with bars, the last part of a wedding ceremony is taking place. No sooner does the Justice of the Peace pronounce Joe and Iola man and wife than the marshall slaps handcuffs on the the grooms wrist and leads him away. In the original version the scene was more callous with the Justice of the Peace asking loudly, "Who pays me?" as Joe was escorted out.[1] Later, as he is battered by circumstances, our sympathies are still with him. Even when he becomes a stool pigeon he is hardly despicable. He hopes to deceive the boss and remain true to his class. Each betrayal is extracted from him by force. Prescott wins by reminding Joe of his obligations to his wife and child. Even when he is most treasonous, when he divulges the organizer's name, it is hard to hate him. He is a trapped animal. Prescott fires with both barrels: he will fire Joe, he will evict his entire family, he will withhold the doctor, he will expose Joe for a stool pigeon by disclosing the recording of their interview and claim that the ten dollars Joe took as a loan was bloodmoney. Joe becomes a pathetic wretch.

Throughout Joe's decline and fall, Maltz mitigates Joe's personal

---

[1]Maltz, "Black Pit," Promptbook, p. P1.

culpability by emphasizing the pressures that he must undergo. He wants society to share the blame for Joe's ethical demise. Joe, however, seems more a victim than the engineer of his own fate, and that is the major fault of the play. The cards are stacked aginst the central character. By slamming Joe into a wall of social injustices, by making his betrayals conspicuously coincide with the travails of his wife's pregnancy, Maltz attenuates Joe's individual responsibility for his deeds. Sklar was almost right. The audience might continue to sympathize with him despite his action because he was forced into it, as if there never was a choice, all viable alternatives having been wittled away from under him. Maltz attempts to avoid such a response in the third act which passes an unequivocal judgment on Joe's situation and behavior.

The play's acts correspond to the three frames of the action: Act One—Joe succumbs to the pressure and makes his fateful decision; Act Two—Joe acts as a stool pigeon; Act Three—he is unmasked and punished. Joe's role as an informer is publicly unveiled at a party Joe hosts to celebrate the birth of his son. Money for the beer and food has come from Prescott. Joe is at the lowest ebb of compassion or understanding in this scene. He is enjoying the benefits of his misdeeds openly. But like Macbeth in the banquet scene, the results of his action soon come to haunt him. Barolla, a fellow miner and union strongman, eyes Joe darkly. At a propitious moment he proclaims that Hansy has been beaten and hounded out of the patch. He fingers Joe as the informer. The proof: Joe claimes Anetsky went into a condemned room. Anetsky, a guest at the party demurs; Joe, he states, was in another room and could not possibly have seen where he, Anetsky, went. Just then, Hansy, bruised and bandaged, and some other miners rush in. There has been an accident at

the mine. There are a few casualties. The mine is hot, after all. The miners decide on an immediate wild-cat walkout. As they rush to the mine Joe shamefacedly trudges into his shack.

The final scene is Joe's recognition scene, the obligatory confession. Tony cross-examines him about the beer money and the contradictions concerning Anetsky's accident. Joe brazenly admits he is a stool pigeon, saying that he did it to survive, to pay the rent. Tony, speaking as the author's mouthpiece, blasts Joe: "(With a roar) No! Jesus Chris' you be lie. I no be lak you. I gone sleep on groun'. I gone eat coal, I gone die from starve 'fore I be cheat on odern miner. You wan' be stool pigeon? You lak be stool pigeon? Okay! (He spits) I no gone stay in same house wit' stool pigeon."[1] No hardships, no amount of suffering, no motivation, in short, can justify turning your back on your people. Because Joe is basically a good person, his heart cracks with pain when he hears the truth" "I be lie, Tony. I got sooch hurt in here, got sooch shame on me I wan't die now."[2] He immolates himself on the pike of his own conscience. In a larchrymose outburst he lacerates himself with degradation. Tony promulgates the edict on Joe's fate: "Joe, now you be no bett'r from ordern stool pigeon . . . you be rat now. . . . Now miner got hate heem. All miner got spit at heem."[3] Joe is execrated because he breached the cardinal rule of the worker—solidarity with the cause:

> Joe: I no wan' do, Tony. . . . I be wan' lil' bit somet'ings have . . . have awright lil' bit. . . .
> Tony: Have awright? How you wan' awright? By self, hah? By lie, by cheat by crawl on belly . . . Jesus chris', Joe, miner no can have noddings . . . you wan' somet'ings you got go wit'

---

[1]Maltz, Black Pit, p. 103. [2]Ibid., p. 104. [3]Ibid., p. 105.

odern miner, tak' cohmpany by throat, fight. . . .[1]

As an individual the worker is helpless against the might of the bosses. Mass action is the only way. To sabotage the masses is an abomination. For his sin, Joe is consigned to a classless purgatory. He is forever ostracized from the society of workers. He must even disinherit his son since Little Tony must grow up to be a "good union feller." Like the morality play, the last scene drives home the lesson of the story. The ending leaves no doubt about what conclusion the audience should draw. Joe's ignominious, desolate fate is deserved. His betrayal has transformed him from comrade to pariah.

Though the thrust of the play underscores the importance of class solidarity, Maltz makes a few other points. Black Pit adumbrates the many problems that face the miner. There are blacklists, the company towns, the company unions, yellow dog contracts, company dogs, and inadequate relief. On the job there are poor working conditions, low pay, and speed-ups. We learn how the company forces the miners to use postpullers instead of axes to knock timber out in order to reduce its insurance premiums. Because the miners are paid by the ton, the hour it takes them to use a postpuller is dead time. The bosses are oblivious to the dangerous working conditions in the mine in order to protect their sizable profits. When the mine gets hot, Prescott merely brings in safety lamps, a feeble measure since a spark from a cutting machine can cause an explosion. But Prescott's only concern is increased tonnage and decreased overhead.[2] Besides, they are now in the busy season: "We're watchin' it," Prescott tells Joe with fulsome assurance, "If the mine

---

[1]Ibid. [2]Ibid., p. 51.

gets hot we'll know it before anyone else does an' there'll be plenty of time t'clean things up in the slow season—right now we've got orders 'n' we gotta fill them.[1]

With the production of Black Pit the Theatre Union made its strongest effort toward a permanent company. The man chosen to direct the play was Michael Gordon. The Theatre Union's posture with regard to a permanent director was about the same as its attitude toward a permanent company. It recognized that it was important and it granted that it was working towards such an arrangement. Its main concern was to find a director who is "thoroughly imbued with the ideas of the theatre."[2] For the nonce it would settle for a directorship of several people, drawn from the ranks of its members when possible, who would alternate on productions.[3] So far its record was good; an outsider did the first production but Blankfort did Stevedore and Gordon did the next two.

In casting the play, twelve out of the company of seventeen were actors who had appeared in previous Theatre Union productions or were members of the Studio. As the alternative to a regular permanent company, the Theatre Union came up with a provisional notion of recycling as many of the actors as it could from production to production. Later in the spring, it formalized this policy by announcing the formation of a small core of eight to ten "flexible and adaptable" actors who would be cast in each production. Auxilliary casting, as necessary, from Broadway

---

[1]Ibid., p. 63.

[2]Theatre Union to Mr. Carlisle, 20 February 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]ML:M to Edward H. Barnhart, 21 November 1935, p. 2, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

and the Studio, would supplement this nucleus of a permanent company.[1] This was a reasonable palliative to diffuse the demands of critics like Leon Alexander.

Gordon directed the play with an emphasis on realism. To make the villainous characters more credible he cast Clyde Franklin in the role of Prescott. He hoped that Franklin (who usualy played sympathetic roles like the newspaper editor in Precedent, the liberal investigative reporter in Peace on Earth, and the abused father in Strangers at Home) would modify the antipathy of the role. He also directed the actors to search for and reveal the maximun of justification for the characters' behavior.[2] Gordon, no doubt, underscored the many details of local color that Maltz had observed and woven into the fabric of the play. There were such "old country habits" as cutting bread while holding it against the chest, there were the traditional Hungarian dances and an animated old Italian choosing-game in which the contestants try to guess the number of fingers two players will present. To these touches of European life were added the habits of the West Virginia mountain people like sharpening a razor inside a glass and "dip stuff," the act of rubbing the gums with a twig dipped in snuff.[3] Gordon paid particular attention to the various accents of the characters, attuning the actors' ear by directing in an accent.[4] Martin Wolfson, who played Tony, took special lessons from a Slavic stagehand then at the Theatre Union.

---

[1]Margaret Larkin, "Theatre Union—Its Tasks and Problems," Daily Worker, 15 May 1935, p. 5.

[2]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[3]Maltz, Black Pit, pp. 16, 87, 92, 26, 66.

[4]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

When Maltz heard Wolfson he found that the inflection was wrong—he wanted West Virginia Polish not New York Polish—so he coached the actor himself.[1]

The realism extended to the scenery, props, and costumes. The five locales called for in the script were designed by Tom Adrian Cracraft. Cracraft was a relative newcomer to Broadway, but a very busy one. His first design for the Great White Way was for Goodbye Again in December 1932. In the next two years, he did fourteen other productions. Prior to that he had worked as an assistant to Cleon Throckmorton, painting drops for the latter's "seacoast of Bohemia" adventure in Hoboken, and he had designed the Theatre de Famina in Paris.[2] Cracraft's design for Black Pit was based on his first-hand knowledge of the mines. While a student at the University of Utah and shortly afterwards, young Cracraft dug coal in Utah's Kenilworth mines. He earned a certificate from the U. S. Bureau of Mines for his training in first-aid and he took the test for "fire boss."[3]

The prison room, Tony's quarters, the room in the boarding house, the super's office, and the company house facade were created through a series of traditional box sets placed on rollers to expedite the ten scene shifts. Dressing the settings were many props and set pieces that evoked the mood and ambience. Each item was carefully selected to enforce the verisimilitude of the scene. Tony's quarters, for instance, was a precise simulacrum of deprivation and indigence, "The room is clean, but the total effect is one of miserable poverty."[4] An oil lamp illumines rotting wallpaper and newspaper pasted on the walls to patch old holes.

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin. [2]Ibid. [3]Ibid.

[4]Maltz, Black Pit, p. 8.

A worn oilcloth covers the table and, on the wall, hangs an old wedding portrait, the bride and groom dressed in traditional wedding garb. Also on the wall are several unframed Madonna prints and Murillo angels, a commonplace expression of faith in these homes where the religious, especially the wives, pray for the good fortune and safety of the miners. Other details complete the image: a ragged doll, a dented pail with a dipper, a frayed towel hanging on a nail, an old double bed with tarnished brass posters, a rickety ironing board pock-marked with burns. Maltz had been keen and efficient in his observations and he was ably served by Cracraft who was driven by a Belasco-like spirit of obsessive realism. For the safety lamps that were worn by the miners, Cracraft insisted on authentic Wolf Safety Lamps which had to be imported from Utah.[1]

The same attention to detail went into the preparation of the costumes. All the clothes had the requisite shabby, worn look. Shirts and dungarees were smeared with a mixture of Indian red greasepaint and glycerine and rose water. Felt hats were given a battered look by slashing them with a razor and burning the brim with a cigarette tip. Shoes were sandpapered to give them a scuffed appearance. The women's dresses were stylish Salvation Army models. Because miners' clothing is washed frequently with a strong soap, the dresses were put through a special "fading" process.[2] Every detail was meticulously considered. The total effect was comparable to documentary journalism. Miners, the ultimate authorities on the subject, who saw the production frequently commented on the exhaustive transposition of reality: "If you took a mining village and put it right on the stage, you couldn't do any better," said one.[3]

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin. [2]Ibid. [3]Ibid.

Economy was still important for the Theatre Union. The scenery cost $2,921.64, including $250 for Cracraft's designs. Mogens Petri, the production's technical director, achieved a minor coup by obtaining the props and costumes under his allotted budget; prop expenses were $99.47 and costumes were $81.56. Even so, the total production costs, including publicity, salaries, and miscellaneous expenses, registered a hefty $5,728.09.[1] This made a dangerous dent in the theatre's treasury, its bank account already depleted by the losses of the Stevedore tour. Through Walker's influence, the Nation published an appeal for the Theatre Union. It claimed that a narrow profit margin and the disastrous tour threatened the very existence of the organization and it urgently solicited contributions.[2] Advance ticket sales helped ease the Theatre Union's cash flow problems. By 12 March, 100 theatre parties, representing 23,347 seats, had been bought sight unseen. This was the equivalent of three weeks of sold-out performances.[3] Board members could at least be satisfied that they had cultivated a loyal, regular following. Additionally, three nights of previews, on the 16th, 18th, and 19th, for United Front Supporters, the Crown Heights Workers' School, and the Office Workers' Union, respectively, cut the production cost by $550.[4]

Black Pit opened Wednesday night, 20 March 1935. It was the only play to open that week. Since the opening of The Sailors of Cattaro, Broadway was beginning, albeit dimly, to recognize the effects of the

---

[1] Financial Report, 1934-35.

[2] "Editorial Paragraphs," Nation, 6 March 1935, p. 263.

[3] Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4] Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Financial Report, 1934-35.

social crisis. Of the fifty-three plays that opened between 10 December 1934 and 20 March 1935, four reflected social conditions. These were Rain from Heaven, S. N. Behrman's drama of manners which made a bleak comment on the spectral shadow of racial intolerance that was creeping over Europe; The Petrified Forest, Robert Sherwood's allegory of futility, disillusionment, and defeat; Awake and Sing, Odets's drama of middle-class hope; and Panic, Archibald Macleish's verse play dealing with the collapse of capitalism because of incapacitating fear. None of the plays however, as provocative as they were, dealt with social problems from the point of view of the working class.

By and large, the critics of New York's regular dailies and weeklies received Black Pit with guarded praise. Witnessing the Theatre Union's fourth production, they were willing to accede, in some instances obliged to, that this organization was a producing unit to be reckoned with. Its attention to the quality of its productions was consistently on a par with the standards above Forty-second Street. And if its plays were strongly partisan, with a pronounced proclivity for melodrama, they were, if they were accepted on their own terms, often moving and always well-intentioned. Among those who approved of the play for one reason or another were the following: John Mason Brown, John Anderson, Richard Lockridge, Robert Garland, Percy Hammond, Arthur Ruhl, Burns Mantle, Stark Young, Euphemia Wyatt, Grenville Vernon, and the critics from Variety, the American, and the Brooklyn Citizen.[1] Two critics, Arthur

---

[1]John Mason Brown, "The Theatre Union Presents Alan Baxter in 'Black Pit,' A Play By Albert Maltz," Evening Post, 21 March 1935; John Anderson, "'Black Pit' Theatre Union Hits Mark With Play Revealing Life in Coal Fields," Evening Journal, 21 March 1935; Richard Lockridge, "'Black Pit,' a Drama of the Coal Mines is Offered in Fourteenth Street," Sun, 21 March 1935; Robert Garland, "'Black Pit' Offering of the Theatre

Pollock and Thomas Dash, gave Black Pit especially high marks, the former considering it the best of the Theatre Union's offerings, highly impressed with its earnest characterizations, and the latter insisting that it was a strong contender for that season's Pulitzer Prize.[1]

In general, what appealed to most of the critics was the relatively cool temper of the play. The author, they said, is as duteous to theatrical exigencies as he is to the needs of his propaganda. Unlike previous Theatre Union plays Maltz had held back from throwing the audience into a delirious frenzy; propaganda, though certainly present was restrained. Many of the critics characterized Black Pit as a melodrama, but the term was intended as a compliment to explain the source of the play's power. The play was seen as a compelling, vigorous, exciting drama whose convictions about the grim conditions of the mine laborer were persuasively set forth. There was, too, subdued praise for Maltz's craftsmenship, especially his control of character. The two major reservations held about the play were that its villainous character was overdrawn and unremittingly dastardly and that its ending was clubfooted, providing

---

Union: Play Given at Civic Repertory Shows a Picture of Life in Coal Mines," World Telegram, 21 March 1935; Percy Hammond, "Black Pit," Herald Tribune, 21 March 1935; Arthur Ruhl, "Theatre Union's Play of Protest is Incidentally a Good Show," Herald Tribune, 31 March 1935; Burns Mantle, "'Black Pit' At the Civic Repertory: The Case for the Exploited Coal Miner is Honestly Argued in Drama," Daily News, 21 March 1935; Stark Young, "Of Blackest Midnight Born." New Republic, 17 April 1935, p. 289; Euphemia Van Rensselar Wyatt, "Black Pit," Catholic World, May 1935, pp. 213-214; Grenville Vernon, "Black Pit," Commonweal, 5 April 1935, p. 654; Kauf., "Black Pit," Variety, 21 March 1935; M. B., "'Black Pit' Opens at Civic Repertory, Is a Stirring Drama," American, 21 March 1935; "Theatre Union Presents 'Black Pit' at the Civic Repertory Theatre," Brooklyn Citizen, 21 March 1935.

[1]Arthur Pollock, "'Black Pit,' Well Presented, Remains Only a Picture," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 24 March 1935; Thomas R. Dash, "Black Pit," Women's Wear Daily, 21 March 1935.

the playwright with a facile, rather tedious vehicle for mounting a soap box and making certain his sermon was clearly understood. Noteworthy among the minority of critics who expressed a dissenting view were Brooks Atkinson, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Edith Isaacs. They found, in various degrees, Maltz's playwriting to be defective. Atkinson said the "stock melodramatic formula" had a "hackneyed look" despite the uses to which it was put.[1] Krutch lamented that though Maltz was proper in his approach, "workmanlike" in his writing, the play is "quite uninspired;" "it rises to no great heights of excitement and it remains for the most part respectably pedestrian."2 Isaacs is less patient with Maltz, saying the he "creates no response but ennui, and disappointment at his ability to make a vigorous subject live vigorously."[3]

Once again, however, the production was highly praised. "As is its habit," noted John Brown, "the Theatre Union has given Mr. Maltz's play a production which emphasizes all that is most vigorous and anguishing in the script."[4] There were the customary compliments for the director who was "sensibly restrained" in his direction, making the production "well-paced and full of vigor."[5] Gordon was also lauded for his pictorial arrangements of the group scenes.[6] One critic was so

---

[1]"'Black Pit' Being Albert Maltz's Drama of Coal Miners in West Virginia," New York Times, 21 March 1935, p. 26

[2]"Case History," Nation, 3 April 1935, p. 399.

[3]"Other New Plays—'Black Pit,'" Theatre Arts, May 1935, p. 331.

[4]"Alan Baxter," 21 March 1935.

[5]Mantle, "Case for Coal Miner," 21 March 1935; Anderson, "Union Hits Mark," 21 March 1935.

[6]Atkinson, "Albert Maltz's Drama," 21 March 1935; Brown, "Alan Baxter," 21 March 1935; Vernon, "Black Pit," p. 654.

taken with Gordon's attention to detail that he claimed, half facetiously, the production made theatrical history "in that a pregnant woman was made up a pregnant woman and no nonsense about it."[1] Remarks about the setting were brief. We learn only that Cracraft's work was "stunningly effective," "properly sombre," and "authentic".[2] Alan Baxter's protrayal of Joe Kovarsky was, like the play itself, generally lauded. This was Baxter's first opportunity in a leading role. He had been at Yale while Maltz and Sklar were there and he had played minor roles in Men in White, Gold Eagle Guy, and The Pure in Heart. His performance as the misguided stool pigeon impressed Anderson for its "directness, fervor and fine honesty."[3] Others found his work "substantial and convincing," "sturdily sustained," and possessed of "a fine pathos."[4] On the negative side, Atkinson found his dialect falsely idiomatic and Isaacs considered his "drawing-room comedy appearance" incongruent with the needs of the play.[5] Others in the cast who were singled out for praise were Martin Wolfson, Millicent Green, and Clyde Franklin.

If the Theatre Union had, to a certain extent, overcome the prejudices of the "bourgeois" press, Black Pit provided problems in its own ideological backyard. The left was, to say the least, tepid about the

---

[1]Wolcott Gibbs, "The Mine and the Market," New Yorker, 28 March 1935.

[2]Anderson, "Union Hits Mark," 21 March 1935; Isaacs, "Other Plays," p. 332; Rowland Field, "'Black Pit' A Melodrama of the Coal Miners Is Presented by the Theatre Union at the Civic Repertory Theatre," Brooklyn Times Union, 21 March 1935.

[3]Anderson, "Union Hits Mark," 21 March 1935.

[4]Lockridge, "Drama of Coal Mines," 21 March 1935; Mantle, "Case for Coal Miner," 21 March 1935; Young, "Blacklist," p. 289.

[5]"Albert Maltz's Drama," p. 26; "Other Plays," p. 332.

play. No one, to be sure, damned it outright, but there was an element on the left that was vocal about the play's shortcomings. The problem began, according to Maltz, when the play was still in rehearsal. A bullish rumor, emanating from within the Communist left, spread that Black Pit glorified a stool pigeon. There was, as Maltz elucidates, "a mingled left-wing euphoria and shortsightedness; of saying that you can't treat a stool pigeon as a human being, plus a certain amount of jealousy about the Theatre Union."[1] In its pre-opening publicity the Theatre Union tried to stem the rumors by emphasizing that the Theatre Union was still on the right side (or the left side, as it were) of the barricades. Press releases advised readers that Black Pit was not only revolutionary drama, but that it marked an advance in this genre. Black Pit, these proclaimed, was a character play as opposed to a plot play, a human, personal drama in contradistinction to the schematic, thesis laiden Peace on Earth and Stevedore. Man's timeless struggle within his own soul had been adapted to the needs of the new social theatre. The promotional announcements promised that regardless of this psychological approach the class forces causing the central situation would be sharply analyzed.[2]

Opening night lobby talk was divided. Those moved by the play exalted it as potent propaganda laying bare the degeneracy of an economic system which forces good men to betray both their class and themselves. Those opposed to the play decried it as a scandalous, disgraceful evocation of pity for the stool pigeon, a creature who should be despised not

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Margaret Larkin, "How One Type of Workers is Corrupted by Capitalism is Theme of 'Black Pit,'" Daily Worker, 19 March 1935, p. 5; "Backstage: Black Pit," New Theatre, March 1935, p. 26.

understood.[1] The left's theatre critics reflected this dichotomy of thought. Carl Reeve, of the Daily Worker, could barely disguise his disappointment. For him the play fell short of being the classic it could have been. He grants that Maltz's eye for the details of the miners' ambience and the facts of his unending struggle are unassailable. Maltz fails, however, in his choice of theme:

> The main theme of the play shows that because of personal considerations a strong union man has been degenerated by the employers and the capitalist system. Undoubtedly the capitalist system by means of force, of poverty and oppression destroys the working class integrity of such weaklings as Joe turned out to be. This is true to life, but is a minor theme in the class strugle which is now going on in the mining field.
>
> What is now typical of the struggle of the miners—what was brought brought in "The Black Pit" not as the main theme but as the background and through minor characters—is the heroic struggle which masses of miners are putting up to maintain their unions and defeat the wage cutting drive of the employers and the Roosevelt government. In the struggle, which is now the main concern of every miner, there are dramatic stories which I believe would if made into a play far better carry forward the fight of the miners, and an understanding of that fight, than the main theme of "The Black Pit."[2]

The play would have better served the politics of the labor movement if it had featured the central concern of the struggle to establish the union rather than the fringe issue of the union spy. Nonetheless, Reeve encourages workers to see the production because of the Theatre Union's effective staging and because "It gives a vivid picture of the conditions which miners face in a company patch."[3]

Joseph North, an editor of the New Masses, delivered that journal's

---

[1]Stirling Bowen, "Propaganda and Drama," Wall Street Journal, 22 March 1935.

[2]Carl Reeve, "Despicable Role of Scab," Daily Worker, 23 March 1935, p. 7.

[3]Ibid.

opinion of Maltz's play. Like Reeve, North admired the slice-of-life realism of the play. He was most impressed, as was Reeve also, with the boarding house scene: "here the playwright got off the proletarian's life brilliantly. The game of cards, the bottle of beer, the swapping of yarns, the quick camaraderie—it's all there as real as a coal tipple. These are the miners: the strong men of the class destined for power."[1] However, the play, North contends, is fundamentally flawed. It views the miners' struggle through the wrong end of the worker's binoculars. Proletarian literature, he instructs Maltz, is esteemed to the degree that it is a "keen weapon in the armory of the working class." The themes of such works must induce "the audience to a clear conception of social forces, to a hatred of capitalism, to a mode of action." Teneb-rously he acknowledges that Maltz "meets these considerations, but that he does so lamely. He asserts that a shift in emphasis would have elevated the stature of the drama which is otherwise redundant:

> When the playwright sets out to tell his audience of workingmen that obloquy and limitless misery are the lot of the traitor, he tells a tale more than twice told. . . .
>
> If, through indirection, the tragedy of the stool pigeon would cast into bolder relief the heroism of the rank and file (for that is the great reality) then Maltz'z emphasis could be understood. But unfortunately the impression remains that he has not succeeded in his device . . . The splendor of the miner is his indomitableness—his first class fighting qualities. Though this appears in the play, it is relegared to a secondary role.[2]

In other words, Black Pit illustrates the noxious, seamier side of the labor movement. The working class wants to see, declared North, the heroes of the revolution; the Tonys with their proletarian courage, not

---

[1]Joseph North, "Theatre Union's 'Black Pit,'" New Masses, 2 April 1935, p. 43.

[2]Ibid., p. 42.

the craven Joes. North also takes Maltz to task regarding his portrait of Iola, a point which caught Reeve's eye as well. The typical miner's wife is not the leech-like, undermining influence Joe's wife appears to be. She is imbued with the spirit of the revolution and is a strudy supporter of the pickets and strikes. Something other than a fleeting allusion to such women should have been inserted to balance the picture.[1]

The report from New Theatre was a little more heartening. Herbert Kline gave Maltz credit for composing the "first revolutionary tragedy," a play "high in quality of writing, in rich characterization, in sustained emotional intensity." But Kline, too, chastized Maltz for a lack of balance, "his failure to give a proportionate representation to the lives of other miners besides Joe and Tony." He offers the playwright the following recommenations: replace the first scene with a welcome party for Joe given by the miners, enhance our sympathy for the miners by introducing them into the action rather than just reporting their names, show us the miners at work thereby dramatizing the implications of Joe's lies. Kline was generally pleased with Gordon's staging, favorably commenting on the scenes between Joe and the Super, and with Cracraft's design's, noting that the exterior of the company house at night was especially beautiful. His only criticism of the staging of the production was with the card-game strike meeting and the picnic scene which he felt were not given their full scope and dimensionality.[2]

These damp notices had their impact on the Theatre Union's box office. With the exception of the second week, the Theatre Union regis-

---

[1]Ibid., p. 43; Reeve, "Despicable Scab," p. 7.

[2]Herbert Kline, "Black Pit," New Theatre, April 1935, pp. 20, 33.

tered losses. The entire enterprise was jeopardized. As a result, Oak went to the Communists, advising them that unless they softened their judgment of Black Pit, and by extension the Theatre Union, the organization would fold.[1] In response Jack Stachel, a member of the Central Committe of the New York Communist Party, issued a modification of North's glowering review. Invoking the authority of Georgi Dimitroff, who said that the "negative example" can be made into an "educational warning" for the workers, Stachel negated North's strictures. He affirmed that the stool pigeon issue is a crucial one and that Maltz had taken care to inhibit sympathy for Joe at the end. The play does induce its audience to a militant vigilance because it vividly illustrates the machinations that can ensnare even a good, honest worker.[2] North's reply to Stachel appeared in the next day's Daily Worker. He said that he thought Black Pit was a good play and he allowed that perhaps, in the rush to meet his deadline, he did not fully develop the positive aspects of the play as he should have. He explains that he was absorbed more with his strong belief that Maltz's theme was inopportune for a proletarian writer at this juncture of the struggle. North cites Dimitroff, too. In the same speech, the General Secretary of the Comintern exhorted the Moscow Writers' Club, "'Where in our belle-lettristic literature are the heroes of the proletarian movement . . . ? Where are the figures which millions might emulate? Give us living examples, show us human beings of flesh and blood, that youth may learn from these living examples.'" North avers that his review was inspired by this sentiment. Proletarian

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[2]Jack Stachel, "On the Theatre Union's Play 'Black Pit,'" Daily Worker, 29 April 1935, p. 5.

literature is deficient in positive heroes that workers can identify with and esteem, figures who could serve as models of courage and determination. It is inappropriate at this time to examine the anomolous weaklings of the proletariat. "The whole question," North concludes, "is a matter of the degree of effectiveness at this specific time. The effect is greater, I submit, when we depict 'somebody to emulate' than somebody not to emulate."[1]

Subsequently, there appeared in print a chain of commentaries from unimpeachable sources all supportive of the play. The New York Times printed a letter from Isador Schneider, the leftist writer on the editorial board of the New Masses, who ratified the validity of choosing a stool pigeon as the principle character because that spotlights how capitalism "crushes and corrupts," making Black Pit "uniquely impressive as a social document."[2] Phil Frankfield, a union organizer, expressed much the same opinion in the Daily Worker:

> Stool pigeons are social phenomena. Capitalism is responsible for the creation of the labor spy as a means of provoking, splitting and organizing disruption in the ranks of the workers. It is a tactic of class war. To get a clear conception of the stool and his degeneracy is not to excuse him—but rather helps clarify the purposes of provocation and arouses hatred against the system responsible for that institution.

He also testifies from first-hand knowledge that the case of Joe Kovarsky is not only possible but has, in fact, occurred. He cites two instances of militant workers who deserted their creed.[3] Then there was Pat Toohey, another union field-worker, who documented how the informer, "an abscess"

---

[1]Joseph North, "Joseph North Answers Jack Stachel on 'Black Pit,'" Daily Worker, 30 April 1935, p. 5.

[2]"Sign of the Whistle," New York Times, 12 may 1935, sec. 10, p. 2.

[3]"Splendidly Realistic Portrayal," Daily Worker, 18 May 1935, p. 7.

plaguing the mines, is "one of the most characteristic features of mining town life," systematically developed by the employers to the degree that they seriously paralyze the miners' efforts to organize and better their intolerable conditions." He adds that the "made stool pigeon," the worker who is well-known and trusted, is the most dangerous variety of this specie.[1] In addition to this defense of Black Pit, the Theatre Union issued press releases that underscored the authenticity of the play. In one, the reactions of two miners, John Borsick and Aubrey Price, were transcribed as they watched the play and spontaneously expressed recognition of the environment of the play, the characterization of the Super, the exploitation of the miners, and the difficulties encountered in organizing themselves.[2] Another, quoted an excerpt from a congratulatory letter from William Sprang, the President of the Pittsburgh District Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers' Union: "It gives a vivid picture of the plight, misery and starvation of the miners and their struggles to better their lot. The stool pigeon in the play is real."[3] Other endorsements of the play were received from Carl Brodsky, Secretary of the New York State Committee of the Communist Party; Nathaniel Buchwald, theatre critic of the Yiddish language Der Freiheit; Mike Stanovich, President of the United Mine Workers Local 3506 of Russellton, Pennsylvania; and Clarence Irwin, President District 6 the Amalgamated Iron, Steel and Tin Workers' Union.[4]

---

[1]Pat Toohey, "More About 'Black Pit,'" Daily Worker, 30 May 1935, p. 5.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin. [3]Ibid.

[4]Carl Brodsky to Theatre Union, n.d.; Nathaniel Buchwald to Theatre Union, n.d.; Mike Stanovich to Theatre Union, 22 March 1935; Clarence Irwin to Theatre Union, 8 May 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

These, the Theatre Union liberally incorporated in its publicity effort among the labor unions and factories.

The controversy concerning Black Pit was taken up at several symposia. The Bronx Cooperative House and the Plymouth Friendship League of Brooklyn both independently sponsored debates on the work. Margaret Larkin represented the Theatre Union at the former and Maryn Myers, who was the assistant director of the Theatre Union Studio, spoke for the Theatre Union at the latter.[1] The most striking symposium on the subject was arranged by the Partisan Review (the official organ of the John Reed Club) at the Civic Repertory Theatre on 5 May. The Theatre Union footed the bill which brought them a net loss of $29.37.[2] The celebrity panel included Clarence Hathaway, a leading Communist and editor of the Daily Worker; Joshua Kunitz, writer and editor for the New Masses; Leon Alexander; Mike Gold; Mordecai Gorelik; and Albert Maltz. The discussion was chaired by Herbert Kline. Maltz, anticipating the "controversial symposium" said, "This discussion I think will have a lively, Left flavor."[3] There is little doubt that it did. At the meeting, Hathaway, mindful of the Theatre Union's precarious position, gave his imprimatur to the play saying that stool pigeons are a tremendous problem in the trade union movement and that the play is sound in its class consciousness.[4]

A fortuitous occurrence with respect to the publicity for Black Pit was the release in April of Black Fury, a film on the life of a coal

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Financial Report, 1934-35.

[3]Albert Maltz to Leo Marsh, n.d., Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

miner, featuring Paul Muni. The film was a rowdy melodrama, which afforded the Theatre Union the opportunity to strike back at the critics and to boost the importance of its own drama. Maltz was the general in the crusade. With a hectoring sneer he revived the old art vs. propaganda debate by asking, "Why is it that a good play which says that miners have a good reason to strike is propaganda, while a picture which says miners have no reason to strike is not propaganda?"[1] Black Fury must be considered propaganda, too. Its many errors and distortions are tailored to promote a very obvious class bias. Harry Irving, the film's co-author, replied that the purpose of the film was entertainment and enlightenment, not propaganda. The film was merely a protrayal of an objective slice-of-life, the story of a man caught in a human situation.[2] Maltz, of course, rebutted Irving's rather narrow definition of propaganda by affirming that propaganda is not determined by intention but by the inherent position of the work itself: "An author is propagandist by what he says or fails to say. He is a propagandist for one cause or another, directly or indirectly, by the very nature of the 'slice-of-life' he selects or fails to select."[3] This discussion culminated in yet another symposium. Entitled "Black Pit vs. Black Fury: Where does the Truth Lie?" the debate was held 28 April, under the auspices of the Theatre Union at the Belasco Theatre. The panel, moderated by Harry Hansen (book editor and literary critic of the World Telegram) included Judge

---

[1]Albert Maltz, "'Black Pit' vs. 'Black Fury': Which Play is Propaganda?" Post, 17 April 1935.

[2]Harry Irving, "It's Art—Not Propaganda, Says Author of 'Black Fury,'" Post, 19 April 1935.

[3]"What is Propaganda?" New York Times, 28 April 1935, sec. 10, p. 3.

M. A. Musmano, co-author of the film, Albert Maltz, Mrs. Gifford Pinchot (wife of the ex-governor of Pennsylvania), the film critics of the New York Times, the World Telegram, and the Nation, Mike Gold, and the film actress Rose Hobart.[1] The guests of honor were four miners from the Pennsylvania coal fields who were invited to see both the film and the play and to comment on both at the symposium. Admission was set at 25¢, or 40¢ and 1,200 people attended, with 200 more turned away because there were no more seats.[2] Despite the receipts and a $100 gift from Hammond, the Theatre Union absorbed a loss of $104.86.[3] But it was well worth it, provoking serious discussion about the propaganda vs. art argument. Fred Siders, one of the miners, proved to be one of the more popular speakers, captivating the audience with his knowledge of mining and his skillful, intuitive analysis of the drama.[4] Attending this symposium as an auditor was Friedrich Wolf, who had arrived in New York too late to catch his own play, but in time to observe first-hand the status of the American workers' theatre as exemplified by the Theatre Union. In his essay on the "New York Theatrefront—1935," Wolf stepped right into the Black Pit imbroglio, giving his European perspective on the work. He wondered, as did Reeve and North before him, whether the figure of the spy was so central in the American labor movement as to make Joe a significant negative hero. In Europe, this was not so sig-

---

[1] Judge Musmanno could not attend the symposium. In a letter to the Theatre Union he claims he had previous commitments. (26 April 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.)

[2] Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3] Financial Report, 1934-35.

[4] Maltz to Marsh, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

nificant a question. Moreover, why would such a worker with a record of union ardor, who betrayed his class out of desperation, not be rehabilitated? Could he not be brought back into the fold and join the picket lines at the last moment? He learned from Maltz that the stool pigeon was Maltz's dramatic vehicle for getting at the question of class betrayal and that spies were an important factor in strike battles.[1]

What conclusions can we derive from the commotion within the left concerning Maltz's play? The controversy brings into focus the shortcomings and limitations of a political theatre which endeavors to propagate a single, very definite point of view. One reason that the Communists did not like Black Pit could be that the play, experimenting with the tactics of revolutionary drama by stressing the tragedy of the negative hero, became politically ambiguous, ambiguity being the cardinal sin of a political play. Proletarian drama must induce a mode of action, we were told. It cannot induce action if the audience's feelings are divided, or worse, if the audience is uncertain of what position to take. Gold, in setting forth the principles of what he called "proletarian realism" some years earlier, left little doubt about the need for pristine pellucidity: "Swift action, clear form, the direct line, cinema in words; this seems to me one of the principles of proletarian realism. It knows exactly what it believes and where it is going; this makes for its beautiful youthful clarity."[2]

With Black Pit the critics were not saying that it did not know where it was going, rather that the average worker spectator, particularly

---

[1]Wolf, Aufsaetze, pp. 304-305.

[2]Gold, "Proletarian Realism," p. 5.

the unclassconscious one, would be puzzled by his pity for Joe. The point here is that the political play admits no nuance. Arthur Koestler summed it up in Darkness at Noon when he has Rubashov write in his diary, "It is necessary to hammer every sentence into the masses by repetition and simplification. What is presented as right must shine like gold, what is presented as wrong must be black as pitch. For consumption by the masses, the political process must be colored like ginger-bread figures at a fair."[1] There can be no grey areas.

Another related matter is the role of the hero in the new revolutionary theatre. The emphasis which Marxist ideology places on the masses in the class struggle demands that character, any character, be it hero or villain, be viewed not as an individual but as a representative product of his class. As Piscator said, "the individual not only reflects his class, he is also one factor in its historic development. Not the asborbing destiny of one person alone but a course of events valid for a class, for an epoch, is the foundation of the new dramatic art."[2] The social drama seeks to identify the characteristics that men, because of their class affiliation, have in common. It is not interested in what distinguishes one man from another, what individuates people. A man shares the hardships, the triumphs, the defects of his class. He evinces character traits and behavioral inclinations that are conditioned by the history of his class. That is why the characters of proletarian drama are homogenized into either glorious workers or nefarious villain-bosses. The caricatures of the old agit-prop sketches have not disap-

---

[1]Trans. Dophne Hardy (New York, Bantom Books, 1966), p. 190.

[2]"Social Theatre," p. 14.

peared, they have been a little modulated and fleshed out. That is why North could fear that the good worker turned stool pigeon might give the impression that America was "a breeding place for stool pigeons."[1] Maltz's experimentation with personality, his attempt to graft a psychologically troubled character onto the format of the proletarian drama met with chagrin because it abstracted the character from his class, it forced attention on individual motives beyond what was acceptable. Paradoxically, Maltz's purpose demanded just such a treatment. The question remains, however, what is acceptable? Is it possible to write a proletarian character play or is this a contradiction in terms? The left did not think this was an impossibility, but that writers had to continue searching for the right balance:

> There is, of course, nothing that excludes both character and action entering a play to an equal degree, and in our opinion there is nothing in the direct or indirect treatment of out material which determines the stress. We have yet to produce a revolutionary play in America which strikes an effective balance between inner conflict and outer events, between the drama of the individual and the drama of his class.[2]

A third implication of this affair centers around North's insistence on heroes the masses could emulate. This has to do with Blankfort's theory about the interrelation of the notions of wishfulfilment, identification, and the call to action, as was explained earlier. It is useful to recall these concepts when examining the left's dislike of Black Pit. The left believed, North and Reeve saying as much, that workers yearned for dramas which portrayed the vigor of their struggle and characters with which they could identify. Such a drama invariably culminates

---

[1]"Union's 'Black Pit,'" p. 43.

[2]Blankfort and Buchwald, "Social Trends," p. 134.

in a call to action which elicits a rousing response from the audience, the kind of response elicited by Peace on Earth, Stevedore, and the flag waving of The Sailors of Cattaro. Aside from focusing on a negative hero, Black Pit was unique in that there was no overt appeal for audience action. The drama did not rally the spectators to the barricades nor did it urge them to grab a club or a sign and fight. There were no ringing speeches to provide the catharsis. The closest it came to one was Tony's censure of Joe, and that was a chastisement not a harangue. Emotionally, Black Pit's ending was muted, still with remorse, quiet with contrition and regret. The vociferous optimism of the other Theatre Union plays, of plays like the hot tempered Waiting for Lefty, was implied at best.

Finally, the controversy surrounding Black Pit is indicative of the Party's abiding desire to control and monitor artistic expression on the left. The United Front was now in full swing. The left encouraged artists of whatever tinge of crimson to join in the proletarian crusade, but it was ever energetic in inculcating a proper sense of priotities, making certain, in other words, that political concerns were not obfuscated by artistic ingenuity. In his reviews of Black Pit, North ascribed Maltz's choice of emphasis to his "relatively recent initiation into the proletarian environment." He then instructed the novitiate political dramatist that "clearly, considerations of political content should occupy a higher place in this theatre; a place on a par with its technical level."[1] This is to say that a work of proletarian literature is judged as much by the political points it scores as by its artistic achievements. This was an aesthetic philosophy which returned to haunt Maltz in the

---

[1]"Theatre Union's 'Black Pit,'" p. 43.

the late forties when he boldly challenged the notion that "Art is a Weapon" means that political utility supplants intrinsic value as the criterion for success.[1]

The matter of the aesthetics of revolutionary literature was taken up at the first American Writers' Congress. In order to put muscle behind the United Front platform and to attract eminent writers to the cause, the New Masses issued a call for a writers' convention. Its purpose was twofold: politically, it would unite artists against the menace of encroaching war and Fascism; aesthetically, it would establish for the intellectual left the guiding principles of revolutionary literature in America. A corollary purpose was to abandon the John Reed Club and substitute for it the broader League of American Writers which was to be an affiliate of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers.[2] The Congress convened 26 April 1935 at New York's Mecca Temple. Attending were 216 delegates from twenty-six states, 150 writers from around the world and 4,000 spectators; Granville Hicks, the respected literary critic and an editor of New Masses, presided.[3] Dramatists and theatre people who went to the meetings were Em Jo Basshe, John Howard Lawson, Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, Virgil Gaddes, Paul and Claire Sifton, John Wexley, Sidney Howard, Friedrich Wolf, Peter Martin, and Herbert Kline. The Theatre Union was represented by a sizeable contingent which included Maltz, Sklar, Peters, Blankfort, and Gomez.[4] Just prior to the meetings

---

[1]Aaron, Writers on Left, pp. 386-389.

[2]Henry Hart, ed. American Writers' Congress (New York: International Publishers co., 1935), p. 10; "Call for an American Writers' Congress," New Masses, 22 January 1935, p. 20.

[3]Hart, Writers Congress, p. 12. [4]Post, 25 April 1935.

Blankfort proposed an agenda for the writers to consider:

> The following problems, which can best be summarized in four questions, will be considered by the writers. These are: What shall my political orientation and participation be? What is my economic outlook and how may I broaden my audience? What are the pressing literary problems related to the struggle against war and Fascism? And, finally, how can I help in creating the League of American Writers?[1]

Albert Maltz chaired the playwrights' commission which, besides probing the nature and function of proletarian literature in general, examined the status of the workers' theatre and offered a healthy prospectus for its future. Many of the reports to the commission were simply sky-writing press agentry: Peter Martin described the program of the New Theatre League; Gomez enumerated the achievements of the Theatre Union. The two theatre-related papers that were read did try, however, to shed some light on the aesthetics problems.[2] Lawson's paper on "The Technique of the Drama" was an abstract of his soon to be completed Theory and Technique of Playwriting. It formulated the proposition that the social theme of a play was expressed in the structure of the action.[3] The other paper, "Social Trends in Drama," was co-authored by Blankfort and Nathaniel Buckwald. It categorized social plays into five groupings: the theatre of the status quo, the theatre of individual protest, the theatre of social protest, a transitional social theatre, and the professional revolutionary theatre. The latter, or course, was preferred and was best exemplified in the works of the Theatre Union. Among the many functions of such a theatre were the illumination of the contradictions of capililalism, winning over the middleclass, coaxing the workers

---

[1] "Writers' Congress," New Theatre, April 1935, p. 29.

[2] Hart, Writers' Congress, pp. 180-81.

[3] Ibid., pp. 123-28.

into class consciousness, and serving the needs of the picket line.[1]

Black Pit maintained a run of eleven weeks before closing on 1 June. Organizations ranging from the Dentists Wives League and the Brooklyn College Drama Study Club to the Workman's Circle and the Mapleton American League Against War and Fascism bought theatre party benefits. But overall the controversy over the play had a negative impact. Attendance was down, causing nearly ten weeks of consecutive losses amounting to $2,069.53. Added to the pre-opening expenses, the total loss for Black Pit was $7,247.62.[2]

As the Theatre Union ended its second season, it faced two major problems--money and plays. The Stevedore reopening brought in a small profit and The Sailors of Cattaro came within $870. 38 of repaying its nut, but the loss on Black Pit was a bitter pill and the losses of the Stevedore tour wiped out any hopes of a balanced budget. The financial set up of the Theatre Union made it especially difficult for the organization to be self-sustaining. Even with its frugal production budgets the large number of cheap seats made it almost impossible, unless there were more "blockbusters" like Stevedore, to recoup the initial cost of the production and to show any kind of profit. The theatre was forced to rely on the magnanimity of friends and patrons. As long as the enterprise manifested vigor and hardiness the theatre could reasonably expect such support. One certain asset was Charles R. Walker. When the Theatre Union needed cash he turned to his many resourceful contacts. He made a fund-raising visit to Los Angeles and brought back, among others, a gift of $700 from Katherine Hepburn.[3] Others on the Theatre

---

[1]Ibid., pp. 128-34. [2]Financial Report, 1934-35.

[3]Walker, 9 September 1978; Financial Report, 1934-35.

Union staff plumbed their contacts as well, Mary Fox securing an anonymous donation of $2,000 and Zelda Dorfman bringing in an anonymous gift of $500.[1] As an organization the Theatre Union was indefatigable when it came to fund raising events. We have already noted the two balls that were held that season which together brought $288.63. On 22 May they held a $1.50 a plate anniversary dinner at the Hotel Delano. Guests were treated to a panel discussion on the subject of "The American Theatre--Right or Left?" (Maxwell Anderson, Blankfort, Sidney Howard, Maltz, Peters, Sklar, Maurice Wertheim, and Stark Young were the speakers) and were then asked to donate to the Theatre Union.[2] The evening was a bountiful success, bringing in $725 in pledges. At the end of the season though after considering all expenses and receipts, the Theatre Union showed a loss of $10,970.38.[3] The Theatre Union's economic troubles threatened its very existance. But assuming it did continue, and no one was yet questioning that assumption, economics would have a direct impact on the way future plays would be staged and restricted the kinds of plays the Theatre Union could consider.[4]

If the money problem was nettlesome, the play shortage problem was even more perplexing. There were few suitable plays on the horizon. All plays seemed to be stenciled reproductions of the standard strike play. Neither the play contest nor the script library brought any new talent to light. To complicate matters the Theatre Union exhibited a diffidence in the selection of its plays. It was, as we noted, reluctant

---

[1]Financial Report, 1934-35.

[2]Invitation, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Financial Report, 1934-35. [4]Larkin, "Tasks and Problems," p. 5.

to take risks with works that departed from the accepted formula of the proletarian play. The best illustration of this is the hapless fate suffered by Parade.

The Theatre Guild chose Parade to cap its seventeenth season, a season in which they produced plays by James Bridie, Maxwell Anderson, S. N. Behrman, Margaret Kennedy, and G. B. Shaw. It may have been chosen because as a musical revue it was thought to have a better chance for a healthy summer run or because the Guild recalled that the last time it did a revue (the Rodgers and Hart creme puff, the Garrick Gaieties, in three editions, 1925, 1926, 1930) it was very popular.[1] The Guild cast Jimmy Savo, Eve Arden, Ralph Riggs, Charles D. Brown, Avis Andrews, and Ezra Stone in key roles. Musical numbers were choreographed by Robert Alton and Philip Moeller and Lee Simonson served as the Guild's production committee.

Trouble began during the out-of-town tryouts in Boston. At one performance when Al Saxe's "Newsboy" was done (Sklar and Peters incorporated it into the revue) Massachusetts governor Fuller and a group of others in the Governor's party stalked out of the theatre. They were offended by the references to the Sacco and Vanzetti case, still a tender issue in that region of the country.[2] Subsequently, the Guild began cutting other politically pungent segments of the revue. They were able to do so at their discretion. The Dramatist Guild contract in effect at the time made no provisions for the author's rights in the case

---

[1]Roy S. Waldau, Vintage Years of the Theatre Guild, 1928-1939 (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1972), p. 203; Sklar, 18 July 1978.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

of a revue, thus giving the producers free reign to cut without the author's permission. "Newsboy" was dropped as was a chant about lynching and the song "Letter to the President" that had opened the show was removed after opening night. The revue became muddled by the sentimental and irrelevant nightclub-like acts that were injected as fillers. Alton's choreography was excessively lavish and out of place. A simply conceived episode, a piece involving snow shoveling, was seized upon as a production number with thirty-five high-heeled show girls tap dancing up and down a staircase.[1] The arbitrary surgery resulted in a meaningless, vapid, mangled hodgepodge. Parade closed after thirty-two performances, leaving the Theatre Guild with a loss of nearly $90,000.[2]

The satrical revue was disastrously out of place above Fourteenth Street. Had the Theatre Union produced it, it might have retained its identity and it might very well have been given the kind of production it needed. Charles Friedman, who later directed the runaway success of the labor stage, Pins and Needles, a satrical social revue on the order of Parade, was at that time a busy worker backstage at the Civic Repertory. The failure to do Parade and the fact that everyone, except the Theatre Union Executive Board, recognized that it was a natural for the Theatre Union may have affected the types of plays the Theatre Union received. Playwrights with unconventional plays may have sought other producers.

On the credit side, the Theatre Union had several strengths in its favor. It could take some confidence from the fact that it had consolidated a loyal audience following. It was acknowledged in all circles as

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [2]Waldau, Vintage Years, p. 203.

a leader in the workers' theatre movement, serving as a model for similar organizations across the counrty. It had gained the respect and attention of the bourgeois theatre. Its offerings were esteemed for their consistently high quality of production. If there was some debate about Black Pit no one would contest that it was a provocative play, well crafted by a solid talent. In The Sailors of Cattaro they also savored a success d'estime of an important European work. Moreover, it had added another laurel with the stirring, enthusiastically received London production of Stevedore that spring, featuring Paul Robeson in the leading role. Finally, the bustle in the Studio at the end of the season presaged the possible establishment of that dream—a permanent theatre company. The future boded well.

CHAPTER VI

THE THIRD SEASON:

MOTHER, LET FREEDOM RING, and BITTER STREAM

The play that was most likely to follow Black Pit was Strike Song by Loretto and J. O. Bailey. When Black Pit preempted it the year before, it was to be subjected to revisions and become the first play of the third season, with rehearsals beginning in August.[1] Maltz spent a great deal of time in correspondence with the authors, hoping to iron out the script's difficulties, and eventually the authors came to New York to consult with the Theatre Union. On 24 May 1935, the Studio did a reading of the play for the Executive Board with special invited guests attending. Martin Wolfson, whose directing experience consisted of having been assistant director for a production of The Front Page at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow, rehearsed members of the Black Pit cast for a one time showing of the piece without sets or props.[2] The trial viewing revealed more problems with the script so the play went back to be revised. A letter to colleagues at the Contemporary Theatre in Los Angeles suggests that the work the play needed was political, "to clarify the line of thé play and point its message." The authors agreed that the

---

[1] New York Times, 3 February 1935.

[2] Theatre Union to Jelliffe, 25 May 1936, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center: Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

script was not yet ready.[1]

During its summer retreat at Wellfleet, Massachusetts, the Executive Board continued to work on Strike Song and other scripts, still planning to open the strike play on 15 October.[2] By mid-August however, the Board announced that Mother, a play by Brecht with music by Hans Eisler, would replace Strike Song as the season's opener.[3] The Baileys' play was kept on reserve for later consideration but was never done, having cost the Theatre Union $85.75 in advance expenses, $50.00 for an advance reading option, and an undefinable sum in time and energy.[4]

The choice of Mother proved to be momentous for the Theatre Union not because it was written by Bertolt Brecht and that this was to become the first major production of the exiled German dramatist's work in America; Brecht was hardly known on this side of the Atlantic at that time. Mother turned out to be a turning point for the Theatre Union both economically and artistically. After its hasty departure, the theatre's fortunes lurched into a tailspin from which it would never recover. The production of Mother, fraught with acrimony and frustration, was not the only cause for the decline of the Theatre Union. Other factors, which we shall examine later, contributed to it as well. But

---

[1]Theatre Union to Contemporary Theatre, Los Angeles, California, 25 May 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection Lincoln Center.

[2]Herald Tribune, 26 May 1935.

[3]New York Times, 11 August 1935.

[4]Financial Report, 1934-35.

it is certainly a pivotal episode in the life of the Theatre Union and it demands close scrutiny.

One of the difficulties of ascertaining the facts about this production is that Brecht, a figure who aroused strong feeling pro and con, has in the intervening years been accorded the stature of one of the most significant practitioners of the modern theatre. No matter how often the merits of his plays or the validity of his theories are discussed, he is incontestably regarded as seminal and influential. Those among the Theatre Union who worked on the play and lived through the rancorous tempest that the impish man with the granny glasses stirred up are at odds, sometimes genuinely perplexed, about Brecht's current reputation. It is difficult for them to reconcile their bitter feelings toward the man with the esteem with which he is held in the world's eyes today. Their recollections of the affair, because it is freighted with deep emotional overtones, because it blends past experience with present esteem, often makes it difficult to untangle actuality from legend.

The Board was introduced to Brecht's play through Hans Eisler. So scant was knowledge of Brecht in America that for a time the Theatre Union considered it Eisler's work. An entry in the balance sheets at the end of the second season, 6 June 1935, states that $15.40 was paid out in advance expenses for "Eisler's 'Mother'."[1] Eisler, the German "revolutionary composer' who had studied with Arnold Schoenberg, fled Germany in 1932 because of political persecution. He had written music

---

[1]Financial Report, 1934-35.

for Peasant's Revolution, Tempo Der Zeit, Die Mass Nahme, two films (one, Kuhle Wampe written by Brecht), and Piscator's production of Kaufman von Berlin. Eisler came to America in February 1935, as part of an extended concert tour. At this time the Daily Worker hailed him as the "noted composer of Comintern."[1]

One evening during his stay in New York, Helen Black, Margaret Larkin's musical friend from Sante Fe, held a dinner party for Eisler to which she also invited several members of the Executive Board. The composer played the score of Mother and outlined the story. The Board members present were intrigued.[2] Peters, who knew German from his student days at the University of Munich, assumed the task of translating the play. It is unclear from the available record whether the Theatre Union secured Brecht's permission before proceeding with the translation, though it is likely they did. Maltz dimly recalls that the Theatre Union corresponded with Brecht to inquire about permission to translate the play and to adapt some scenes and having received an affirmative answer.[3]

"Eisler's" Mother seemed like an ideal play for the Theatre Union. The drama with music was based on Maxim Gorky's simple, homespun revolutionary novel, Mother. Written in America (in a log cabin in New York's Adirondack Mountains) while Gorky was in exile, the novel had

---

[1]Serge Radamsky, "Noted Composer of Comintern Arrives for U.S. Concert Tour," Daily Worker, 18 February 1935. p. 5.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[3]Maltz 15 July 1978.

been a runaway success when it was published in 1907. It portrayed the gradually awakening revolutionary consciousness of an ignorant, long-suffering Russian widow. The novel apotheosized the strength residing in the masses, the hope and zeal that inflamed the soul of the workers. Praised by Lenin, it was a passionate, inspiring novel that was translated into twenty-eight languages and published in hundreds of editions. Millions of workers around the world heard its clarion call for spirited progress toward Socialism. The novel was viewed as the prototypical example of Socialist Realism.[1] With its theme of the need for education and organized action by the working class, it was inevitable that the novel would find its way to the stage.

Brecht wrote his adaption of the novel in 1930 when he was doggedly pursuing the Lehrstuecke. As usual with Brecht's adaptations, the play deviated markedly from the novel. The playwright retooled the sentimental, compassionate story to fit his notion of a didactic epic theatre. The play opened at Berlin's Komoedienhaus Theatre on 17 January 1932 with Helene Weigel in the leading role. At the sixty-first performance the actors were arrested and the production was closed by the police. Later the play was given minimally staged readings before appreciative workers audiences. In 1932, Piscator directed Brecht's play in Moscow. Two years later another dramatization of the novel was done in Moscow at the Krasny Presny Theatre by the innovative director Nikolai Okhlopkov.[2]

---

[1] Tertz, Socialist Realism, p. 47.

[2] E. Stephen Karnot, "Krasny Presny," New Theatre, July-August 1934, pp. 6-8.

Thus, Mother came to the Theatre Union with impeccable credentials. It was based on a novel with universal appeal among workers and its stageability was proven. Moreover, after Black Pit it offered other appealing factors as well. Gorky's novel had an unquestionable upbeat tone; there could be little doubt about its purpose and its political message. Here was a story with a strong, affirmative hero, a character whose rectitude and personal integrity would make Dimitroff, North, and Reeve happy because of the way it encouraged emulation. Here, too, was a story which ennobled the stature of women in the struggle. This could be an opportunity to rectify the picture of women given in Black Pit. Finally, Eisler's music and the charming quality of some of the scenes offered the Theatre Union a change of pace. With the lesson of Parade still fresh in their memories, the Executive Board was ready for something a little more experimental.

Peters worked on the play all through the spring and early summer, completing his translation in July 1935. As he worked on it he discovered that he preferred Gorky's version of the story to Brecht's revamping of it. In a letter to Barbara Nixon of England's Left Theatre, who coincidentally was working on a dramatization of the novel herself (a translation which, their correspondence suggests, the Theatre Union was willing to consider in place of Peters's), Margaret Larkin states that Peters is doubtful as to whether the German or the Russian is more interresting. She told Nixon that Peters thinks "the Russian one has greater dramatic power in some ways."[1] In the end, Peters compromised, taking

---

[1][Margaret Larkin] to Barbara Nixon, 17 July 1935, Theatre Union File, Theater Collection, Lincoln Center.

what he found was the best of both versions.

> I followed the Brecht script quite closely, trying to find a single, vernacular speech for the characters, which might have deviated somewhat from the German, but not in thought and feeling.
>
> The play seemed valid and interesting to me to a certain point, after which it began to hammer away at obvious political points already previously made. At this point I turned to Gorki's novel and the movie that had been made of it in Russian and wrote a final scene in which the youth is caught and killed by the police and the mother, by this time familiar with her son's work and thought, carries on.[1]

Peters found the last third of the play repetitive, a point at which Brecht's political brio got the better of his dramatic judgment. As a result, the most radical surgery Peters performed occurs in the third act. Brecht's play was simply divided into scenes. Peters grouped these into acts which corresponded to the three phases of the protagonist's development.[2] The first act depicts the Mother, Pelagea Vlassova, as a class-consciously ignorant mother fretting about the health and welfare of her son, Pavel. Her first political action--distributing leaflets in the factory yard--springs from her protective maternal instincts rather than from any ideological motivations. It is Pavel's turn to distribute the revolutionary strike literature to the workers at the Sukhlinov factory; to prevent his risking arrest, she volunteers. Gradually, she learns the reasons for the strike, the difference between capitalist oppression and Marxist hope and the justification of the small band of

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2][Paul Peters] to Brecht, 4 September 1935, in "Der Briefwechsel Zischen Bertolt Brecht und der New Yorker Theatre Union Von 1935," ed. James K. Lyon, in Brecht-Jahrbuch 1975, ed. John Feug;, et. al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkemp Verlag, 1975), p. 141.

agitators whom Pavel has befriended. The act concludes with the abortive 1905 revolution where the Mother takes her first active step into the maelstrom of political the movement. At a first of May demonstration when Miligin, a worker in the forefront of the procession, is shot by the on-rushing militia, she grabs his red flag and keeps the march going.

In the first act the action is causal and straightforward. The second act shifts from a vertical movement to a lateral movement. Here Vlassova learns to read and write and prepares herself for party work. Her education in the intricacies of Socialist thinking broadens as she undertakes her first assignments--obtaining from Pavel who is in prison the names of trusted contacts in the countryside and disseminating the party's newsletter to the peasants in the country. A key focus in this act, one that according to Peters, threads the action, is the fresh relationship between mother and son which is guided by "die dritte Sache," their shared devotion to the cause of the Party. This act, in Peters's translation, ends with the Mother too busy feeding a printing machine to minister to Pavel who is running away from the police. Her conversion from solicitous mother to ardent revolutionary is complete. She has no time to say goodbye to her fleeing son, even though this could be the last time she will see him. Up to this point Peters was faithful to the structure and substance of Brecht's play. It was the last scenes which Peters found undramatic and dull:

> Here we all felt--others outside the theatre felt, too--a lack of clear and logical development. The political situation develops chronologically, it is true; but this is reflected in a series of scenes which do not grow one from the other, and in which the mother continues doing agitational work, such as distributing leaftest, which she has done before. Disregarding all questions of style of drama, there is no growth here as in the first or second series of scenes. That is why we felt the play stopped and became somewhat lost in this section.

> And that is why I drew on Gorki in the attempt to construct a new growth based on further political development and relationship between Pavel, his mother, and their common agitational work in the war.[1]

In Brecht's play the next scenes show how Pavel is caught at the border and executed, and how Vlassova continues her work as a committed Bloshevik. In "The Coat of Paper" scene she uses her native peasant cleverness to teach workers' wives how the prevailing system exploits them by preying on their ignorance and indifference. When the Bible-toting neighbors, in the next scene, come to commiserate with her grief at the loss of Pavel, she shrewdly exposes the hypocrisy of organized religion. She is then beaten for distributing seditious anti-government leaflets on the streets, but she rises out of her sickbed because of the needs of the revolution. Using reverse psychology, she thwarts the war effort by driving away women who are queued at a copper collection station. Brecht ends his play with the Mother at the vanguard of a street demonstration during the 1917 revolution.

Peters felt that the line of the action that had been developed up to the end of the second act was abruptly dispensed with in favor of this series of thumping political lessons. The relationship between the Mother and Pavel, a strong and prevailing matter in the novel, was dropped, and the only thing that gave the action coherence and forward motion was the temporal escalation of political events, i.e., Russia being drawn into a war which nobody except for the Czar's military-industrial complex wanted. Peters resolved the problem by substituting three scenes which showed the Mother not only in the role of combative proselytizer but in

---

[1] Ibid.

her relationship with Pavel, a move which brought the storyline closer to Gorki's novel.

In Act Three, scene one, of Peters's version, the Mother is on a dangerous assignment to distribute anti-war literature to soldiers. The scene is the compartment of a railroad car on a cold winter day. The place and the idea for the scene are suggested by the action of the last chapter of the novel where the Mother is beaten at a train station while haranguing a crowd on the theme of Socialism. Like Brecht, Peters extends the time frame of the action to include the World War and the November Revoltuion. She is seated alone in the compartment when Shostakovich, a radicalized unemployed worker she had met while lodging with the teacher, rushes in enraged that the teacher, who is carrying the satchel filled with the leaflets (he is the least suspicious) got lost in the crowd.

The teacher, a character which Brecht virutally ignores in the last third of the play, is given a fuller role in Peters's drama. Suddenly, huffing and puffing and distraught about being drawn into the whole affair, the teacher pokes his head through the door. He complains that he got lost while dodging a man who was following him, a menacing figure with two warts on his face, wearing a dark overcoat. The danger quotient of the assignment increases. The teacher leaves the bundle of papers and he and Shostakovich depart. The plan is to clandestinely switch the bundle of leaflets with an identical looking one at the next stop when Andrie, an agitator (and Pavel's friend) who has infiltrated the army, comes on board. Several other passengers enter, among them a soldier, a war-widow and the man in the dark overcoat.

During the ride, the Mother engages the soldier in a colloquy about the cold weather at the front and the soldiers' poor boots. Peters

borrowed the Mother's feigned pro-war posture from Brecht's copper collection scene. The man in the overcoat gets restless and wants to change seats, taking the empty place next to the garrulous Vlassova. He offers to place the Mother's bundle on the overhead rack. She refuses, saying first that the bundle contains eggs, then that it contains fragile wood carvings. As the man badgers her about the contents of the bundle, his shawl falls, exposing the warts on his face. The soldier aids the Mother by forcing the man to desist and sit quietly in his old seat.

When the train stops, several soldiers enter. One of them gives the Mother the secret password, "Is there any room for me beside your bundle, mother?" Vlassova is inwardly startled. The voice is that of her son. She retains her sangfroid and gives the pre-arranged coded response, "There's always room for one of the Czar's soldiers."[1] Pavel sits beside the mother and the train trundles on.

The widow asks the Mother if she has a son at the front. No, she answers, she has a nephew and she hopes the war will last another few weeks so he will get a promotion. Pavel wonders about the safety of her "nephew." The Mother is not worried; his father is rich so he has a special commission in the rear flanks. After all, this is a rich man's war and a poor man's fight. Pavel agrees, but cautions his loquacious fellow passenger that a soldier named Andrei was shot for saying that very thing while organizing soldier's councils at the front. This conversation between mother and son is touching if a little heavily streaked with melodrama. When the train stops, Pavel takes Mother's

---

[1]Bert Brecht, "Mother," adapted by Paul Peters, typescript, 1935, p. 47, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

bundle and leaves his own. The spy in the overcoat observes the manueuver and seizes Pavel, accusing him of being a thief. They scuffle but Pavel escapes. The spy denounces the Mother as a Bolshevik and leaves in pursuit of Pavel.

In scene two, we learn that Pavel has been captured and his execution is scheduled for the next morning. The scene begins with the awkwardly placed song of Pavel's execution. Instead of using the past tense as Brecht does, Peters has the chorus use the future tense. Pavel's friends--Ivan, Shostakovitch, the teacher, and a new character, the Lamplighter--tell the Mother their plan to help Pavel escape. They are interrupted by the noise of someone in the hallway. It is the landlady's taciturn cousin from the country who they suspect is an informer. Their plan may be foiled because of his eavesdropping. But Vlasova refuses to be stopped. Instantly, she starts wailing and sobbing. Hearing her cries and thinking that Pavel has been shot, several neighbors, the landlady and her cousin come to extend their sympathy. As they enter we realize that her crying was a decoy. She tells the others secretely to go quickly and pursue their plan.

She detains the informer with tea and polite conversation about his home in the country. The short exchange that follows is virtually the same as Brecht's anti-religious Bible scene. Peters's rendition of it is somewhat abridged. The Mother is more straightforward in her campaign to radicalize the neighbor, fomenting thought of a rent strike and mocking the landlady, who storms out of the apartment, by shouting after her, "Don't forget to call me on the picket line."[1] No sooner

---

[1]Ibid., p. 59.

do they leave than the teacher returns with news that the jail break worked and that Pavel will leave for Switzerland at midnight after he visits her briefly.

Scene three begins with an ominous cameo of the informer lurking in the hallway. It is later that same night; Pavel comes to the apartment. He tells the Mother that because of a sudden stirke at the munitions factory and the return of the soldiers from the front, the revolution is imminent. He will not go to Switzerland as planned but will remain at home to work for the cause. Vlassova pleads with him. Pavel ignores the dangers and gets busy counterfeiting passports and drawing up lists of contacts. Forthwith, there is a knock at the door. Pavel hides behind the portierres. It is the police inspector, the same one who searched and vandalized the Mother's home in the first scene. He greets her with false bon hommie. He tells her he must once again search her lodgins. Hoping to distract the inspector, Vlassova dashes through the room spilling drawers out, ripping sheets, tearing the curtains, and overturning the bookcase. With each violent gesture she offers a terse political commentary. The scene is an inverse reprise of the havoc of the earlier search with the Mother now scoring political points.

Her ploy is fruitless, however. The inspector calmly waits until she is finished, orders her to sit, and pulls his gun. He finds the fugitive and they fight. Pavel knocks him down and runs for the window. The inspector recovers his gun and shoots Pavel in the head. As the Mother watches in horror, Pavel slides down the outside wall out of sight. Neighbors rush in and within moments Pavel's bloody body is brought back into the room. As the Mother sits in silence, a chorus of women offer a grave litany over the meaning of Pavel's death:

First Woman: He spoke the truth so they killed him.
Second Woman: They shot him because he was for the workers. He was for peace.
Third Woman: Such a fine young man.
Second Woman: What he did was good. It was good. The whole rotten autocracy should be overthrown.

. . . . . .

First Woman: Don't worry, Pavel. We'll get revenge for you, Pavel. The workers will revenge you, Pavel. They won't forget. It won't be long now, Pavel. It won't be long.[1]

For the material of the last scene Peters returned to Brecht's play. The Mother is sick in bed because she has spent three months in prison. A doctor briefly tends to her and the chorus sings "Get up, the Party is in Danger." The Mother drags herself out of bed with difficulty and dresses. The scene moves to the street demonstration on the eve of the November Revolution. The Mother, firmly grasping the red flag, is at the center of the procession. At her side, among the marchers are some of the people she introduced to Bolshevism: the big soldier from the train compartment, the neighbor woman who went on strike, and a second neighbor woman.

If Peters succeeded in enlarging on the relationship between Mother and son, he did so at the expense of the play's consistency. The third act is certainly dramatic what with the episodes of esponiage and counter-spying, the excitement of prison breaks and the tension of onstage fisticuffs and shootings. In trying to sustain the action line of the first two acts and advance the growth of the central character, Peters seems to have overshot the mark. The action is so speeded up in the last act that it resembles the climactic ending of a suspenseful

---

[1]Ibid., pp. 64-65.

melodrama. The character of the Mother, though certainly more energetic politically, loses her peasant wiliness and her credibility. Later, Peters acknowledged that the scene of Pavel's death was excessively violent and out of tone with the rest of the play.[1]

The naturalistic dialogue of the last act was not, however, inconsistent with the dialogue of the first two acts of Peters's adaptation. Brecht's play, written in the "epic, non-Aristotelian" style, had a stiff starchy quality. The dialogue was shorn of small talk of daily conversation, making it seem cold, abrupt and harshly abrasive. The characters, too, appeared wooden and artificial, reminiscent of the stick figure cartoons of the agit-prop plays. Peters tried to soften the dialogue and to flesh out the characters, to come closer to the picturesque folk quality of Gorki's novel. Often the translation into an American idiom helped. Sometimes Peters interjected whole sections of dialogue. For instance, at the opening of the play Peters allows Pavel to interact with the Mother. In Brecht's play, Pavel is discovered engrossed in a book and the Mother delivers a lengthy monologue to the audience in which she worries about Pavel's attitude toward her in the light of their economic hardships and his remote behavior of late. She hovers over him with a bowl of thin soup which he only sniffs at. Peters's Pavel is less taciturn. Pavel enters the kitchen, as the curtain goes up, with a robust "Good morning, mother." As he buttons his shirt collar the Mother tells Pavel directly about her shame in providing him with such meager victuals and her consternation about their poverty. Pavel,

---

[1][Peters] to Brecht, 4 September 1935, in Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 141.

though absorbed with his reading, finds time to placate her with "That's all right, Mother" or "It's all right, mother. Now stop fretting about it."[1] In the next scene, when the revolutionary workers come to Pavel's home to print their leaflets, Peters begins the scene with their entrance and a round of handshaking introductions. Brecht begins the same scene with the workers already in place and ready to commence their work.

Besides humanizing the dialogue, Peters makes the situation more plausible realistically by bridging the transitions from dialogue to music. For example, the song, "Song of the Question," that Masha sings to the Mother to prove to her that the purpose of their activity is to help her not hurt her, follows Masha's line, "I don't think you mother likes us, Pavel." Brecht has the song follow a speech by the Mother which Peters cut, in which she upbraids the workers for their detrimental influence of Pavel which may cost him his job. Interpolations of this kind which Peters introuced in the first two acts were not many or large, but they were sufficient to alter the tone of the play.

One other major modification that Peters made was giving Pavel a more significant role in the drama, one that reflected the emphasis Gorki placed on the son. In the novel, Pavel is the leader of the band of revolutionaries, not a recently joined initiate. He is an example of the conscientious, dynamic, confident revolutionary. He heads a workers' delegation to the manager of the factory, he is at the forefront of the demonstrations, he is arrested twice. This is important in the novel, because the love that the Mother bears her only son, seen at first as

---

[1]Brecht, "Mother," adapted by Peters, pp. 1-2.

love for him as a person, is translated into love of his revolutionary work. As the novel advances, in fact, the Mother sees herself as protector of all young men and women engaged in bringing about the revolution. Moreover, Gorki underscores Pavel's importance by centering the climax of the novel around him. His last arrest leads to a trial wherein he delivers a scathing phillippic condemning the crimes of the state and urging revolutionary reforms. It is this speech, printed as a leaflet, that the Mother is carrying to the masses when she is beaten up at the conclusion of the novel.

In Brecht's play, Pavel is on the periphery of the action, a quiet, sullen, phlegmatic drone of the struggling band. Peters opens Pavel up. We have already seen how Peters keeps Pavel alive until the penultimate scene. Earlier in the play, Peters injects a few lines for Pavel in an effort to suggest his importance within the group of agitators. In the factory scene when Karpow, the manager's handpicked workers' representative, informs the workers of the shameless compromises he has agreed to on their behalf, it is Pavel who voices the strongest protest:

> (jumping up on box and talking passionately)
> Men, the question you got to decide is simple enough: do you want your wage-cut back or do you want the swamp cleaned out? I say we've got to strike--strike for our wages. And that isn't all. A week from today it will be May first. All right: every plant where they've pulled a cut: close it up! Not a belt moving; not a wheel turning. That's how we'll get our wages back. (Cheering from the men. Pavel and Anton leave. Many of the workers go with them, all talking excitely.)[1]

Brecht gives Pavel a backseat in this scene, allowing Anton and Ivan to act as Karpow's antagonists.

---

[1]Ibid., p. 13.

The Executive Board was immensely satisfied with the change Peters had made. Larkin wrote to Barbara Nixon: "We have decided to produce 'Mother' in October--the Brecht-Eisler version in translation by Paul Peters. We are enormously enthusiastic about it and are hoping to be able to give it the kind of production it deserves."[1] In another letter, we learn some of the reasons for the Theatre Union's satisfaction with the play:

> We have selected our first fall play and are very enthusiastic about it. It is based on the Gorki novel, but it is not a dramatization. It departs somewhat from the strictly realistic play. We believe that it will be fairly simple to produce, and it should be a fine, stirring play for you later on. It is very fresh, affirmative, and good-humored--with lots of amusing dialogue.[2]

The Executive Board recognized that some of the appeal of the play rested in its experimental form, but what it liked most was its inspirational story. This is what would interest their audience. In promoting the play the Theatre Union explained its reason for settling on it as follows: the Executive Board

> . . . saw its value as a thrilling and heoric drama of the simple toilers in the working-class movement, of the anonymous 'Jimmie Higginses' who by their day to day work are building the basis for a new society. . . . A good deal of its value lies in its tender, deep, human characterization of the class conscious workers' life, a phase that no play as yet produced in this country has completely revealed.[3]

---

[1]Margaret Larkin to Barbara Nixon, 6 August 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Theatre Union to Sam Rudnick, 8 August 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Martha Dreiblett, Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

Buoyantly, the Theatre Union commenced casting and placed its audience building machinery in motion.

Soon, however, a black cloud drifted over from across the Atlantic. Brecht, having received a copy of the Peters version, rescinded his permission for the Theatre Union to use his play. It was, he said, too much at variance with his own work, completely distorting the intent.[1] The Board met on Cape Cod in an emergency meeting. Its commitment to the play had placed the theatre in a real bind. Actors had been signed and theatre parties had been sold. Besides, there was no other play available. Nevertheless, Maltz insisted on abandoning the project. He liked Peter's version, but he did not want to be placed in the position where going ahead meant choosing a play they all had reservations about. Such a choice, Maltz said with some unconscious prescience, would be disastrous.[2] Maltz was overruled. The others on the Board felt they were too far committed to the play to drop it. They decided to send Gomez to Denmark to speak with Brecht and possibly persuade him of their earnest intentions. It was agreed, too, that if it would help matters, Gomez could offer to bring Brecht back to New York, an idea spawned by Brecht himself.[3]

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[3]Gomez, 8 October 1978. Previously Brecht had offered to direct the production himself. The Theatre Union rejected his offer, giving three reasons: 1) his unfamiliarity with their methods of work; 2) his limited knowledge of English; 3) their lack of money to bring him to America. They said they would allow him to work in an advisory capacity, but he would have to pay his own fare. (Theatre Union to Brecht, 29 August 1935, in Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 138.)

Meanwhile, Peters reviewed the play and together with Victor Wolfson, who had been designated as director, made some changes that restored the original. Peters now became, according to yet another letter to Nixon, more impressed with the dramatic power of Brecht's version than with the Russian one.[1] On 4 September 1935, Peters sent Brecht a lengthy letter, conciliatory in tone, addressing some of the reasons Brecht had given for withdrawing permission. The adaptation, Peters wrote, does not violate the style of the original. It is not "completely naturalistic" as Brecht thought. The look of the play on the printed page and the obligatory changes in syntax and idiom that are necessitated by translation from German to English may have given him that impression. He went on to say that he was as faithful to the original as any translator could be:

> But in general, page for page, the English script follows your "Mother." It would have been simple to translate it literally: but from this you would have nothing, of course, no style whatever. As far as the literary style goes, its rhythms can not be translated directly from German into English. What I can do is catch in the English, with the peculiar inflections and quality of English as we speak it in the country, the spirit of the scenes, the characters, and the speeches of "Mother." Sometimes to make English of the translation, the original must be changed even in concept.[2]

Peters then enumerates the various changes he made in the adaptation, explaining the rationale for his three act division and his return to Gorki for material in the third act. He assures Brecht that none of the changes are sacred and immutable: "with a stroke of the pen--and no great loss--" many more alterations can be made to restore

---

[1]Theatre Union to Barbara Nixon, 30 August 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Peters to Brecht, 4 September 1935, in Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 139-40.

the original. It is here that he admits his own dislike, after time has distanced him from the work, of the excessive violence of Pavel's death. He closes with a deferential, ingratiating appeal for Brecht to reconsider and return to the Theatre Union the rights to his play:

> We feel the play is important for what it tells our workers and should be, by all means, done at once. We will not, of course, continue production without your permission; but we should like you earnestly to reconsider your decision. I especially ask that you go through the script thoroughly, and write me fully about it. There is no reason why further changes cannot be made in the adaptation; and I am still hoping that we can reach an agreement in time to go ahead with production.[1]

Gomez was elected for the mission to Denmark because of his peculiar private circumstances at the time. Earlier in the year, Gomez, as Charles Shipman, was hired away from the Wall Street Journal By David Stern who had just bought the New York Evening Post. For awhile Gomez served as financial editor for the Post, but then he had a falling out with Stern who dismissed him with one year's severance pay. Gomez, therefore, had the time to go and he had enough money to travel.[2] The Theatre Union paid for Gomez's passage--$410.00 round trip--and Gomez paid all othe expenses.[3] With his passport reading "Charles Shipman--Theatrical Producer." Gomez sailed for the continent in early September. On the sea voyage, Gomez polished his German. He also had the time to examine both versions of the play and deliberate on their respective merits. He arrived in France, traversed Hitler Germany and soon arrived

---

[1]Ibid., pp. 141-42.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[3]Financial Report, 1 June 1935 to 25 May 1936, loaned to author by Adelaide Walker.

at Brecht's home-in-exile in Denmark, a resort town outside of Copenhagen.[1]

Gomez and Brecht developed a warm, cordial relationship. Gomez swam in the mornings while Brecht wrote. In the afternoons they would discuss the plays. Brecht was well disposed toward the Theatre Union as an organization. He had heard many favorable reports about its works, possibly from Wolf. He was convinced that the Theatre Union was a real proletarian theatre, like the ones he was familiar with in Berlin--run by workers for workers. Furthermore, Brecht may have had the false impression that the Theatre Union was dominated by Communists. Gomez suggests that he may have gotten this idea from Wolf though we should remember that Gomez himself had been a Communist.[2] This is not to suggest that Gomez directly led Brecht to believe this about the Theatre Union, but Gomez's political background coupled with the fact that the theatre had sent him as their emissary may have drawn Brecht into such inferences. Moreover, Brecht corresponded with V. J. Jerome about the play and believed that Jerome had some influence on the Theatre Union when, in fact, he had none.[3]

Brecht lectured Gomez on the precepts of the epic theatre and showed him how the new adaptation subverted his purpose. Gomez was not entirely convinced of the soundness of the epic theatre theory, but he did agree that Brecht's play had a certain vitality that was absent from Peters's play: "Our play had become a mish-mash. We had taken a com-

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Bertolt Brecht to Jerome, beginning of September 1935, in Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 142-44; Maltz interview with Lyon.

paratively great play, a play plainly of real distinction, and we had made a Theatre Union play."[1] Gomez was open to Brecht's promptings because of some of the conclusions he had made during his trans-Atlantic meditations.

> On the way over, before I got to Denmark, . . . I had begun to see that there was something in Brecht's play that was missing from our play and that was genius. Whatever difference in viewpoint there might be there was something arresting in Brecht's play that our softening of it had lost. So I was halfway convinced that Brecht was right by the time I reached him, though I had gone over to persuade him to accept the Theatre Union's point. That got me a very favorable reception right from the start from Brecht; even though he was opposed to the play he could see that I didn't like the play either--what we had done to it. I had begun to have serious doubts about it.[2]

Given this attitude on the part of Gomez, it was not difficult for him to procure Brecht's permission. Working in the Theatre Union's favor was the fact that Brecht would get a technically proficient production of his play in America by a workers' theatre. To seal the deal Gomez intimated, how strongly we cannot tell, that Brecht's presence at rehearsals could be a factor in recycling the play back to its original form. Gomez says,

> I was commissioned to get him to sign a contract giving us the right to the play in Paul's version. And he signed that, I having persuaded him that if he would come to America, his presence in rehearsals could bring about such alterations in the play that he would be pleased with. And on that basis he accepted, without any guarantees on our part at all.[3]

It is tempting to read in this ambiguous concordance the seeds of the rancorous confusion and bickering which beset the production when Brecht landed in America. Did Brecht deliberately set out with the intention, as Peters believes, of transforming the Theatre Union into an epic theatre, to secure a beachhead for his theories in the new

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Ibid. [3]Ibid.

world?[1] Even Gomez noticed with some wariness, Brecht's enormous self-confidence, his high opinion of himself, and his faith in his power to prevail.[2] Or were the problems which ensued the result of a well-intentioned but unfortunate misunderstanding? The truth may lie somewhere in between. In early October, Brecht, accompanied by Gomez, sailed for New York aboard the Aquitania.

In New York, the entire project was held in abeyance pending the outcome of negotiations, and then Brecht's arrival. Originally scheduled to open 15 October 1935, the opening was postponed to 12 November and then to 19 November. The seven week delay heightened the Theatre Union's economic plight. The delay cost the theatre $1,843.92. This included $108.62 for cable expenses, $232.25 for Brecht's passage--the Theatre Union agreeing to absorb the cost--and a total of $1,004.00 in salaries for staff members and the director.[3]

The appointments of director, designer and cast had been made by early September, in time for the first announced opening date, well before the arrival of Brecht. To direct the play the Theatre Union's first choice had been Benno Schneider. Peters approached Schneider with Brecht's play. Schneider found the play unsuited to his temperament and disliked it, saying it was "arid, completely devoid of the character, emotion and philosophic content of the Gorki novel."[4] Andre van Gysegham, the British director who had done Stevedore with Robeson in London, wrote Walker in May asking to be considered as director should

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[3]Financial Report, 1935-36. [4]Peters, 20 August, 1978.

the Theatre Union decide to do Mother. He did so when he learned that the Theatre Union was reading Barbara Nixon's version of the play, a translation she made at his instigation because of his attachment to the novel and admiration of Okhlopkov's production.[1] Nothing further ever came of his request. Also considered to direct the play was Joe Losey, Hammond's friend. But some members of the Board saw a production of a Farragoh play he did and were not impressed.[2]

Wolfson, who was then twenty-five years old, was probably chosen for two reasons. The Executive Board had, as we noted earlier, the policy of nurturing directors from within the group. Wolfson was the only other person on the Board who had proclivities for directing. His experience embraced his college work at the University of Wisconsin, his work as assistant stage manager for Elmer Rice and, most recently, the staging of his own dramatization of Crime and Punishment. That production which opened 22 January 1935, at the Biltmore Theatre, was designed by Irene Sharaff, the beautiful tenant at the Civic Repertory Theatre, and it featured a young Lee J. Cobb. It ran a brief fifteen nights. The official announcement concerning Mother's director appeared 8 September.[3]

To design the play the theatre first talked with Kiessler, the originator of space stages.[4] Later, however, Mordecai Gorelik was

---

[1]Andre Van Gysegham to Walker, 18 May [1935], Theatre Union File, Theater Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Sklar, 18 July 1978. [3]Herald Tribune, 8 September 1935.

[4]Peters to Brecht, 4 September 1935, in Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 140.

engaged. His success with The Sailors of Catarro and his disposition toward socially relevant plays (which included work for the New Playwrights, the Group Theatre, and the Theatre Collective) made him an ideal choice for this non-realistic, experimental play.

In casting the play the Theatre Union ran into some difficulty with the leading role. The part demanded a talented dramatic actress who could carry off the lighter, comic glints of the character. At first Pauline Lord, who played Amy in They Knew What They Wanted and the title role in Anna Christie, was sought to play the illiterate peasant woman who becomes the zealous revolutionary.[1] When she declined, the theater turned to Celia Adler. Adler was at that time the star of the Yiddish Theatre, having played the lead role in the Dybbuk opposite Maurice Schwartz at the Yiddish Art Theatre. She was the oldest daughter of the renowned Jacob P. Adler, whose other theatrical children included Luther and Stella, step-siblings of Celia. Celia Adler was actually slated to perform the role, but just prior to beginning rehearsals a change was made. It remains unclear whether she withdrew or whether she was replaced. The Theatre Union may have decided that her heavy Jewish accent or her history of character types made her inappropriate for the role.[2] In her place the theatre hired Helen Henry, wife of the playwright Elisha Cooke, Sr. The elderly actress, who had acted opposite such great performers of the American stage as Rose Coghlan, the Kendalls, James O'Neill, Ed Harrigan, and Frank Bacon, had retired from the stage in 1929 to raise her family after appearing with Wallace Ford in The

---

[1]Theatre Union to Wyckoff, 9 August 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

Nut Farm. The Theatre Union felt that her "natural sweetness, simplicity and charm" would work well for the character of Vlassova.[1]

Others in the cast of thirteen (plus three extras) included Martin Wolfson, Millicent Green, Francis Bavier, Hester Sondergaard, Tony Ross, John Boruff, and James MacDonald, all of whom had acted in at least one previous Theatre Union production, thus perpetuating the notion of a nuclear permanent company.

Brecht arrived in New York on 15 October. The very first contact between Brecht and the Theatre Union proved to be mutually antipathetic, The director went to the pier to greet the refugee author. As Wolfson recalls its, what disembarked from the freighter was "this surly, disgusting-looking man with a cap pulled over his eyes."[2] Brecht, for his part, thought Wolfson "absolutely worthless," young and inexperienced.[3] Nevertheless, the Theatre Union's good intentions to uphold its end of the bargain is indicated in a letter Larkin wrote to Nixon on 16 October, the very day rehearsals began with Brecht present: "We will do the Brecht version of 'Mother,' but somewhat changed from the script we gave you. Brecht arrived here yesterday and Eisler is here already."[4]

When Gomez returned, he told his fellow Board members that he was very much persuaded in Brecht's favor. He urged them to make several

---

[1]Dreiblett, Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

[3]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[4]Margaret Larkin to Barbara Nixon, 16 October 1935, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

changes, but he failed to convince them. They continued to adhere to Peters's version. As a result, Brecht began his maneuvering.[1] Gomez, whom Brecht trusted, became the intermediary/translator between the author and the producers. The weeks that followed seemed like a protracted, hideous nightmare. At first, the Theatre Union, anxious to accomodate the foreign author, ignored his imperious behavior and tried to make compromises to meet his demands. It soon became clear, however, that Brecht would accept nothing less than a full restoration of the original, staged so as to realize his epic theatre theories.

Brecht's major assault was on the text itself. Everthing about the Peters's translation was "reines Kitsch or Dreck or sheer heresy."[2] Line-by-line he insisted on rewrites. The three new scenes in the third act based on Gorki were expurgated forthwith. They were replaced with the original Bible scene, the Mother in her sickbed, a streetcorner scene, the copper collection scene, and the finale of the mass demonstration. Fliminated, too, were the interchange of dialogue between mother and son in the first scene (the scene reverting to a monologue delivered directly to the audience) and the entrance of the revolutionaries in the second scene with the introductions Peters added.

To see to it that the dialogue shed all its realistic touches, Brecht insisted on a literal translation. This demand was stretched to absurd lengths when he commanded that the English translation be verbatim regardless of the proprieties of correct English usage. He wanted the words arranged as they were in the German, with German grammatical rules.[3]

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978. [2]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[3]Moross, 29 June 1978.

For example, he preferred "The Socialism is the Answer" to "Socialism is the Answer" even after Peters patiently tried to explain that the article is not used in English before proper nouns.[1] This mania for precise translation had adverse consequences for the translation of the songs. Brecht wanted a notable American poet to do them. Edmund Wilson, Archibald Macleish, Muriel Rukeyser, and several others were approached, but they all turned the offer down. James Agee accepted the task of making the lyrics less crude, but after one day at rehearsals with Brecht he politely bowed out.[2] Brecht frightened them all away: he would not allow anyone to tamper with his words. As Jerome Moross recalls,

> Everybody they went to got frightened off by Brecht. They knew they had to stick to the German, but try to make it into poetry and rhyme it, and with this horrible man over their shoulders it was an impossible job. So all of the poets begged off. In the end Paul did a literal translation and that was what Brecht wanted.[3]

When the production opened the critics took notice of the oddity of the language, one saying that it sounded barren and impersonal: "the kind of English commonly used in manifestos," and another taking poor Peters to task for a translation that was "poor in every sense: it is not idiomatic English, not strong speech."[4]

In certain matters, however, the Theatre Union obdurately resisted

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978.

[2]Ibid. [3]Moross, 29 June 1978.

[4]Richard Lockridge, "'Mother,' Propaganda with Music, Opens at the Civic Repertory," Sun, 20 November 1935; Edith J. R. Issacs, "Distance Lends Enchantment -- Mother," Theatre Arts, January 1936, p. 14.

Brecht's onslaught, refusing to comply with his requests. The song title "In Praise of Communism" was changed to "In Praise of Socialism" and the Mother's statement "I am a Bolshevik" was modified to "I am a revolutionary."[1] The Theatre Union made such changes, of course, to remain consistent with its United Front policy. Outright mention of Communism and Bolshevism would be impolitic. The most contentious debates were over lines in scenes restored in the third act. The Theatre Union kept trying to minimize the agitational quality of the scenes and keep the focus on the dramatic line of the action. Brecht, on the other hand tried to keep his lesson plan intact with each point in its proper sequence.

The Theatre Union truncated the anti-religious propaganda in the scene in which the neighbor women console the Mother in her grief over the loss of her son. In so doing, Brecht claimed that the character became crudely insensitive and purely comical. In the following scene, wen the Mother wants to aid the part in its moment of need, Brecht complained that the Theatre Union lost the focus of the scene by dropping the line "When the Czar mobilizes, we workers must also mobilize," the line having given the motivation for her action. Bolshevistic slogans denouncing war were omitted in the next scene where the Mother tries to propagandize several workers on a streetcorner on the occasion of the outbreak of war. Lastly, the copper collection scene in which the Mother slyly conducts further anti-war propaganda was struck.[2]

---

[1] Bertolt Brecht, "Anmerkungen zu Stuecken und Auffuehrungen: Zu Die Mutter," in Schriften zum Theater, vol. 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), p. 1079.

[2] Ibid., p. 1078.

For a while, this last scene was included but was removed some time before opening night. This is evident from the fact that Act Three, scene five--"In Front of the Government Copper Office"--is printed in the program appended to the promptbook but is crossed out and all the scenes in the third act are renumbered. There is evidence, too, of the pages being torn out of the promptbook.[1] Brecht says that the Theatre Union ill-advisedly dropped the seven-minute scene in order to limit the running time of the play to within two hours.[2] This may be so because the promptbook log shows that at the first runthrough without interruptions held 14 November the running time was 123-1/2 minutes.

It is more likely, however, that in the final analysis the Theatre Union found the scene unnecessarily repetitious. They considered the streetcorner scene sufficient to show how the Mother carries on her agitational work after the death of her son. Again the controversy centered on whether the drama or the propaganda was more important. In Brecht's view the scene was necessary because it clarified the logic of the play's political lesson. The streetcorner scene shows the proletariat rejecting the Bolshevik platform in 1914. The final scene shows them accepting the program of the 1917 revoltuion. Without the interim scene, which illustrates that reform is accomplsihed only by active revolutionary work, the audience may get the impression that the

---

[1] Bertolt Brecht, "Mother," Promptbook, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2] Brecht, "Criticism of the New York Production of Die Mutter," in Brecht on Brecht, ed. and trans. John Willitt (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 82.

revolution was "a passively-awaited gift from heaven."[1]

The battle over the script was continuous as was the battle over epic theatre and the staging techniques of the Lehrstueck. Brecht at this time was absorbed in developing and propagating his concept of epic theatre. He had the firebrand certitude of a fanatic who believed that epic theater with its apocalyptic vision was destined to supplant the old "Aristotelian" drama. It was the drama and theatre practice of the new age, he proclaimed. It was a drama which in its form and intent heralded a new kind of humanism. It was optimistic, hopeful, but always pragmatic.

At its core was the belief that life was in a state of dynamic flux and that man holds the reins of his own destiny. It asserted that mankind possessed natural propensities for goodness and that if it were shown what course of action to follow this potential goodness would come to the surface. Brecht propounded that traditional drama, the "culinary theatre," encouraged an antithetical Weltanshauung. It saw man as compartmentalized, fixed into an unalterable pattern, flattened by a harsh, inscrutable inevitability. For Brecht, the distinctive feature of Aristotelian drama was the notion of catharsis which he interpreted as a psychologically induced state of emotional paralysis. The spectator, by sharing the experience of the characters, is left, after the play's climax, cleansed and purified, but he is also sapped of energy and he shares the sealed fate of the characters.

---

[1]Ibid.

Brecht rejected catharsis and its pernicious henchmen, empathy. He affirmed that an emotional response to the action of a play, engendered by psychological identification with its protagonist, inhibits the intellect, it forecloses on perception, it confines the spectator to a deterministic outlook. Brecht banned emotion from his brand of drama. Instead, he wanted the audience to respond to the drama as it would to a lecture, with the critical detachment that gives the spectator the freedom to make rational, thoughtful decisions.

The pedagogic purpose of the epic theatre necessitated a change in the form of the drama and its manner of presentation. To foster the inquiring frame of mind, the drama was constructed as a parable. The action was stripped of all its illusionistic elements. It was composed only of those integers of action which together illustrated its thesis. There was no attempt, as there was in illusionistic drama, to flesh out the story with the trappings of recognizable, everyday activities or recognizable bridges in the action. The drama was given more of a syllogistic quality with the scoring of the action determined by the logic of the argument rather than being laden with or conditioned by the earmarks of causational behavior. Characters were seen as paradigmatic figures whose function it was to illustrate the parable. The quotidian aspects of their lives was eliminated so as not to clutter the main thread of the action (or to induce identification).

The place of the action was de-emphasized or made nondescript so as to universalize the import of the play, to make it clear that what happens in the play is not rooted to one time, one group of people, in one place, but is relevant to all time, all of mankind, throughout the world. Thus, in a play like Mother, the epitome of the Lehrstuecke,

Brecht's most forcefully didactic variety of epic theatre, the action is arranged in self-contained, independent scenes, each serving as mini-lesson, but also linking up to express a total statement. The picture given of the characters is limited to the area of the main action; we see none of their personal idiosyncracies. The ambience is barely suggestive of Gorki's Russia so as to show that the workers' struggle against repression is endemic to every country where conditions are similar to those depicted in the play.

For the staging of epic plays, Brecht marshalled a series of techniques which sought both to interrupt any emotional/illusionistic response to the play and to enlarge the scope of the parable. These included what are now readily recognizable features of the epic theatre, such as direct address to the audience; slides and film projections; a chorus breaking into the action to comment and interpret; songs that begin abruptly and unnaturally in the midst of the action; making visible the source of the music; an uncurtained stage with an unmasked battery of lighting equipment and other normally hidden theatrical paraphenalia and so forth. All of this was intended to keep the audience alert and attentive, to make the intellectual response the only possible response in the theatre.

The Theatre Union naturally, had a difficult time understanding, let alone accepting this new gospel of the drama. Only Gomez, who had the benefit of long, peaceful discussion, was at all inclined toward accepting the dicta of the epic theatre. The others were skeptical, to say the least. When Brecht arrived he distributed to the Board a statement elucidating his concepts. The Board found it cloudy, syn-

thetic, nonsensical, pedantic theorizing.[1] What they liked best about Mother especially in Peters's version, was where the empathy came through, where the emotive power and sentiment of the novel rose to the surface to affect the audience.[2]

The premise of the epic theatre was as alien and threatening to the Theatre Union as was the Communist Manifesto to the barons of Wall Street. How could a non-empathetic, non-illusionistic style of theatre take root with a theatre company which valued the realistic, emotional, melodramatic appeal of its plays? Here in retrosepct, was one of the most ironic twists in American theatre history. For the Theatre Union, reform and political protest were equated with galvanic emotional stimulation. Empathy and identification, the two most hated words in Brecht's lexicon, were the theatre's oxygen and blood. Blankfort had theorized on their necessity and how the social theatre could manipulate them to its best advantage. Like some sort of Richter scale, the theatre would guage the success of its performances by the delirium engendered in the house. This, as we have seen in accounts of critics and spectators, is what the Theatre Union's audiences wanted and this was the theatre's forte. The Bojangles phenomenon at the end of one Stevedore performance, whether it was spontaneous or not, represented the ultimate fulfillment of a Theatre Union production. He extroverted what everyone else was feeling and would have wanted to do--to be so swept away by the action as to want to join it. This was the object of Dimitroff's plea for heroes the spectators would want to emulate. And this was the very shortcoming for which the Theatre Union

---

[1]Maltz interview with Lyon. [2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

had been criticized with Black Pit.

To the directors of the Theatre Union, then, Brecht's freezing of the emotional juices seemed sheer lunacy. The theatre, they felt, was foremost the medium of empathetic involvement. Repudiate the emotional response and you are left with boredoem. Michael Gordon, who at that time had moved to the Group Theatre, but was still around the Theatre Union, recounts a story which exemplifies the distance between Brecht's intentions and the Theatre Union's position. Gordon, eager to resolve his confusions about the epic theatre, spoke to Brecht about his theories. Brecht showed him a photograph taken from the side of a house showing an audience during a performance. The audience was enraptured. Brecht's comment was, "Isn't this disgusting? These people are intoxicated." Gordon was astonished; he could only covet such an "intoxicated" audience for one of his production. He remained baffled about the epic theatre: "The objective was, Brecht felt, the urgent necessity of keeping the mind totally unobfuscated by any emotion so that they can clearly understand what they already understood when they came into the theatre."[1] The Theatre Union, in short, found Brecht's separation of emotion and perception both unnatural and unnecessary.

With views so diametrically opposed, a clash was virtually unavoidable. What aggravated matters considerably was Brecht's personality. Blankfort remembers him as "a physically dirty man, very unpleasant."[2] Gomez says, "He was a filthy object. I don't think he ever took a bath. He was very stubborn and very difficult in every respect."[3] Jerome

---

[1]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

[2]Blankfort, 17 July 1978 [3]Gomez, 8 October 1977.

Moross separates the man from his art and wonders, "I still can't understand this great adulation for Brecht; his poetry, yes, but he was a petty man, a small man."[1] Peters found him "a very supercilious and arrogant German," with pretentious, self-conscious habits. He had, says Peters,

> an eccentric affectation for the clothes of a foreign pugilist, with granny glasses and a $50 silk shirt. The glasses, by the way, which he said he had obtained from a small antique shop in Berlin because they were the most "comfortable" he could find were bound around the nose bridge and the ear pieces with white adhesive because they were cutting angry red welts in his skin.[2]

From his earliest contact with Brecht, Peters recalls obtaining the impression that Brecht was the victim of a virulent egomania. Brecht, who was at that time unknown in this country, objected to the credits for Mother on the Theatre Union's posters and handouts. The poster related the play to the novel to capitalize on the novel's popularity. Brecht wanted references to Gorki and the novel expunged, saying "that Gorki's novel was insignificant, his play a work of art and the difference lay in the article The." Aside from scornfully refusing to give Gorki credit, the playwright wanted his name to be listed simply as "Brecht." Afterall, he reasoned, you would not list Hamlet as a play by William Shakespeare would you? Moreover, Aristotle had no first name. So Brecht who wished epic drama to replace Aristotelian drama as the dominant dramatic form would henceforth be simply known as Brecht.[3]

---

[1]Moross, 29 June 1978.

[2]Paul Peters, letter to author, 9 September 1978.

[3]Peters, 20 August 1978.

Socially, needless to say, Brecht had nothing to do with the Board members of the Theatre Union. He would come to rehearsals with Eisler and afterwards they would disappear together.[1] In his spare time he would go to the movies. His partiality was for detective films because, as he puts it, they gave a realistic picture of American life and were technically the best entertainment.[2]

The troglodyte Brecht was extremely vocal, however, during rehearsals. As Gomez reports, nothing pleased him: "Every minute Brecht would say 'Dreck! Dreck!' He would yell out, 'Genosse Gomez. Genosse Gomez, Sitzung!' He didn't like the way it was directed, the way the actors stood. Everything he criticized."[3] At the outset of rehearsals, Brecht took the liberty of rushing onto the stage everytime he was disturbed by Wolfson's direction or the actors' movements. Since he could not speak English (or if he could, chose not to) his shrieking in German served only to confuse and fluster the actors. The Theatre Union quickly put a stop to that, requesting that Brecht convey his criticism to the production committee which would in turn relay his thoughts to the director and cast. Hence the Sitzung.[4]

The production committee for Mother consisted of Sklar, Martin Wolfson (representing the actors), Sylvia Feningston, and Victor

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Press Release, Exclusive for Willela Waldorf, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[4]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

Wolfson.[1] Gomez served as intermediary. From the Theatre Union's standpoint, the committee served the positive purpose of balancing the needs of the theatre against the demands of the playwright, sometimes siding with the director, sometimes making suggestions about staging to mollify the author.[2] In Brecht's view, the committee was a "dilettantish" nuisance, bringing inordinate pressure to bear on the rehearsal process (and on the director) by consuming a lot of valuable time in unproductive discussion and by discomfitting the author with its constant "nervousness," "a nervousness which manifests itself in a primitive scream to cut at every opportunity." Brecht wanted the "undisciplined" committee banned from the theatre unless they could constrain themselves to offering only positive suggestions.[3]

Brecht's objections to the Theatre Union's handling of the play covered every aspect of the production: setting, costume, acting, staging, music. The setting caused Brecht the least chagrin because in Gorelik, Brecht found an ally and a convert to his epic theatre precepts. When he first examined Gorelik's designs for Mother, Brecht declared that the scenery was "bourgeois, picturesque and wrong from start to finish."[4] Then Gorelik conferred with Brecht and came to

---

[1]Program for Mother attached to promptbook. Maltz and Blankfort also participated in the Sitzungen though they were not part of the production committee.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[3]Brecht to Theatre Union, 9 November 1935, in Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 145-46.

[4]Mordecai Gorelik, "Brecht: 'I am the Einsten of the New Stage Form,'" Theatre Arts, March 1957, p. 72.

to understand that an atmospheric design would be distracting; all that was necessary was a functional open space with the minimal properties that the actors require. "Forget about settings," Brecht said, mulling the thought while chomping on his ever present cigar,

> Let's have a platform, and on this platform we'll put chairs, tables, partitions--whatever the actors need. For hanging a curtain give me a wooden pole or a metal bar; for hanging a picture, a piece of wall. And I'll want a large projection screen. When the characters talk of the high cost of living, we'll project Mother's grocery list, written in her cramped, untutored hand, for the factory scene we'll have a welding tank on the platform, maybe, and on the projection screen photos of the factory and of Mr. Sukhlinov, the owner.[1]

Gorelik was fascinated with the appositeness of the "Japanese precision" of these recommendations. The designs he created earned him Brecht's approval and respect.

A large turntable was centered on a bare, stark stage. Across the center of the circular revolve, bisecting it at its diameter, was a wall of wood panels. New scenes were set up on the offstage side and then rotated into view. Because of this and Peter Xantho's (the stage manager) efficient organizational skills, set changes were accomplished within ten seconds. For interior scenes such as those in the Mother's home or the teacher's apartment, two short sections of wall, a door in one and a window in the other, were placed perpendicular to the large wall at both ends, thus forming a small box set. Otherwise, the stage was open. Once, in the streetcorner propagandizing scene (III.v), the back wall was set obliquely to suggest the vista of a street. The rest of the time it was parallel to the edge of the apron. Scene shifts were done in the dark. The backwalls behind the revolve were draped with a

---

[1]Ibid., p.73.

black velvet curtain. Stage right, at the rear, side-by-side and fully visible, were the two pianos for the music. Overhead, the four electric pipes were hung low so as to make the banks of stage lighting visible to the audience, a staple of the epic theatre's illusion breaking theatrical practice. In the Civic Repertory Theatre this created some sightline problems since the spectators in the upper balcony were forced to view the play through a screen of lighting equipment.[1] Across the front of the stage, Brecht ordered what came to be known as "das kleines Brecht Vorhang," a half curtain made of untreated burlap, another epic theatre device. Theatre Union Board members were perplexed by this apparently arbitrary gambit which divided the house across social lines, if you will. The spectators in the two balconies were permitted to see what the spectators in the orchestra could not.[2]

On each proscenium pillar a banner was hung in classroom fashion. The left one was engraved with a quotation from Jefferson--"All authority belongs to the people"--the right one with a maxim from Marx--"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of the class struggle."[3] The most important part of the setting was a large screen which hung midstage over the turntable. On this was projected the many titles, captions, statistics, pictures which, for Brecht, underscored and amplified the action. Some of the projections became another bone of contention between the progenitor of the epic theatre and the woeful theatre group which failed to recognize its purpose. For Brecht, the

---

[1]Moross, 29 June 1978.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [3]Ibid.

projections were intrinsic to the production, constituting, together with the text, "the actual spiritual movement . . . through which the plot unfolded." They make the effect of the play, Brecht postulated, indirect. By which he meant that they frustrate emotional engagement and offer instead, when they are appropriately juxtaposed to the text, a provocative contrasting position.[1] The Theatre Union occasionally found this to be true, but too often the explanatory inscriptions hinged to the action seemed redundant. For example, the title that flashed across the screen prior to Act Two, scene four which read "Ivan Vesovchiko Does Not Recognize His Own Brother," is followed by action which shows just that.[2]

Board members who must have been outraged at the escalating cost of the production (caused in good measure by the postponement and the expenses in bringing Brecht to America) were very likely grateful that Brecht was satisfied with an austere set. For once their policy--the technique of poverty--coincided with the astringent strictures of the epic theatre. A total of $1,303.28 was spent on the set. Of this $310.00 went to Gorelik in fees, $300.00 was for the actual construction of the set, $132.40 was paid for the slides, with $64.80 spent on a screen and $50.00 on the rental of a projector.[3]

Brecht was disturbed by the way the lighting and costumes were ultimately arranged. The lighting, he felt, was picturesque and romantic, a throwback to the loathsome theatre dedicated to illusion. He complained

---

[1]Brecht, Schriften, p. 1037.

[2]Gordon, 14 July 1978. [3]Financial Report, 1935-36.

about an "atmospheric October evening light" in one scene which was incongruent to the formalized effect created by the setting.[1] For the Theatre Union such lighting effects were second nature. It was, after all, atmospherically realistic renditions of scenes like the lunch break on the dock in Stevedore and the twilight picture of the miners' barrack in Black Pit that earned the Theatre Union attention and acclaim. Again, it was a matter of two vastly dissimilar theatrical styles coming into sharp, headlong conflict. In another matter with respect to the lighting, the two onstage pianos were not illuminated. This Brecht felt, created the odd impression that the pianos were put on the stage because there was no room for them anywhere else.[2]

With regard to the costumes, Brecht felt he was tricked. He claims that the Theatre Union, in defiance of previous agreements and knowing that it was contrary to his wishes, changed the costumes to make them look Russian. This created a "picture-book atmosphere and gave exotic local color to the revolutionary workers' activities."[3] This subversive deed was a political sin becuase it narrowed the focus to a specific group, at a specific time and place, when Brecht wanted to universalize the action. He would have been content with some variation of the nondescript workers' uniform--gray flannel shirt, black trousers, red tie--worn by the two musicians.[4] Brecht contends that if Gorelik who understood the importance of these considerations but was also never consulted about the changes, had been given the chance to fully realize

---

[1]Brecht, Brecht on Brecht, p. 82. [2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid,; Brecht, Schriften, p. 1079. [4]Moross, 29 June 1978.

his conception, the production would not have gone astray technically.[1]

Next to the clashes over the script, the most violent differences occured over the direction and the music. For the Lehrstueck, Brecht stipulated that a prime prerequsite is for the director to possess a "historian's eye." He must grasp the political essence of a word or gesture and find the most cogent means of expressing these. Having a "historian's eye" means that the director must show an action not as an incident in the life of a single character or a specific group of characters, but as an emblematic event, one that is resonant with historic significance.[2]

Wolfson, however, had a casual attitude toward the politics of the play, feeling the need instead, as his training and experience inclined him, to contentrate on mining the dramatic qualities of the play: "I don't care whether they learned or not, it never entered my head. I wanted the play to be as vital, as vibrant and as interesting as it could be. I gave very little thought to the political thing; the political thing was in the word."[3] To Brecht, this attitude was naive, it was "undisciplined and dilletantish", two words he often used as imprecations. First, there was the matter of the acting style, which was not entirely Wolfson's fault. To prevent empathy and to highlight the meaning of the lines, Brecht wanted the actors to adopt a manner which was akin to reportage. The actor should play his role as if he were testifying in the witness box, to explain himself rather than present

---

[1]Brecht, Brecht on Brecht, p. 82. [2]Ibid., p. 83.

[3]Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

himself. For the epic theatre, the theater of instruction, the actor must abandon his habit of representing his character, instead he must show and elucidate the action. Brecht offered the example of a street demonstration wherein a bystander acts-out an accident he has just witnessed and gives his interpretation of what occured without "losing himself in the role." This acting style, Brecht felt, was integral to the execution of the Lehrstueck and he had few doubts of his abilities to retrain the actors to play in this manner: "As far as the actors are concerned, I have for many years worked with all sorts of actors, with famous stars as well as with proletarian agit-prop players. It is certainly not easy to bring about this style, but in the end it is possible."[1]

Wolfson was oblivious to the need for any change in technique and he was hardpressed to see what practical difference it would make. During rehearsals, though he was relegated to the rear of the auditorium, Brecht nevertheless attempted to instruct the actors in reading the script. Sometimes he confused the actors, but in at least one instance he illuminated their understanding. It was during one rehearsal of the song "The Party is in Danger." The chorus of workers was singing the song in a sentimental fashion. Brecht was infuriated. Millicent Green remembers what happened:

> In a voice that boomed across the stage, it sounded exactly line the German music halls of the period, he said, "Die Partie ist in Gefahr." Now listen to the difference. The words are so much harder in German, but the manner of delivery is so different, and suddenly as he sang it in German it had some meaning for me.[2]

---

[1]Brecht to Jerome, Beginning of September 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 144.

[2]Green, 30 June 1978.

In the whole of the production Brecht found only three passages which were delivered in the style which he wanted:

> In the Theatre Union's production of Mother a correct way of speaking was used for the following sentences: by Mrs. Henry in the scene where the mother is lying ill . . .; by John Boruff as Pavel in the May Day denomstration scene . . .; by Millicent Green in the bible tearing scene . . . These passages were properly spoken because the were spoken with same sense of responsibility as a statement made for the record in a court of law, and because the gest stays in the memory.[1]

Other things about the production, such as the weak acting material and the many actors used in double and triple roles, also disturbed Brecht.[2] But what brought Brecht the most consternation about the direction was the inappropriate, ill-conceived manner in which Wolfson staged some of the songs. At the end of the second act the chorus sings "Praise of the Vlassovas." The purpose of the song, as Brecht said, is that "all good proletarian fighters are praised as the unknown soldiers of the revolution."[3] Brecht wanted the song separated from the previous scene--the scene in which the Mother converts the butcher on the Smirnoff farm--and have it sung directly to the audience, giving the song a broader scope. Wolfson had the actors, who moments before played strikebreakers, sing the song directly to the Mother, "screaming it at her face." "Through this," fumed Brecht, "the entire song which is cold, sharp and complicated was made ineffective and had the result that the audience watched this wild screaming in the kitchen completely confused and shaking their heads."[4] Even though Brecht thought the Theatre Union was all wrong in its approach, the theatre was at least consistent.

---

[1]Brecht, Brecht on Brecht, p. 83.

[2]Brecht to Theatre Union, 9 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 145.

[3]Brecht, Schriften, p. 1073. [4]Ibid., p. 1080.

The title which they gave the song--"In Praise of Vlassova"--used the specific noun which would suggest that it was addressed to the characters rather than to the audience.

Another song which caused no small vexation was the "The Party is in Danger." The Mother is seriously ill, prostrate in bed. Brecht meant the song as an alert, a radio bulletin in which the Party calls all workers to defend the cause in its moment of grave danger. He wanted to have the chorus grouped around the piano, singing the piece to the audience, or off-stage with the voices of the chorus projected through a loudspeaker as in a radio broadcast. Wolfson thought differently. He had a group of workers barge into the room and sing directly to the enfeebled woman, importuning her with sharp commands to get out of bed and onto the streets. Brecht considered this "an act of brutality."[1] It was in his view, "inhumane behaviour" and "an enormous political error."[2] Inhumane, because it showed the Party badgering a sick woman; politically wrong, because the song was intended as an urgent summoning to all workers, with the Mother's response--significantly, of her own volition--exemplifying the courage of the workers despite suffering. Brecht was amazed that, content and purpose aside, the intonation, rhythm, and melody of the song could bo so crassly misinterpreted and abused.[3]

Brecht objected when the scene was being rehearsed. Since this was a few days before opening night, nerves were frayed to a tender,

---

[1]Brecht, Brecht on Brecht, p. 83.

[2]Brecht, Schriften, p. 1079. [3]Ibid.

painful rawness. Wolfson describes what happened:

> This creep Brecht sitting in the audience, "Ach nicht so, est muss ein Sitzung." He wanted a conference all the time. The play is opening in three days. So I finally said, "You get the hell out of this theatre and don't come back." He didn't understand. I grabbed him, the holy Brecht, and I pushed him right down the aisle out of the theatre, bolted the door. He was going to get an injunction. Instead I get a telephone call--I don't even know what the hell the Communist Party is all about--V. J. Jerome, the cultural attache, demands that I sit with a group; Brecht wasn't there.[1]

Wolfson went east a few blocks across Fourteenth Street to Luchow's restaurant where the meeting was held. Sitting there with Jerome was Archibald Macleish, wearing a yellow checkered vest and eating a hard-boiled egg with horseradish. To Wolfson this culinary twist was the height of elegance.[2] The agenda of the meeting involved the staging of the song "The Party is in Danger" as well as the question of several cuts in the play, particularly in the Bible and copper collection scenes. Wolfson made some concessions about the cuts, agreeing to talk to the Board about reinstating some stricken lines, but held out about the staging.[3]

This was not the only time Brecht resorted to the Communist Party, asking it to intercede on his behalf. He felt that the play had been so mangled at the hands of the Theatre Union, that its Marxist statement was no longer recognizable. He apparently believed, too,

---

[1]Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

[2]Ibid.; Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[3]Wolfson, 22 June 1978; Brecht and Hanns Eisler to Theatre Union, n.d., and Theatre Union to Eisler and Brecht, 19 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 149-151.

that the Theatre Union was under the wing of the Party and was obliged to subscribe to Party discipline. As a result, he and Eisler brought Gomez to a hearing in Earl Browder's office at Communist Party headquarters. He set forth his grievances and accused the Theatre Union of eviscerating the play by taking a bourgeois approach to it. Browder refused to make any judgment, wisely deciding to stay out of the fray; "You settle among yourselves. You're all comrades, you settle among yourselves," he said laconically.[1]

Given the central importance of the music in the play it was just about foreordained that the music, too, would cause disagreement. The music of the epic theatre is as different in approach and purpose as the structure of the play itself, the staging or the acting style it requires. Ordinarily, music is used in a play to express the feelings of the character or to underscore the mood. In the epic theatre the purpose of the music is, to use Eisler's term, "to enforce an attitude."[2] In Mother, for example, according to Eisler, the vocal composition must

> . . . point to the moral, so to speak, of the scene just presented. The songs are not lyrics, but theory. The musical pieces have the task of making it possible to place the spectator in a frame of mind which makes it possible for him to reflect on what he has seen in a useful way. The music puts in order and decides the emotions of the spectator.[3]

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]Eva Goldbeck, "Principles of Educational Theatre," New Masses, 31 December 1935, p. 28.

[3]"Einiges Ueber die Musik zu dem Stueck 'Die Mutter,'" Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

As a result, special emphasis was placed on the form of the music. For the Theatre Union production, Eisler rearranged the score, which was originally intended for a full orchestra, so that it could be played by only two pianos. Additionally, he reworked the choral pieces, which originally required a minimum of thirty experienced singers, so that they could be performed by actors among whom were only two with singing experience.[1] Having made all these alterations, Eisler expected a certain amount of cooperation in having his intentions for the music realized. Unfortunately, he was disappointed. The brunt of his disappointment fell onto Jerome Moross. He found Moross inexperienced and believed that he mishandled the score both in his playing and in his instruction of the chorus which was already handicapped by itslack of vocal skill. Moross, for his part, has no kind words for Eisler, saying that his music is a "kind of Kurt Weill without wit."[2]

Much of Brecht's and Eisler's backseat directing focused on the manner in which the music was played and sung. At the rehearsal on 8 November, a scant ten days before opening, differences came to a head, becoming outright antagonistic. The rehearsal was an open run-through for the benefit of backers and patrons of the Theatre Union. In the middle of the performance Brecht shouted out that Moross's playing was "Dreck Musik." Eisler corrobroated Brecht's view, but in more decorous language, saying, "The tempo, the tempo is all wrong." Moross, not to be out done, matched insult with insolence and replied, "I won't play your music, it's a steal from Wagner anyway." He then approached Brecht and threatened to crack his skull. Brecht, always

---

[1]Ibid. [2]Moross, 29 June 1978.

pragmatic, adopted a Schweikien tactic and hastily retired from the theatre. Eisler followed.[1]

Brecht and Eisler were outraged by Moross's threats of physical abuse and offended that the theatre's Board condoned such affrontery. The next day, in a letter to the Board, Eisler patiently offered some alternative suggestions. Eisler recommended that Moross be relieved of his responsibilities and that Comrade Adomian, the choir director of the New Singers, take over the direction of the chorus. Adomian would do this without fee as a gesture of solidarity. If the Theatre Union refused, Eisler threatened to withdraw his music. He explains that two weeks earlier he had predicted that such a "catastrophe" would occur unless something were done about the music. He added that only because the Theatre Union is a revolutionary theatre did he put up with so much frustration. Now, his tolerance had peaked; the political importance of the play forced him to take such a position.[2]

Brecht, customarily forthright and not averse to scatology when it serves a purpose, now added the music to his list of complaints:

> Dear Comrades, first I must express my surprise at the easy going manner of your treatment of the insult to me in your theatre. Naturally, I have the right to object in the sharpest terms the dillettantish, unrecognizable change in a work which will publicly be brought out in my name. In a political art work quality is so important that it requires the most alert concentration. My opinion, for example, that your pianist

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978; Brecht to Theatre Union, 9 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 144.

[2]Hanns Eisler to Theatre Union, 9 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 146-47.

> has made "Dreck" out of Eisler's extraordinary music is unchanged and, as I heard today, is shared by Eisler.[1]

Eisler's recommendations went unheeded. As the production date drew nearer, Eisler charged that Wolfson was also responsible for ruining the music. In a typed, unsigned note in English, dated 14 November, he communicated his discontent:

> Eisler demanded, when he saw that the director by his staging of the choruses, ruins his music, that Eisler himself be the one to decide on the position, gestures, etc. of the choruses, in order to enable him to bring the music to full effect. If the board does not satisfy Eisler in this matter, it is impossible for his music to be played.[2]

But it was Moross who remained the chief culprit in Eisler's view (and in Brecht's). On November 19, the Executive Board responded to yet another battery of complaints about Moross with apologies about the earlier altercation, but remainded firm about continuing to work with Moross:

> Apparently the essence of your present dissatisfaction involves the question of the musicians. We regret exceedingly that an incident should have occured in our theatre in which Comrade Brecht regards himself as having been insulted by a musician. We feel sure that Comrade Brecht will realize that our regret is deep-going and sincere. On the other hand, we find ourselves unable to take action against the worker musician to whom Comrade Brecht had addressed himself in a manner that is not customary in the American Theatre. The worker in question, Comrade Moross, who, with Comrade North is an outstanding contributor to working class music, has worked closely with the Theatre Union over a long period of time. He has made many sacrifices for the present production and has worked earnestly throughout the rehearsal period. In any event, we have been informed by the union delegate that union regulations prohibit

---

[1] Brecht to Theatre Union, 9 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 145.

[2] This note was shown to me by Gomez who very likely wrote it on Eisler's behalf in his capacity as interpreter and as go-between for the German artists.

> dismissals after one day of rehearsals, and such action would entail a strike. It is unfortunate that this question should require so much attention since we know that you will agree that personal problems are of decidedly secondary importance at a time like the present.[1]

Just prior to the opening of the play, the Theatre Union took a break from the rehearsals to hold what was by now a routine pre-production fund raising publicity ball. The place was again Webster Hall and the motif was a carnival with clowns, jugglers, magicians, and sideshows. The prestidigitator Robert Reinhart provided the evening's entertainment. The ball was held Friday, 15 November, and $1.00 was charged at the door.[2] A profit of $309.05 helped defray the enormous production costs of Mother.[3]

With all bills and salaries paid, Mother cost $8,622.13 to produce, almost $2,000 more than any previous production. This did not include a $10.00 item which had the puzzling but provocative explanation "Legal fees 'Mother'."[4]

With Mother, the Theatre Union experimented with two changes in its box office policy. First, it announced that it would take advantage of the new law permitting performances on Sundays. The Sunday matinee and evening performances were to replace Monday evening and Wednesday matinee performances which box office records showed were

---

[1]Theatre Union to Eisler and Brecht, 19 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 150.

[2]Handbill for ball, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Financial Report, 1935-36. [4]Ibid.

poorly attended. This schedule could more easily accomodate workers' schedules by taking advantage of their one free day.[1] The Theatre Union explained that it would undertake this schedule for a four-week trial period to test the sales response. Increased expenses--double pay for actors and stagehands--may make it impossible to continue this policy.[2]

The other change involved lowering admission prices. The top price for a ticket for performances Tuesday thru Saturday matinee would be $1.00, with 167 orchestra seats available for 75¢. The $1.50 maximum would be retained for Saturday evenings and Sunday matinees and evenings.[3] The theatre management had found that people who could only pay $1.00 were turned away when only $1.50 seats remained.[4]

The new price scale was launched also because of a survey conducted by the Theatre Union. A random sampling of 2,108 members of forty-two trade union groups in the city were asked to determine the types of plays they attended, their theatregoing habits, and the interests of the working class. Aside from finding out what the favorite social play of this group was Peace on Earth, the Theatre Union learned that almost half of the respondents were kept away from the theatre

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978; Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Herald Tribune, 27 October 1935.

[4]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

because "the tickets cost too much."[1] Despite the economic sacrifice the Theatre Union realized that it owed its success to a workers' audience and that to remain true to its manifesto of producing social plays about the ninety percent for the ninety percent it must create more middle-priced seats.

Concomitant with the opening, shortly before and immediately after, the Theatre Union engaged in a press campaign, particularly in the labor press, to introduce the play. The tenor of this public relations work (now managed by Martha Dreiblatt, who was brought in to relieve a very busy Margaret Larkin) suggests that the theatre was somewhat apprehensive about the appeal for workers of the experimental play. Brecht was acclaimed as a stage innovator and as an author interested in writing for the working class. Dreiblatt tried to arouse interest in the didactic purpose of the drama by explaining the importance of learning in all social plays: "We go to our workers' theatres to learn of course. But not to learn dully and by rote mechanical rules and regulations. There is an entertaining learning, a militant and a joyous learning, a learning that, because it entertains, is a deeper learning."[2] The play's form, she affirmed, underscored the vitality of the lesson. She would mention some of the unrealistic staging methods of the production, linking them with the techniques of Newsboy. In one piece, stressing the "Humor, song, music, the light-heartedness that springs from revolutionary courage" Dreiblatt wrote, "And in the spirited informality of the staging . . . [workers] will catch something of the

---

[1]"Drama--And the Full Dinner Pale," New York Times. 20 October 1935, sec. 10, p. 2.

[2]Dreiblatt, Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

spirit of comraderie, of vaudeville gaiety that circulates between the audience and the stage itself, making them one.[1] The handbill for Mother reinforced the appeal of the novel staging when it announced, almost as a challenge, "Bars are Down Between the Actors and the Audience."[2]

Dreiblatt also focused on the musical interests of her prospective audience by talking about Eisler's songs and how some of these like "In Praise of Learning" are popular with workers' organizations, having been introduced in America by Mordecai Baumann in his recitals.[3] In a lengthy article in the New York Times Brecht himself described the cultural milieu out of which Mother grew and set forth the basic tenets of the epic theatre and the Lehrstueck.[4]

On opening night, Tuesday evening, 19 November, there was no "vaudeville gaiety" in evidence backstage. After the mishaps with Moross, Brecht had been barred from the theatre. The night before the opening he was invited to return. A brief letter, sounding like a peace overture, read, "We have always felt that your presence in the theatre was highly desirable."![5] There is no indication that Brecht or Eisler

---

[1]Ibid.

[2]Mother File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]"The German Drama Pre-Hitler," New York Times, 24 November 1935, sec. 10, p. 1.

[5][Theatre Union] to Brecht, 18 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 149.

accepted the invitation. On opening night Wolfson recalls spending most of his time in the dressing rooms backstage trying to bolster the bruised confidence of the actors: "I was backstage trying to give confidence to the actors who were absolutely shattered by this maniac yelling in German; these poor American actors didn't know what was going on. And I just said, 'Now you just do it the way we were doing it. Great! You're going to be fine.'"[1]

The actors had good reason to be fearful. They must have had some unconscious premonition of the public's response to the play. The critics' verdict was devastating. One newspaper after another expressed some variation on the theme of boredom. Dull, tiresome, monotonous were words that were used or suggested in almost every review. A few excerpts will suffice to convey the feeling the critics came away with.

> Howard Barnes: The Brecht dramatization is an awkward and monotonous stage piece. Scrapping some of Gorky's most significant material, the author has used the novel to compose a rather dull manual in dilectical matherialism. He brings it to the stage as a series of flat tableaus [sic].
>
> Gilbert Gabriel: . . . it seemed to me to grow steadily more tiresome as an exercise in the new drama--and even as a tin-pan piece of political instruction. Not offensive. Not troublesome. Just, sad to say, increasingly tiresome.
>
> John Anderson: It may not yet be a Communist sin to consider the kiddie-car unsuitable for adult travel, and "Mother" is addressed to kiddie-car intelligence. The pinafore brigade may find it entrancing pap. I found it dull and flavorless.
>
> Robert Coleman: . . . it is neither a good play nor effective "red" propaganda. . . . Those parts of it through which we were able to stay awake were dull episodes in a naive and biased revolutionary pageant.
>
> Grenville Vernon: It is indeed a pity that an organization which

---

[1]Wolfson, 22 June 1978.

> has given us such fine things as "The Sailors of Cattaro" and "The Black Pit" should have been so blinded by its social mission to present such an uninteresting and utterly alien thing as "Mother." . . . the play, if play it can be called, has little interest for any native American audience.[1]

The critics did acknowledge the play's stylistic novelities. As Garland put it, "it is the method rather than the matter that makes the Theatre Union's new offering theatrically significant. Otherwise, "Bringing Up Mother" might be its name."[2] However, they considered these novelties extraneous, hollow, and self-conscious, serving only to diffuse the play. Brooks Atkinson tried hard to accept the production but was ultimately left unmoved:

> The style of the production is considerably more interesting than the drama. . . . What "Mother" lacks in the theatre is cumulative power. After the novelty of the staging has worn off, the conscious simplicity of the dramatic method turns "Mother" into an animated lecture on the theme of revoltuion, which may have an educational value but is desultory theatre. It is a healthy thing to rid the theatre of trickery. But only uncommonly dramatic stories or characters have power enough to live in the theatre without benefit of stage artifice. To revolutionists "Mother" may be a sacred story that has to be told in the form of a religious masque. To this column it is an interesting experiment in stagecraft without much emotional vitality.[3]

---

[1]Barnes, "Mother," Herald Tribune, 20 November 1935; Gabriel, "Mother:' Theatre Union Begins with a Musical Version of a Gorki Tale," American 20 November 1935; Anderson, "Premiere of 'Mother': Drama Tells Old Woman's Struggle Through Dark Bloshevist Period," Evening Journal, 20 November 1935; Coleman, "'Mother,' Novel of Gorki Used as Basis of Drama," Daily Mirror, 21 November 1935; Vernon, "Mother," Commonweal, 6 December 1935, p. 162.

[2]Robert Garland, "'Mother' Produced at Civic Repertory: Tells Story of Transformation of a Woman from a Conservative to a Radical," World Telegram, 20 November 1935.

[3]"'Mother' Learns and Teaches the Facts of Life at the Theatre Union in Fourteenth Street." New York Times, 20 November 1935, p. 26.

To a certain extent, the production did realize one aspect of Brecht's epic theatre. The audience's response was not emotional. But American audiences, unaccustomed to such an ascetic mood in the theatre, were perplexed by the emotional aridity of Mother. Burns Mantle, who was familiar with the novel, felt the Theatre Union, "cheated" him; "the thrill that should be there is missing." Expecting to be swept up by the urge to stand in the aisle and shout himself, the "considerably disappointed" critic found only a pedantic version of Mother which "dwindles to practically nothing but a series of animated pictures."[1] When Theatre Union Board members read Arthur Pollack's review they must have forlornly nodded in agreement, for he expressed their view of the mechanism of propaganda's effectiveness in the theatre:

> What is the use of propaganda in the theatre if it goes over the same old things without offering any kind of excitement to lure the uninitiated out of his conservative corner. I can understand the Theatre Union's wanting to use the theatre as a medium for the spread of its ideas. The theatre is one of the best means of convincing people through their emotions. But if they are given nothing at all for their emotions to take hold of or their minds either, how far can the propaganda spread?[2]

Brecht's intentions were so unheard of that Thomas Dash criticized him for the very thing he deliberately suppressed:

> It seems to this reviewer that with this marvelous material for overpowering drama, Brecht's play . . . should stir us more than it does. It should evoke more feeling that it does. There are barren stretches when the onlooker, no matter how sympathetic, fails to become emotionally overpowered. The play remains too distant from his periphery of feeling. Possibly the choppy, episodic manner of presentation is to blame; possibly the stress

---

[1]"'Mother' Soviet Primer in Action: Pre-Revolutionary Russia Revealed in Simple Drama Extolling the Workers," Daily News, 20 November 1935.

[2]"Theatre Union Opens Its Season with 'Mother,' a play as Violent as a Zephyr," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 20 November 1935.

on mass action rather than personalized drama is to blame. Dash, wanting to like the drama, snatches at the few rudimentary expressions of feeling that fleetingly come to the surface: "the play's best scenes are those that stress the human element most."[1]

When the critics set aside their unsatisfied hunger for emotional stimulation, what also bothered them about the style was its inexorable, heavy-handed insistence on old-fashioned, hornbook learning. The play was roundly berated as a "first-primer" which underestimated the intelligence of the audience.[2] One critic scowled that the play should be catagorized "as a simple kindergarten for Communist tots" which even "the children will find a little slow."[3] Richard Lockridge said sarcastically, "The scenery is only intimated and after a thing has been said four or five time, and sung twice, it is spelled out on a motion picture screen. There is certainly no excuse for anyone's missing the point."[4] Willela Waldorf summed it all up by saying, "Last night's presentation proved to be something in the nature of a primer designed to instruct kindergarteners in the more elementary phases of the class struggle. The actors did everything but hold up colored blocks arranged to spell out K-A-R-L M-A-R-X and R-E-V-O-L-U-T-I-O-N."[5]

---

[1]Mother, Women's Wear Daily, 20 November 1935.

[2]Gabriel, "Gorki Tale," 20 November 1935; Anderson, "Old Woman's Struggle," 20 November 1935; Isaacs "Distanct," p. 14.

[3]Pollack, "Violent as Zephyr," 20 November 1935.

[4]"Propaganda with Music," 20 November 1935.

[5]"'Mother' Opens Theatre Union's Third Season: Fourteenth Street Organization Stages Primer for Revolution With the Aid of Stereopticon Slides," Evening Post, 20 November 1935.

Despite their general displeasure with the production, the critics did manage a few kind words for the director, designer, music, and acting. "The performance . . . is as simple as the drama and the staging and is packedwith conviction," said Brooks Atkinson.[1] According to Howard Barnes the company did as well as could be expected to "vitalize and integrate the material of the play," and "Mordecai Gorelik's settings are expressionistically correct and Victor Wolfson has directed it with an eye to the meager action in the script."[2] One of the few things which Gilbert Gabriel liked about the production was "its musical exhortations--which even though they turn before long into monotonous warwhoops, are composed with much vitality and skill."[3] Arthur Pollock found the music "the play's most stirring element" and commented that those notorious piano players that so chaffed Brecht and Eisler "played with good revolutionary firmness of touch and well."[4] Wilella Waldorf agreed that the music was "interesting and often very touching," but she noted that the lapses on the part of the actors who were weak singers interfered with the music's effectiveness."[5]

Unquestionably, the heroine of the evening was Helen Henry whose rendition of Pelagea Vlassova captivated the critics. Garland raved about her:

---

[1]"'Mother' Learns and Teaches," p. 26.

[2]"Mother," 20 November 1935.

[3]"Gorki Tale," 20 November 1935.

[4]"Violent as Zephyr," 20 November 1935.

[5]"Primer for Revolutionists," 20 November 1935.

> There are scarcely enough words in your correspondent's vocabulary to give Helen Henry's projection of the title role its due. As Pelagea Vlasova, Miss Henry is sincerely simple, simply sincere. Hers is the artistry of under accentuation, of knowing not to do and when not to do it.[1]

Others liked the way she "suggests very subtly the simple, humorous shrewdness of the mother," or the "quiet dignity" she has which makes the entire production "strangely appealing" despite its shortcomings or her "force and conviction . . . pitched in a sober, subdued key" or her "nice restraint" or her honesty of expression.[2] For John Anderson it was only Helen Henry who transcended the mundaneness of the material and offered some kind of emotional restorative: "only in the literal, sensitively wrought, admirably imagined portrait of the old woman, done in ordinary theatre terms by Helen Henry, does the thing touch the audience at all."[3] Of the remainder of the cast some of the acting did stand out as individual performances. Those mentioned for their work were John Boruff as Pavel, Martin Wolfson as Ivan, Stanley Wood as the teacher.

The critics, the bourgeois critics, at any rate, quite plainly rejected Mother and with it Brecht's non-Aristotelian, revolutionary theatre. The Lehrstueck and the epic theatre were alien to their nature. They were uncompromisingly didactic and irritatingly resolute in their non-emotionality. American audiences, as reflected in the comments

---

[1]"Story of Transformation," 20 November 1935.

[2]Joseph Wood Krutch, "Black Bread and a Circus," Nation, 4 December 1935, p. 360; Waldorf, "Primer for Revolutionists," 20 November 1935; Dash, "Mother," 20 November 1935; Barnes, "Mother," 20 November 1935; Mantle, "Primer in Action," 20 November 1935.

[3]"Old Woman's Struggle," 20 November 1935.

of these critics, craved the "culinary theatre." They resented being treated like school children. The play seemed like some bizzare interloper from another planet. Both in its form and content it seemed to have no relevance to the American scene. "Certainly 'Mother' has nothing whatever to do with the American theatre, from which the Theatre Union seems at this point to have seeded," observed Richard Lockridge.[1] Thomas Dash advised that the play "with its elementary lessons in Marxist economics and revolution, is more for Moscow than for New York.[2]

Brecht was unperturbed by the criticisms. The play had been greeted by the same assault from the bourgeois press in Berlin. At least in New York there were some critics like Atkinson and Krutch who considered the play a failure but a worthy experiment. There was also Stark Young who admired the Theatre Union for its courage to produce it and considered the production a step forward in their progress.[3]

The leftist press was more receptive both toward Brecht and the Theatre Union production. The report in the Daily Worker consisted of an uncommon four-column explication of the connections between Drama-Life-Marx and how Brecht's play and theories are magnificent, penetrating representatives of this nexus. The critic Moshe Olgin considered the play nothing less tha a dramatization of Capital:

> This very substance of the play is of a nature to keep worker audiences spell bound. It is not only Russian or Nazi Germany. It it is the working class of the whole world. Millions of toilers

---

[1]"Propaganda with Music," 20 November 1935.

[2]"Mother," 20 November 1935.

[3]"Workers in General," New Republic, 18 December 1935, p. 175.

> everywhere. It is not only the drama of yesterday. It is the drama of today and tomorrow.
>
> It was Brecht's plan to have a spectacle representing the dramatic story of present day class struggle which must culminate in the victory of the proletariat.. He planned his play on a grandiose scales. Scene after scene, picture after picture of the world conflict were to pass before the eyes of the beholder.

Olgin has fewer comments about the Theatre Union production, however, saying only that it was a "colorful and very exciting spectacle, with moments of unsual artistic height." His one reservation about the production was that it was an admixture of two divergent theatrical styles:

> It was felt, however, that there was a struggle of two styles, two tendencies in the production. The players in the Theatre Union are used to one kind of technique. Brecht's "Mother" required a different kind of technique. The production showed quite frequently a lack of unity of style, and this weakened the effect. The realism of the Theatre Union often violated the special realism required by Brecht's conception and this jeopardized artistic unity.

The two examples he gives to explain this difficulty would have warmed Brecht's heart. They were one, the mingling of the chorus and the players and two, the staging of the song "The Party is in Danger." But despite these problems the production remained a "phenomemon of prime importance in the development of our proletarian theatre."[1]

Stanley Burnshaw in the New Masses was likewise appreciative of Brecht and his aims. He did his homework on the theories of the Lehrstuecke and found Mother an original contribution to the technique of revolutionary drama. He notes though that the Theatre Union production

---

[1]M. J. Olgin, 'Mother': The Theatre Union's New Play," Daily Worker, 22 November 1935, p. 5.

did not adhere strictly to epic theatre theories, changes having been made "in accordance with the Theatre Union's conception of the taste and needs of American audiences." Burnshaw does not presume to judge the prudence of these changes. His only concern is whether the play is interesting, rewarding, and worth seeing. His answer is, naturally enough, "an unqualified yes." Sure, there is a mixture of styles. Sure, the staging of "The Party is in Danger" is off key because of the distorted impression it yields of an inhuman Bolshevism. Sure, Brecht's theories of unemotional viewing are suspect or at a minimum strained when we cannot help but become affected by the understated reunion of Vlassova and her son when Pavel escapes from prison. These are compelling questions but they do not diminish the achievements of the drama. Brecht has wrought a unique blending of didacticism and dramatic power, something that has eluded political artists until now. Burnshaw commends the Theatre Union for recognizing that Mother is a "progressive experiment" with an "unimpeachable place in the left wing theatre."[1]

John Gassner, reporting for New Theatre Magazine was a little more reserved. Mother is an engrossing experiment, part of the widening "legend" of the workers' theatre movement. Without it "the season would be definitely the poorer." But, as with all pathmakers, there are some bumps in the road:

> The ending is distincly inconclusive, and the play sometimes lags. There is a certain epic diffuseness in the text which the slides and the chanting fail to overcome and sometimes even accentuate. The play, in fact, exists on two unequal planes--as lesson in montage form and as a drama, in which the latter alone is really effective as a lesson. Unfortunately, the dramatic portion--that

---

[1]"The Theatre Union Produces 'Mother,'" New Masses, 3 December 1935, pp. 27-28.

> is, the mother's story-- is insufficiently developed and is not only episodic but shadowy.

Board members must have gnashed their teeth when they read the next sentence: "And certainly it would have been advisable for the author to have submitted his play to a thorough adaptation for American audiences." The acting, Gassner said, was on the whole good, but the production was marred by a lack of "coordination of the various elements" and the "numerical insufficiency of the cast" which forced an unfortunate narrowing of the play's musical scope.[1]

If Gassner was annoyed with the preachiness of the slides, James T. Farrell was offended by their insupportable impudence. Writing in Partisan Review and Anvil, formerly the organ of the John Reed Club, he asserted with undisguised vehemence,

> Mother, it seems to me might have been a satisfactory play to present to an audience which has not yet emerged from illiteracy. It is over-simplified to the degree that every emphasis which the author seeks to make is made in double and triple. The character will say in an aside what he or she is going to say or do. Then, they do it.

The redundance of the technique is ludicrous and insulting. Farrell blasts the author and the producers for their self-indulgent squandering of what could have been a useful technique is used with restraint and insight. Mother, he concludes "was an illustrated lecture which assumed that audiences in New York, audiences which had seen and understood such a sound and moving play as Sailors of Cattaro, were capable of understanding very little."[2]

---

[1]John Gassner, "Mother," New Theatre, December 1935, p. 13.

[2]James T. Farrell, "Theatre Chronicle," Partisan Review and Anvil, February 1936, p. 29.

Meanwhile, before having had time to absorb the jolt of all the reviews, Brecht and Eisler resumed their campaign to mold the play into the image of their vision. Brecht and Eisler dispatched a letter to the Board requesting that they finally be given the authority to rework the play so that it conforms to their artistic and political intentions. In view of the fact that their suggestions were never attended to, that the production as it stood was a dismal failure, and that thousands of workers were still expected to see the play, their demand had a special urgency, they stated. In bourgeois theatre, Brecht affirmed, work stops when the reviews are released, but in the workers' theatre where the play must influence the masses politically, continual refinements are imperative.[1] The Theatre Union's concise response was that Actors' Equity regulations after the opening of a play make restaging an entire production impossible.[2]

Eisler made one last futile effort to demonstrate his disdain for the Theatre Union's treatment of his music. In an undated letter, surely after things had reached the raw impasse of opening night, Eisler prohibited the Theatre Union from any further use of five of his songs: "In Praise of Socialism" because the musical director still does not understand the tempo; "Death of a Comrade" because it is inadequately rehearsed; "In Praise of Vlasova" because the music was arbitarily shortened and the staging utterly misinterprets its meaning; the final

---

[1]Bretolt Brecht and Hanns Eisler to Theatre Union, 21 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," p. 152.

[2][Theatre Union] to Brecht and Eisler, 22 November 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 152-53.

chorus, "In Praise of Dialect," because the musical arrangement contradicts the poetry.[1] There is no evidence, however, that this demand was ever complied with.

Audiences for Mother were sparse. Over 150 theatre parties which had been booked for the opening dutifully attended.[2] There were a few curious onlookers and, of course, the clan of vocal sympathizers who boosted any representation of the worker's struggle. But the Theatre Union's regular audience, workers who were nurtured on the realism of movies, for the most part stayed away. Larkin writes, "It was popular only with the discriminating few. Our workers' audience felt it was being condescended to--the beautiful naivete of some of the script irritated the workers. While the intellectuals loved it."[3]

Not even endorsements for the play from such trusted luminaries of the left as Carl Brodsky, of the New York State Committee of the Communist Party; Julius Hochman, President of the Labor Stage; Fania M. Cohen, secretary of the ILGWU; and Mother Bloor, America's own Pelagea Vlassova, were able to boost box office sales.[4]

As a stimulus to publicity the Theatre Union sponsored a symposium entitled "Music and Poetry in the Labor Theatre." The discussion

---

[1]Hans Eilser to Theatre Union, n.d., Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 153-54.

[2]New York Times, 27 November 1935.

[3]Margaret Larkin to Barbara Nixon, 20 April 1936, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[4]Theater Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center; Press Releases, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

took place 11 December 1935 at Youth House on West Fourteenth Street. Speakers for the evening and their respective topics were Archibald MacLeish, "Poetry and Realism in the Theatre"; Aaron Copland, "Eisler and Music in the Theatre"; John Gassner, "Dramatic Style in the Theatre"; Fania Cohen, "Social Drama as Workers' Education."[1] Eisler and Brecht were both sent personal invitations.[2]

By the time the symposium was held the Theatre Union knew that it was going to close the play. On 9 December, the Board sent Brecht and Eisler a brief letter stating that because of poor box office sales and mounting losses they would have to terminate the run of Mother on 15 December.[3] In the first three weeks of the run the production lost $1,310.94. Only in the final week, after the closing announcement was issued, did the production show any kind of profit, albeit meager.[4]

Moreover, the mostly empty houses coupled with the after-shocks of rehearsals created a dispiriting low in the morale of the cast. Peter Xantho's stage manager's log charts the mood of the ensemble. The eight curtain calls on opening night were momentary solace. The next night, after the reviews were read, the performance was without life and the musicians were joking so much that their music was flat. A week later

---

[1]Handbill, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Linconl Center.

[2]Theatre Union to Brecht, 6 December 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 154-55.

[3]Theatre Union to Brecht, 9 December 1935, Lyon, "Briefwechsel," pp. 154-55.

[4]Financial Report, 1935-36.

Moross and North were still cutting-up and Xantho asked one of the Board members to reprimand them for their talking, their nonsense, and their applauding between scenes. (If the epic theatre encouraged a classroom atmosphere, someone was bound to become the class clown.) On another night, Stanley Wood showed up drunk. The next week, after Sunday evening's performance, Xantho cryptically writes, "A little flat--Audience very cold." The night of 3 December was a total disaster. The projector malfunctioned throughout Act Two and became inoperative. in the third act. After the performance the harried stage manager gathered the ensemble together. He told them not to make such a fuss if something goes wrong and to stop looking around and to report to the stage at once when they are called. He concluded by saying, "If they don't like the show and don't like the work they can give their notices, otherwise stop saying-'lousy,' 'terrible,' etc." The next day, at the matinee, there was "just an handfull [sic] of audience."[1]

It seems that the actors were probably as relieved as the Board to end the ordeal. The last performance was Sunday, 15 December. Brecht's contempt for the Theatre Union endured to the bitter end. "He attended the last performance," says Gomez, "then disappeared from the theatre. [He] walked out of the theatre with some insulting remark and we never knew where he went."[2]

The aftershocks of Mother persisted for some time after it closed. On the one hand, there was sharp criticism of the Theatre Union for dabbling with stylistic experimentation, for abandoning the type of

---

[1]Brecht, "Mother," Promptbook, "Daily Report," n.p.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

play for which it had demonstrated its proficiency. Gassner in his review had wondered why the Theatre Union did not choose a different play. Dash and Farrell had found it unfortunate that the theatre had not selected Albert Bein's Let Freedom Ring in place of Brecht's exotic drama. (Bein's play, which was produced independently by the author because he could not find a theatre organization to back it, opened 6 November with strong support from the left press, but floundered when it could not cope with Broadway economics.)

From the workers' point of view, Mother was remote in style and content. John Mullen, a union organizer and novelist, articulated this position later in the season in a survey of that year's theatrical fare:

> Speaking for myself . . . the less "Piscator" and other attempts on the part of the Group Theatre and the Theatre Union to employ ultra-arty forms--the better. One of the reasons that thousands flocked to see Stevedore was because it told a simple straightforward story that rolled along as smooth and clear as a glass ball on ice.[1]

The firmest, most candid reproof came from Mike Gold. In questioning the wisdom of presenting it, he characterized Mother as "an agit-prop play with a strongly German flavor." This nudging reminder was tantamount to saying that the searing propaganda of the Third Period was passe and alien. Furthermore, having chosen the play, the Theatre Union should have let Brecht and Eisler direct it since they best knew how to realize "the starkness of the original idea."[2]

---

[1]"A Worker Looks at Broadway", New Theater, May 1936, p. 25.

[2]Michael Gold, "Change the World," Daily Worker, 5 December 1935, p. 7.

In case the Theatre Union missed the point, Gold elaborated on his thesis the next day in another full length article. He was not being petty and chauvinistic, he insisted, when he suggested the Theatre Union do American plays with American themes. He meant simply, he explained, that a theatre like the Theatre Union which excelled in plays such as Stevedore and Black Pit should develop its own strengths. According to Gold, their forte was Socialist Realist drama. This is what the workers' audience they cultivated mandated; this is what their collective sensibility is best able to produce:

> They evidently set forth to do plays of a dynamic socialist realism, written out of proletarian American life. Nobody has done this before; it was a new world. The audiences were excited by it; at this stage of our development, it was what they wanted. The mandate was clear. . . .
>
> Everyone knew this of the Theatre Union, except, evidentally themselves. "Mother" is a fine play, well worth producing and seeing. But does it belong in a pioneer theatre that presumably set out to explore the virgin content of proletatian American life. . . .
>
> The Theatre Union is well on its way to becoming a great and permanent institution. It cannot afford to regard itself as a little experimental studio. It found its line by a miracle at the beginning of its career. Now let it go with that line. . . .
>
> Dynamic socialist realism, applied to the American scene--this seems to be the natural line of the Theatre Union. It is noteworthy that their two weakest productions have been foreign--"The Sailors of Cattaro" and now "Mother." They are not yet equipped to interpret Europe to us; and why not admit this, and work with what is strongest and surest in their art?[1]

On the other hand, there was a small circle of the left's artistic intelligentsia who, through the Theatre Union's introduction, became

---

[1]Michael Gold, "Change the World," Daily Worker, 6 December 1935, p. 9.

ardent admirers of the self-employes prophet of the new theatre. Gorelik became a disciple. Stanley Burnshaw implored Artef, a theatre whose "stylistic predilictions and creative capacities" might make it a more felicitous producer of Mother to revive it.[1] And Eva Goldbeck, Marc Blitzstein's wife, wrote a lucid exegesis of the epic theatre style which was meant to explain its seminal importance.[2]

Within the Theatre Union there was weariness and sadness. Mother was unquestionably the theatre's first real failure. Economically, atristically, politically it was a disaster. Mother's total loss of $9,272.43 saddled the theatre with a debt it would never to able to shed.[3] As a result of the production the Theatre Union lost the support of Edmund Wilson, who left the Advisory Board.[4] There was also the sense in some people's minds that the Theatre Union was finished, that it was sliding down hill, if it were not at the bottom already. Jerome Moross, for instance, felt that Mother derailed the Theatre Union:

> After Mother there was a feeling, I had it and my friends had it, that the Theatre Union no longer counted. Once they had done a disaster like that, then you no longer had faith in the Theatre Union. We now were looking elsewhere for the new and exciting. Also other people came along like Orson Welles, the Group Theatre got swinging, then the WPA was starting up and the Theatre Union was out.5

---

[1]"A Letter to Artef," New Masses, 25 February 1936, p. 28.

[2]"Eudcational Theatre," pp. 27-28.

[3]Financial Report, 1935-36; Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[4]Walker, 9 September 1978; Theatre Union Prospectus, [December 1935], Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[5]Moross, 29 June 1978.

Mike Gold, in yet another article on the subject, underscored the view that the Theatre Union had lost its vigor. The problem as he saw it, was that the theatre's directorship had become 'stale and ingrown." The Theatre Union had fallen victim to "the green-sickness." The symptom of the disease is "cliqueism" which becomes recognizable in the feeling of "isolated infallibility," in exacting demands for perfect scripts, and in "delusion[s] of grandeur." The proof of their isolation is that they have not "produced a single play by any writer not a member of their small group." Gold admonished the Theatre Union to remember that it "belongs to the movement," "Its directors are only the trustees of the movement, as definitely as if a contract had been signed. They should never lose sight of the movement as a whole, and this includes authors."[1]

In defense of the Theatre Union, Maltz wrote Gold a long letter which the latter published in his "Change the World" column in the Daily Worker. Maltz asked that the barrage of criticism leveled at the Theatre Union be modified by a "little understanding". Though the theatre faces problems it is not ready for the "ash heap." Those who quarrel with Theatre Union decisions must know that maintaining the economic life-line of a professional working class theatre is an unending, fatiguing, "life and death struggle." They must know that the theatre's fiscal situation inevitably impinges on its artistic policy. A permanent theatre, though a cherished ideal, is impossible without a lucrative endowment. They must recognize that the budget of a pro-

---

[1]Michael Gold, "Change the World," Daily Worker, 11 December 1935, p. 5.

duction has a built-in maximum beyond which the cost of breaking even would force the theatre to break itself off from its natural audience. The charge that the Theatre Union has failed in its mission to create new playwrights is ludicrous and wrong. Maltz avers that suitable scripts, scripts that examine the class role of working class issues, are hard to find, a situation which could be confirmed by Herb Kline, if Gold should want to research the matter any further. As for the question of the Theatre Union's insularity, Maltz offers two observations. First, the Theatre Union is an independent organization initiated by twelve people and dedicated to the cause of workers' theatre. There is no unspoken covenant between the theatre and the movement, as Gold suggested, and the theatre has remained faithful to its original purpose. Second, the accusation that the theatre is a "closed corporation" was very likely conceived by disappointed playwrights whose plays were refused by the Theatre Union. The Board has the prerogative to reject plays it feels are weak as it has the mission to develop its own group of playwrights.[1]

In retrospect it is clear that Mother was the victim of an unfortunate, colossal misunderstanding, a cultural gap. The Theatre Union liked Gorki's novel and in Peters's version of Brecht's adaptation felt that they had hit on the right blend of elements that would be acceptable to its audience. Enter Brecht, the revolutionary, the impatient visionary, who sought to lead audiences into new and different dimensions of experience. Because of circumstantial factors, Brecht

---

[1]Michael Gold, "Change the World," Daily Worker, 30 December 1935, p. 7. and 31 December 1935, p. 7.

and the Theatre Union were thrown together, one party never completely knowing the needs, habits, and customs of the other. The work they collaborated on was doomed to failure. It was stretched so often and so far it lost its shape, its integrity. In the end the work did not belong to either Brecht or Peters. It remained in an aesthetic limbo, dangling forever a play with no identity.

The distance between Brecht and the Theatre Union is implied in some of the comments after the fact by those involved. Brecht accused the Theatre Union of a failure of will, an aesthetic timorousness which debilitated the theatre and narrowed its significance:

> There is no doubt that the Theatre Union, after having the courage to put on the play, could not find the courage to undertake all of those important changes in their way of producing which were necessary in order to bring out the full effect of the play. . . .
>
> The creation and presentation of new plays demands great political knowledge, artistic ability, courage (a willingness not to run behind the audience but to go in front of it) willingness to learn, renunciation of routine and fear of convention and above all hard work. The attempt of the Theatre Union to stage the play "The Mother" proved that this theatre, which without doubt has made gains in respect to the political theatre, did not have at its disposal these or at least some of these qualities.[1]

Maltz, who liked the Paul Peters version very much, had little time for Brecht's dramaturgy and directorial meddling: "I was glad that I alone on the Board voted against doing it in the revised version with Brecht putting his paws in."[2] George Sklar felt that Brecht's approach "was too much of a departure," one that was strange to American

---

[1]Brecht, Schriften, pp. 1076, 1078.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

audiences.[1] Michael Blankfort says simply, "The truth is we wanted to make it human; he wanted to keep it inhuman. The whole thing was a terrible mess because what we wanted he didn't want."[2] Paul Peters offers a psychological explanation for the calamitous confrontation between Brecht and the Theatre Union. Referring to both Mother and the Laughton Galileo, the other American production of a Brecht play (opening in Los Angeles 30 July 1946) in which the author has a hand, Peters states,

> Brecht certainly has contibuted much to the comtemporary theatre, but what is apparent from these two productions is that he came to America expecting to be hailed as the creator of an entirely new literature that would supersede all previous work. It did not take him long to see that nothing like that could happen here: certainly not then. The history of the people, their literary and dramatic taste, their traditions, their very temperament defied it. A man of tremendous ego, yet paradoxically profoundly unsure of himself, he had to find some scapegoat for potential failure. Hence he began almost immediately at the start of rehearsals to rant, rage and berate everyone in sight. Everything was Dreck or Kitsch. Every word must be reverently preserved, every article in the catechism piously observed. The more obvious it became, in both productions, that in America no such goal could be attained, the more clamorous his outbursts.[3]

The hasty departure of Mother left the Theatre Union unprepared; it had no other play ready for production. Rather than keep

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978. [2]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

[3]Peters, 9 September 1978. The rehearsals for Galileo in Los Angeles during the summer of 1947 were punctuated by the same outbursts, tantrums, and denunciations that Brecht exhibited in New York twelve years earlier. Brecht fought with Ann Sokolow (The choreographer), the designer, the costumer, even with Laughton who was his friend and whose talents he greatly esteemed. (Charles Higham, charles Laughton: An Intimate Biography [Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1976], pp. 138-39.)

the house dark, thereby incurring additional expenses, the Theatre Union considered reviving Let Freedom Ring which had gained some following, but was forced to close because it could not sell its more expensive seats. The play was no stranger to the Executive Board. According to Maltz, it was the Theatre Union which had urged Bein to dramatize Grace Lumpkin's novel, To Make My Bread.[1]

Bein, born in 1902, had a checkered history. After serving some years in reform school, he was convicted of robbing a bank and spent five years in prison. When the depression hit he was forced into a hobo life and lost a leg while riding "the rods" of a train. His literary career began in 1928 with the novel Love in Chicago. The same year there appeared his autobiographical novel about the brutal conditions in reform schools, Youth in Hell. His first play, Heavenly Express , a colorful fantasy with songs about the yearnings of hobos, was produced by Jasper Deeter at the Hedgerow Theatre in 1931. Returning to the theme of reform schools, Bein wrote Little Ol' Boy. For a time Jed Harris held the rights to this drama.[2] The play was eventually produced, however, by Henry Hammond in his first venture as a theatrical impressario. The production, which opened 24 April 1933, was staged by Hammond's friend and advisor, Joe Losey, with settings by Mordecai Gorelik. The large cast included Burgess Meredith and Garson Kanin. The play expired after twelve performances.

Bein's connection with the Theatre Union came about through

---

[1]Gold, "Change World," 31 December 1935, p. 7.

[2]"Theatre Notes", New York Times, 31 March 1932.

this production. Hammond spoke favorably of Bein as did Sylvia Feningston who had been casting director and assistant director for Little Ol' Boy. The first play Bein brought to the Theatre Union was The House of Kuvalsky, a play he had written in late 1932. This was a sketchy, poorly written drama situated in a whorehouse.[1] The Board turned it down, but had sufficient faith in his abilities to ask him to dramatize Grace Lumpkin's novel about the "lint-heads" of the Carolina cotton mills.

The labor conflicts in the Carolinas in 1928-29 were "plastic moments," as the historian Gershom Scholem would call them, in the saga of American Labor. It was the occasion for the Communist's bid for hegemony in the textile industry. Gastonia was the center of the flourishing textile industry of the South. Within a hundred mile radius of this sleepy town there were 570 mills, many of which, like the Lorry Mills, the largest, were owned by northern corporations. In March 1929, Fred Beal, a veteran of the Massachusetts textile strikes, began organizing the mill workers on behalf of the National Textile Workers' Union, an arm of the Communist's Trade Union Unity League.

The area was ripe for the aggressive organizing tactics practiced by the National Textile Workers. Resentment and discontent surfaced in spontaneous walkouts the year before in response to such company policies as the stretch-out, extended piece-work, successive wage-cuts and the steady influx of low wage labor from the Appalachian hills. Management relented somewhat, but tensions persisted. Mill workers were disaffected

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

with the docile methods of the A. F. of L. Beal succeeded in organizing the "lint-heads" and on 1 April a strike began.

The strikers' demands were summarily rejected and the strike was characterized as a "revolt" staged by the Communists. Instantly, the economic issues raised by the workers were transformed into incendiary political issues. The governor ordered the National Guard, the press launched a counter-offensive, the citizens of Gastonia, their patriotism enkindled, mobilized in opposition. Within two weeks, despite the efforts of the Communist Party, the strike diminished. It was resuscitated, however, by the town's vigilant band of militia who on the night of 8 April destroyed the union headquarters. This act of wanton violence gave new life to the strike and lifted the morale of the workers. Soon the violence escalated. A few weeks later the police attempted to arrest one of the union leaders without a warrant. The strikers, now prepared with their own armed guard unit, resisted. In the fight, the police chief, O. F. Aderholt, was mortally wounded. This triggered a succession of trials, infamous examples of one-sided justice, accompanied by vigilante bloodshed--most notably the murder of Ella May Wiggins, the union's trubador.[1]

In the 1930s, with strike literature becoming the vogue, the events at Gastonia served as the basis for no less than six novels, four of which, To Make My Bread among them, were published in 1932.[2] Grace Lumpkin's novel stood out, according to the New Masses, because

---

[1]Bernstein, Lean Years, pp. 20-28.

[2]Rideout, Radical Novel, p. 174.

in its treatment of the facts of the strike struggle it embraced "the history of the birth and awakening of an entire section of the American working class."[1]

When the Theatre Union was still in its planning phase it realized the significance of the Gastonia episode for the labor movement as it was surely aware of the inherent drama of the strike story. Grace Lumpkin was a strong supporter of the Theatre Union's goals, so it was natural that the Board sought a stage version of her novel.[2] As early as June 1933 the Theatre Union had tentatively planned to produce such a dramatization.[3] In January 1934, it was announced that Bein had written the adaptation and that it was among the five play pool from which the play to follow Peace on Earth would be chosen.[4] By the end of the theatre's second season, the play was no longer under consideration. In the balance sheets for that season it appears as an expense item among the "plays dropped."[5]

The Theatre Union declined to produce Bein's play because the author stubbornly refused to submit the script to any editing by the producers. Bein himself had initially read the play for the Board. Its four-hour length seemed interminable. Its latter half was repetitious

---

[1]A. B. Magil, "To Make My Bread," New Masses, February 1933, p. 19.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[3]"Prepare Three Plays, Post 22 June 1933.

[4]Theatre Union Prospectus, [September 1933], Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[5]Financial Report, 1934-35.

and tedious. When Board members suggested cuts--the so-called process of collective criticism--Bein refused. As Peters remembers it, Bein's attitude was "If Eugene O'Neill could have a four-hour drama produced, why couldn't Albert Bein?"[1]

Bein was hurt, feeling betrayed by the Theatre Union's rejection of his play.[2] He tried to get the play produced by others but ended by putting up the money for it himself, along with Jack Goldsmith. To direct the play Bein interested Worthington Miner, who recalls facetiously that the bulky 216 page manuscript, typed on card-board-like paper, was delivered to him by a "couple of piano movers."[3] Miner procured the cuts that had eluded the Theatre Union.[4] With a cast of fifty-two headed by Will Geer, and designs by Mordecai Gorelik, the play opened at the Broadhurst Theatre 6 November 1935.

Let Freedom Ring falls in the tradition of regional folk plays, plays which highlight local color and provincialism in speech, manners, and attitudes. In the hillbilly strain of folk drama it is successor to Hell-Bent for Heaven by Hatcher Hughes (1924), Sun-up by Lulu Vollmer (1923), and the plays of the South by Paul Green. Bein's play is set in the Carolina mountains. It opens with a scene of the McClure cabin. The scene is reminiscent of the picturesque decay made famous in Jack Kirkland's Tobacco Road two years earlier.

---

[1]Peters, 20 August 1978. [2]Blankfort, 17 July 1978.

[3]Worthington Miner, "Actors" Repertory Company," New York Times, sec. 11, p. 3.

[4]Ibid.

The McClures live an inpoverished, patchwork existence. Like many others in the Appalachian hills, they are farmers who barely eke out a subsistance income from their small plots of land. It is March 1920 and Hal Swain, a local entrepeneur, is buying every tract of land he can, offering ready cash to the destitute farmers. Deprived of their one source of livelihood, their future seems dismal. As Ora McClure, the granite spirited mother of four, regretfully observes, "Seems like every year the outside has been creepin' nearer."[1] She knows that a radical changes is imminent, that she will soon have to leave the mountains. She and the others talk of their attachment to the hills as if leaving would mean death itself, certainly a death of the spirit. The catalyst for their departure is Small Hardy, a fast-talking itinerant pedlar. Like a false prophet, he conjures up a picture of easy prosperity in the mill towns. Ora, pragmatic and stolid, knows that life in town will not be easy, but since life in the hills has become impossible, she collects her family and leaves.

This first scene, despite some moments of wooden exposition, captures the essential mood of the mountain community. Bein sets forth his characters and their predicament with compassion. These people as a whole, represented by the McClure family, become the protagonists of the play. They are a forthright, earnest group. Their moral rectitude stems from a fundamentalist religious creed. Their leathery existence has made them hardworking and obdurate. Their insularity and social

---

[1]Albert Bein, Let Freedom Ring (New York: Samuel French, 1936), p. 27.

paranoia is justified. A clever greedy world does not hesitate to laugh at them and take advantage of them. Bein is careful to show us the staying power of these people, their pride, their strong family bonds, their sense of rugged independence.

After this first scene, having established our sympathies for the McClures, Bein channels his play to follow the course of the typical labor protest drama. The McClures and the Martins have descended to Leesville, the mill town, a town not unlike Gastonia, with its Wentworth Mills modeled on the real town's Lorray Mills. Though inexperienced they are hired as mill workers because they are cheap labor. They are provided with barely tolerable housing and fed promises of future wage increases. After a year they realize the hollowness of these promises. They recognize that they have traded the famine, disease, and poor housing of the hills for the hunger, disease, and overcrowded housing of the industrial community. They are forlorn and despondent, but, except for Grandpap, they are too busy surviving to engage in homesickness.

By the end of the first act, Bein has managed to identify all the evils of the textile industry and the excesses of the capitalist bosses. The list is exhaustive: management's deceptive hiring practices; exploitation of cheap labor; speed ups; improper and negligent training which lead to accidents; dangerous equipment which causes maiming and mutilation; sudden, arbitrary wage-cuts; indiscriminant lay-offs; racism and the encouragement of black-white animosity; "lint-head" widows driven to prostitution; the discouraging paternalism of company stores and company housing.

With Act Two, Let Freedom Ring changes from descriptive narrative to the drama of organizing a union. The time is eight years later, the hiatus reinforcing the play's change in tone. Kirk McClure, Ora's oldest son, now appears for the first time. In the first scene he was referred to as a black sheep. The hope of the family, he had gone to work in the mills after being jilted by his sweetheart Minnie Hawkins. He was appointed foreman, but then, inexplicably, he started stirring up trouble at the mills. He was put in jail and hounded out of town. He lost contact with his family who later learned that he also failed to hold onto a coal mining job because he caused trouble. Only after they have suffered the hardships of the mill do they learn that Kirk is a union agitator, whose song--"The Ballad of Kirk McClure"--is famous in the South.

Kirk has come to Leesville to organize a union. His reunion with his family has some of the flavor of Brecht in its emotional restraint. Bein uses the scene as the opportunity for Kirk to instruct his mother and brother about the crimes of capitalism and the meaning of class war:

> I Cain't see whar it's right 'r just fer one man't have so much power that it's left t' him t' say whether ye kin live 'r not. Hit ain't the man that I'm a-quarrelin' with but the power that he wields. . . .
>
> Pore folk are kin by lot the world over. . . .Ther ain't nothin' furrin' 'bout sech a thing. The world o' the pore hit's all the same, Mom....
>
> Hit's that joy o' freedom fer all the workers that the rich'll never give t' us, Mom. We must take it for ourselves. They couldn't give it t' us if they wanted to --fer they've made somthin' bigger 'n they are. Bigger 'n Stringer. . . . An' they're a-goin' t' try an' keep hit. . . . Folk must larn that. . . . An' we must jine t'gether an' strip them o' hit. Ain't that so, Mom? Hit's fer us know how--t' make a world whar thar cain't be no masters an' no slaves—but whar all kin work t'gether an' all kin enjoy t'gether--An' it shan't

be no other way--eh, Mom?[1]

If Small Hardy was the false prophet, the emissary of the avaricious, lying industrialists, then Kirk is the true prophet, the champion of his people. His task is to win their support. Ora, like Vlassova, is fearful. She wants no trouble; she feels that their misery is so deep that it would be impossible to extricate themselves from their poverty. John, now twenty, argues against revolt. He will try to beat the system by following its rules. He is a creative, intelligent young man determined to survive in this alien world. Now without sacrificing his integrity he is on the verge of doing so. Nevertheless, Ora and John are both affected by Kirk, not so much by his arguments as by his compelling charisma.

The action of the remainder of the play gallops along at a brisk pace surmounting all the obligatory hurtles of a strike play. There are the outrageous edicts of management--layoffs and wage-cuts. There are the wrath of the workers and spontaneous, unorganized walkouts. A strong union leader steps in--Kirk--turning individual grievances into a consolidated program with a list of demands and a sense of worker solidarity There is the natural backlash from the bosses in the form of threats of violence and mob rule. This results in bloodshed--the death of the union

---

[1]Ibid., pp. 98, 99, 101-102.

leader--whose martyrdom cements the ranks of the workers and redoubles their resolve to succeed.

Within this larger drama is the secondary drama of the worker who discovers and acknowledges his allegiance to his brethren—the familiar strategy of the "pendulum play." Just as John is given a promotion and salary boost as reward for installing the plant's more efficient new machinery, he is asked by his kin to protest the layoffs that are the consequences of that same new machinery. He is faced with a dilemma. Should he preserve his career and forsake his worker family or throw his lot in with theirs? After an eye-opening session with the superintendent (a scene which appears in the published script, but which was cut in production), John decides to support the strikers. So thorough is his conversion that when Kirk is shot, John succeeds him as leader of the union.

The conversion motif is also played out with two other characters. After struggling, with her conscience Ora likewise comes to espouse Kirk's ideals. In one clear gesture she indicates how firm she is in her belief. When Basil, Kirk's brother who has become a successful minister and a tool of the bosses of the Wentworth Mill, comes to preach a sermon at Kirk's wake, Ora repudiates him for his hypocrisy and orders him out of the union hall. Grandpap, too, gains some insight through Kirk. Though a rabid racist, he learns to accept Kirk's principle of "black and white unite and fight" as the only road to salvation for all workers. Incidentally, the handling of the blacks seems somewhat strange in a proletarian play. There is the suggestion that even Kirk accepts the blacks more because it is expedient than because of his genuine concern for them.

Except for Brooks Atkinson, most of the daily critics dismissed the play, dubbing it propaganda.[1] The leftist press was, on the other hand, whole-hearted in is support. Some, like James T. Farrell, threw a few punches at the bourgeois press, philistinges who "sabotaged" a legitimate work of art because they found its theme unpalatable.[2] The play limped along for twenty-nine performances before it closed on 30 November.

Following the closing of the original production a minor squabble developed between theauthor and Mike Gold about which one was to blame for its anemic run. Gold charged that Bein had only himself to blame; that the play expired because the producers failed to organize New York's trade union audience in advance, that being the "secret" of success for any proletarian play.[3] Bein retorted that with Let Freedom Ring the left missed a "golden opportunity to drive a wedge into the Broadway theatre that could not have helped but be a great victory and a great impetus for the entire growing left wing theatre movement." He claimed he did in fact try to interest workers' groups, but that none reciprocated. Rather than buy tickets for Let Freedom Ring they took benefits for Weep for the Virgins (Group Theatre) and Mother. New Masses and New Theatre, he said accusingly, preferred to buy tickets for Squaring the Circle, an adaptation of a Russian comedy produced by the Tri-Art, instead of Bein's play.[4]

---

[1]Atkinson, "'Let Freedom Ring,' Being a Tragic Drama About the Fortunes of Labor in Cotton Mills," New York Times, 7 November 1935, p. 26.

[2]"Let Freedom Ring," New Masses, 19 November 1935, p. 27.

[3]Gold, "Change World," 5 December 1935, p. 7.

[4]Michael Gold, "Change the World," Daily Worker, 10 December 1935, p.7.

In the interim, the Theatre Union Executive Board, realizing that Mother was a box office failure and faced with the prospects of a dark house until it could prepare another play, began negotiations to transport Bein's play to the Civic Repertory Theatre. The talks, headed by Maltz, involved obtaining special dispensations from the stagehands' union to enable the theatre to manage the complex production and involved a settlement with Bein on the financial aspect of the production.[1] After some haggling, Maltz and Bein agreed that the Theatre Union would shoulder the cost of the transfer and that profits from the run were to be divided as follows: 46% to the Theatre Union, 21% to Let Freedom Ring, Inc. (the producers) and 33% was to be distributed to the cast, the Let Freedom Ring Company, over and above the actors' salaries.[2]

By 11 December, two days after Brecht received notice of Mother's premature closing, the news of the transfer was made public.[3] No sooner did word get around than the audience manager's office was flooded with requests for tickets and theatre party bookings.[4] Either the play's reputation or the Theatre Union's reputation or the low prices at the Civic Repertory Theatre or all three combined accounted for this surge of interest.

Let Freedom Ring opened downtown 17 December 1935, with only a two day hiatus after Mother was packed up and shipped out. The production, except for some changes in minor roles was transplanted intact

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[2]Financial Report, 1935-36.

[3]Gold, "Change World," 11 December 1935. p. 5.

[4]Regan, 28 June 1978.

to Union Square. In this instance, the Theatre Union served not as originator/creator but as producer, providing a theatre and an audience.

The partnership between the Theatre Union and the Let Freedom Ring Company benefited all concerned. During its ten-week run, (it closed 22 February 1936 after chalking up 79 performances) it had seven profitable weeks and netted $2,467.10. The Theatre Union's share amounted to $1,134.87. Because the Theatre Union's preliminary expenses were $2,559.83 it would seem that it lost money. In actuality, however, it could bank its share of the profits because of four special gifts--one an anonymous donation of $1,500--totaling $3,000 and earmarked to cover the preliminary expenses.[1]

With Let Freedom Ring running the Theatre Union now turned its attention to two perennial problems: money and new plays. Cash had always been scarce at the Theatre Union, but now, midway through the third season, it was particularly hard to come by. The problem that surfaced year after year was how to repay production costs. Each of the plays thus far, with the exception of Mother, had easily managed to cover its weekly running expenses, even showing a slim profit margin. According to a statistical broadside issued in January 1936, the average weekly running cost of Theatre Union plays was $3,500, while the average weekly income amounted to $3,650. The problem was that this meager profit was inadequate to cover the average $6,000 cost of mounting each play. As a result, the Theatre Union anticipated a net annual deficit on a season of three productions of $15,000.[2]

---

[1]Financial Report, 1935-36.

[2]"The Theatre Union in Figures," Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

To offset this deficit Board members devised a four point developmental campaign to create a sustaining fund of $15,000. Such a fund could make the theatre self-sufficient and give it the stability of a permanent theatre. The committee in charge of the campaign included Margaret Larkin, Eleanor Fitzgerald (who was then subscription manager), Charles Friedman (production manager), and Charles Walker.[1]

The first steps of the drive was requesting for contributions from loyal friends and building the list of supporters by interesting a wider public. To this end, "The Theatre Union in Figures," the two-page statistical brochure mentioned above, was sent out to the theatre's mailing list. It is a concise resume of the Theatre Union's accomplishments and fiscal problems. Based on the first five productions--Let Freedom Ring which was still on the boards was excluded--it reported that 523,000 saw the plays. Of these, 250,000 attended under the auspices of one of the 250 organizations that regularly contracted for theatre parties and 25,000 were admitted free as part of the tickets for the unemployed policy. The brochure makes it plain that the theatre's deficit did not come from a lack of audience interest. Nor did it accrue from imprudent management. The Theatre Union prided itself on maintaining its "theatre of poverty" policies without sacrificing professional quality. Its average production cost of $6,000--which included the director's and designer's fees, the salaries for the actors at rehearsals the cost of set construction, costumes, props, and electrical equipment, and the expenses for advertising and promotion--was a mere fraction of the budget for producing on Broadway. The cause of the continuing deficit

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

was the low price policy which was integral to the theatre's objectives. Half the seats were priced below one dollar. Even if the house were filled to capacity each night, instead of its average 90 percent attendance, the theatre would still continue to show the same slim profit margin. The only recourse was to supplement box office income with contributions from supporters:

> The Theatre Union operates without endowment, without investors, or "angels," without backing from motion picture companies, and its character as a non-profit corporation provides against payment of any dividends to anyone. Our only source of income outside our box office therefore comes in the form of gifts from interested friends. The subsidy we seek in order to insure another year of life for the Theatre Union is less than the cost of running the average Broadway play for two weeks.[1]

The same summary of the facts and plea for contributions were made in a letter to the editor of New Theatre and in a release, "Thus the Union Figures," published in its entirety in the New York Times.[2] Announcements of this sort helped to reach the wider public the Theatre Union wished to tap and they also helped to promote the second point of the drive, an intensification of the subscription campaign.

The third point of the drive was a revitalization of the Sunday evening benefit performances. As it happened, though, these benefit performances added very little hard cash to the sustaining fund. Their contribution to the campaign would have to be measured in the less calculable terms of goodwill and public relations.

---

[1] "Theatre Union in Figures."

[2] "A Letter from the Theatre Union," New Theatre, February 1936, p. 5; "Thus the Union Figures," New York Times, 26 January 1936, sec. 9, p. 3.

The only Sunday evening benefit the Theatre Union offered that season was given 16 February 1936. The program, coordinated by Sylvia Feningston, still the putative director of the Theatre Union Studio, was a rousing admixture of entertainments tinged with a decidedly crimson hue. The Rebel Arts Players opened the evening with a satirical sketch called "Picket Line" which viewed that familiar union activity through the eyes of Shakespeare, Noel Coward, and Anton Chekhov. Anna Sokolow then performed three dances to music by Alex North, Hindemith, and Shostakovitch. This was followed by "A Letter to The President." Originally written for Parade, this was an emotionally high-pitched mass chant by Peters and Sklar with music by Moross. Juanita Hall, the lead singer, and a chorus of twelve men and women describe the grisly fate of twelve Negroes who were burned to death in a cabin after they were trapped there by a white mob. Jane Alden then sang three more Peters-Sklar-Moross songs, two of which had been included in the Theatre Guild production of Parade. The first act ended with "Strange American Funeral," a dance performed by the Dance Unit while the poem of the same name by Michael Gold was recited in the wings.

The finale of the evening was a fully staged excerpt from John Wexley's new and at that time yet to be produced play Running Dogs. Anthony Brown, who staged Tobacco Road, directed the cast of fourteen actors all of whom were members of the Theatre Union Studio. The second act of Wexley's play, an entity in itself, is set in a small village in the interior of China, just near the territory occupied by the Communist Red Army. During the course of the action, discontented Kuomintang soldiers, ignorant about the enemy they have been ordered to destroy, become acquainted with the mission and purpose of the

"Communist Bandit Army."[1] Stanley Burnshaw was impressed with Wexley's dramatic deftness, but found the Theatre Union Studio's rendition of the piece wanting.[2]

The evening's profits were very low. Box office receipts from the ticket prices which ranged from fifty cents to $1.50 totaled $870.21. But expenses for the evening—rent, salaries, royalities, promotion, and publicity--came to $791.66, leaving $78.55 for the fund raising drive.[3] Despite the low income the Theatre Union scheduled a reprise of the same program for the following Sunday because the audience had been very receptive. This time the benefit program was even less successful in raising funds; it came out $29.14 in the red.[4]

The last measure taken as part of the drive was the addition, starting with the next production, of a five cent surcharge to each ticket sold. The extra nickel was to be deposited in a special sustaining fund account and not to be used for ongoing expenses. Before adopting this plan, the Board consulted with organizations that regularly bought blocks of tickets and with selected individuals as to the advisibility of asking the audience to finance the theatre's future. They found that the plan met with approval. The Theatre Union stated that the idea for such a levy was derived from non-profit workers' theatres in Europe which successfully met their production needs through such a method.[5]

---

[1]Program, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]"First Theatre Union Night," New Masses, 25 February 1936 p. 28.

[3]Financial Report, 1935-36. [4]Ibid.

[5]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

The paucity of plays persisted unabated from the previous season. Casting about for a play to follow Mother, the Board found no play, no good one, that is, that fulfilled its needs for a "social play . . . written from the point of view of the working class." One significant play that came before the Board was Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead.

Shaw, who was a friend of Moross, wrote the play in the summer of 1935 at a Connecticut beachtown where he had accompanied Moross and Sklar who were recuperating from the Parade fiasco. Shaw sent the completed script to Sklar who was then playreader for the Theatre Union. Sklar, a connoisseur of theatrical experimentation, was enthralled by it, recommending only that the title be changed from "Bury Them They Stink" to "Bury the Dead." He brought the play to the entire Board. They liked the play, too, but raised one additional objection--its length. They felt that a long one-act play, even in a double bill, was too risky. This, despite the Group Theatre's success with Waiting for Lefty/Till the Day I Die the season before. Sklar exhorted his collegues to reconsider, but in the end they voted it down.[1] Undaunted, Shaw took the play to the Group Theatre which liked the play very much but could not take it up until after they were through with The Case of Clyde Griffiths. Shaw then took it to the Let Freedom Ring Company who presented it first for two nights in March at the Forty-sixth Street Theatre and then for a run of sixty-five performances at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre beginning 18 April 1936. The play's success

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978; Moross, 29 June 1978.

d' estime dismayed Sklar who was disappointed with the Theatre Union's shortsightedness.

Eventually, the Board decided to do a play Victor Wolfson had written, tentatively titled Sons of Rome. Wolfson's drama was based on the novel Fontamara by Ignazio Silone, an Italian expatriate living in Davos, Switzerland, after fleeing the Il Duce regime. The novel, which was first published in 1930, appearing in an English translation in 1934, was a tragi-comic expose' of oppression and suffering under Fascist rule.

Wolfson had wanted to write a play about Fascism ever since the summer of 1933. Following his stint as assistant stage manager for the road tour of Counsellor-at-Law, Wolfson undertook a bicycle tour of the continent. Journeying through Germany and Italy, his wanderlust brought him face to face with the proliferating menace of Fascism. Peddling Through Sienna, Rome, Venice, Florence, and Perugia, he saw first hand the atmosphere of fear and the threatening omnipresence of truculent Blackshirts.[1] Back in America, one evening while visiting his sister, he picked up a copy of Fontamara and read it in one sitting. He realized immediately that this was the vehicle he needed to allow him to dramatize the true face of Fascism.[2]

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]"'Bitter Stream' Introduces Victor Wolfson as Playwright," Post, 2 May 1936.

Wolfson's only previous experience as a playwright had been as co-adapter, with Victor Trivas, of a stage version of Crime and Punishment. That play, produced and staged by Wolfson at the Biltmore Theatre on 22 January 1935, had lasted only a fleeting fifteen performances. Wolfson had finished Sons of Rome by November 1935. Shortly after 4 November, while he was in the midst of wrangling with Brecht, he received a letter from the dramatic department of Brandt and Brandt rejecting the manuscript of Sons of Rome. Though they recognized some merit in the structure of the first act and the characterization of the village peasants, they felt that the action of the succeeding two acts meandered slowly, that motivation lacked succinctness, and that the theme was repeated so often that it would make audiences restless.[1]

The Theatre Union's Executive Board considered that Sons of Rome would give the theatre the opportunity to explore Fascism. The mounting level of anti-Fascist sentiment, fast becoming the rallying point of the left and reinvigorating the United Front, made Wolfson's drama a propitious choice. By 1936, dictatorial Fascist governments were firmly entrenched in two European capitals and even England and France were feeling the pinch of internal rightist movements. In Germany, Hitler had liquidated all opposition parties and was guiding the Nationalist Socialists toward the apocalyptic Third Reich he had delineated in Mein Kampf. In Italy, Mussolini and his fasci di combattimento had been in power for fourteen years. Both Fascist states, having consolidated their domestic hegemony,

---

[1]Harold Freeman to Victor Wolfson, 4 November 1935, Wolfson Papers, Mugar Memorial Library Special Collections, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.

cast a covetous eye on territories outside their boundaries. On October 1935, Mussolini anxious to expand Italy's African territories, invaded Haile Selassie's Ethiopia.

Aside from the topicality of Fascism, the Board recognized that the canon of anti-Fascist plays was meager. There were, for example, Kultur (1933) by Adolf Philipp and The Shattered Lamp (1934) by Leslie Reade, both of which depicted the plight of German Jews attempting to live with the anti-Semitic laws being churned out by Hitler's Reichstag. Two other plays, the Siftons' Blood on the Moon and Ferdinand Bruckner's Races, dealing with similar subjects, were written but had not yet been produced in New York. Additionally, Judgment Day (1934) by Rice and Till the Day I Die (1935) by Odets concerned the struggle against Fascist authority. All of these plays, however, dealt with the Fascist regime in Germany and their focus was primarily on the condition of the Jews and intellectuals in that country.[1] Sons of Rome would give a glimpse of the Italian brand of Fascism. Moreover, consistent with the Theatre Union's philosophy, it would deal with the struggles of the masses. The Theatre Union capitalized on the uniqueness of the play, touting it as the first American play about Italian Fascism on the American stage, dubbing it the "It Can't Happen Here" of Italy.[2]

In actuality, the play was a recasting of familiar motifs and

---

[1]The only drama touching on Italian Fascism was Ethiopia, the first edition of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper. It documented Italy's aggressive intervention in Ethiopia and it implicitly chastized the democratic world powers for their reluctance to halt the belligerence. The play was censored by the Roosevelt administration after a single private showing.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

plot devices from previous Theatre Union productions. Here again were the suffering and helplessness of the masses, exploited, duped, oppressed by a pernicious political and economic oligarchy. Here, too, was the martyr/hero who after painful self-searching, sets aside his personal needs to act for the good of the community. And here, too, is a picture of the masses who learn the effectiveness of collective action. The names and the places are now Italian. The villain is not the Czar, the mine company, or the superintendent of the steamship company, rather it is the Fascist state.

The play adhered in general terms to the structure of the novel. It opens in the town square of Fontamara, a tiny peasant village tucked away in the Abruzzi mountains, which, with the exception of the introduction of electricity, has remained unchanged for centuries. Pelino, an excitable little man in a gaudy, tight-fitting uniform, is berating the illiterate peasants for their reluctance to sign a petition. After years of being swindled and betrayed the peasants are distrustful of all government officials, especially those who ask them to sign papers. When they are assured that the petition is not for additional taxes, but to help them to gain a favorable settlement of "The Fucino Question," they sign. Once, the Fontamaran peasants had owned the fertile Fucino land in the valley. Relentlessly high taxes and low income from farm yields (coupled with not a little chicanery from the large land owners) had impelled them to sell their property. Now, all that they had were the small, arid garden plots in their mountain village, barely sufficient to provide them with their own food. To stave off starvation they are forced to hire themselves out as day laborers to work the land they once owned.

After Pelino's hasty departure, Berardo Viola, a young, strong, willful, landless peasant returns. He is dejected after his futile attempts to find work in a distant large city. He never reached his destination. Blackshirted police threw him off the train because he had no work permit. Baldiserra, the old cobbler and a veteran of the Great War, insists that the demand for permits must mean the country is at war. The peasants are surprised, but Berardo has still more startling news for them. It seems that uniformed men are surveying the Fontamara stream for the purpose of diverting its course from the peasants' vegetable patches to the large fields in the valley owned by the Promoter, a wealthy landowner who has been appointed by the central Fascist government as administrator of the region.

Now, the peasants are irate. As they vent their anger and frustration, the electricity in the entire village is shut off, the consequence of months of failure to pay electric bills. The image becomes symbolic. Dispossessed from their land, humbled into selling themselves as cheap laborers, shunned by an indifferent government, and threatened with starvation because of the loss of their stream, the peasants are now left in the dark, the moribund darkness of their living tomb. Losurdo, throwing up his hands, utters the perennial response to this accumulated burden of woe: "There's nothing to do."[1] The quick-tempered Berardo opposes this judgment, insisting on a face-to-face confrontation with the mayor to demad their natural right to the stream.

---

[1]Victor Wolfson,"Bitter Stream," Act 1, scene 1, p. 16. Manuscript loaned to author by Wolfson.

The confrontation with the mayor brings only temporary relief. That day the "mayor" happens to be feasting at the Promoter's villa. The cause of the celebration is a telegram received earlier relieving the mayor of his duties and appointing the Promoter in his place. The peasants, their frustration doubled, are stirred to violence; Berardo hurls a brick through a window. Further violence is halted by the appearance of the taciturn Promoter and the loquacious ex-mayor, Don Circonstanza. Don Circonstanza, the putative "People's Friend," self-righteously points out that the residents of Fontamara acquiesced to the action on the stream in the petition they signed calling for the utilization of the stream in the interest of the national welfare. Pelino, also a dinner guest, waves the paper in their faces. The peasants decry the deception, but now Don Circonstanza perpetrates another. Guilefully, in a longwinded peroration, he ostensibly takes the side of the peasants:

> I'm convinced they're right, gentlemen. When you come right down to it what these people want is to be respected. . . . These Fontamarans aren't guilty of any imposition whatsoever---They understand the law is against them because they have signed this petition which asks that----"In the superior interests of national production the Fontamaran stream should belong to those who can best utilize it for the national welfare----. . . But what they desire now is a friendly understanding with our Promoter. That public benefactor that friend of the people who has given his all to the rebirth of Italy, to its victorious future! Now I ask you is not a friendly understanding possible?. . . . In the name of Il Duce, I call upon all of you, -all of you- without discrimination, to submerge-to sacrifice your personal interests to the interests of our corporate state! I call upon all of you not to forget that you are citizens of a new Roman Empire!. . . The strength of the new Italy depends upon you! The strength of Il Duce rests upon the backs of you farmers! I ask all of you to answer the fascist call of patriotism and faith!. . . Yes. Yes. The questions of the stream. I assure you, as the People's friend, the question of the Fontamara stream will be settled by our fascist motto. The stream must belong to those who can best utilize it for the national welfare! The stream belongs to---[1]

---

[1]Ibid., Act 1, scene 2, pp. 25-26.

The ellipsis in intentional. He has done his duty in conveying the obvious message of the state. If the peasants, who respond "To us! us!", draw the wrong conclusion and are satisfied, that is their problem. With the matter of the stream successfully resolved, Don Circonstanza and the Promoter share some wine with the peasants. They toast the upcoming mass demonstration at Avezzano at which, the peasants are led to believe, Il Duce will resolve the Fucino question.

The participation of the peasants at Avezzano turns out to be nothing more than window dressing for the "spontaneous' demonstrations in honor of Il Duce and Fascist officials gathered for a local conclave. The Fontamarans take no part in influencing the decision on the Fucino question. They learn later that the same Fascist principle that Don Circonstanza invoked with regard to the stream is to be applied to the Fucino land. Il Duce needs food for his army which can only be supplied by legislating radical land reform:

> The land must belong to the man who can cultivate it. Let the Fucino belong to the man who has the means to cultivate it or have it cultivated. Let the Fucino belong to the man who has sufficient capital to cultivate it. The Fucino must be freed once and for all of its miserable little squatters.[1]

Production efficiency will be achieved by consolidating the resources. This demands sacrifice from everyone. Given the nature of things, the farmers, who have the least, must sacrifice the most.

Depressed and discouraged, the farmers meander aimlessly through the streets of Avezzano. They are approached by a man who offers them weapons to help them discharge their feelings. When he leaves, a second

---

[1]Ibid., Act 1, scene 3, p. 35.

stranger warns them that the first man was an agent provocateur and that they should leave. They take his advice and return home.

When the peasants reach Fontamara they discover that Don Circonstanza has again duped them. The stream will not run its natural course but will be rerouted to irrigate the Promoter's fields. Berardo makes a feeble effort to stop the theft of the stream, but to no avail. Again, the peasants are forlorn and helpless. All they do--all they can do--is sit in sullen silence and smoke, while the muffled prayers of the women are heard from the church.

Counterpoised to this image of bitter defeat and utter entrapment, comes the slimmest possibility of some succor. Scarpone, Berardo's stiff-lipped friend, brings the news of a spontaneous revolt in Sulmona, a neighboring mountain village which is a carbon copy of Fontamara. Scarpone summons Berardo to lead an insurrection in Fontamara. Berardo desists: "If Sulmona wants to go and have a riot, what's that to me. . . . I don't want to go to prison for your water or your land or your riots. I have enough worries of my own to keep me busy."[1]

Berardo's worries concern his love for Elvira, the comely, orphaned waitress at the wine shop. He wants to marry her, but without land, without work, without the promise of some income, his pride prevents him. He has decided to search for work in Rome. He can then earn money to buy back his land and marry Elvira. With the same single-minded purposefulness that earned him the respect of the community, he now disassociates himself from the community's needs to pursue his own goals.

---

[1]Ibid., Act 2, p. 16.

No sooner is he so resolved than the helpful stranger from Avezzano comes to Fontamara looking for him. As it happens, the stranger is a leader of the underground union which is trying to forge a coalition of workers, soldiers, students and farmers to oppose the government. He has heard of Berardo's exploits and seeks to induce him to lead the Fontamara farmers. He gives him a copy of the union's secret newspaper. Just then, truckloads of Blackshirts, anxious to prevent the Sulmona mutiny from spreading, invade Fontamara. They conduct a house-to-house search confiscating such deadly weapons as rakes and hoes. Berardo is arrested for possession of a seditious newspaper. The other men are lined up in the town square and are cross-examined by the inspector. To the enigmatic question "Who are you for?" each peasant has to find the elusive, desired answer. Della Croce, a wizened old farmer, more senile than political, gives the wrong answer and is shot on the spot.

In prison, Berardo again meets the union organizer. He was apprehended while fleeing Fontamara and police suspect he is the elusive stranger who has been proselytizing for the illegal union. The inspector has him tortured to confirm his identity, but fails repeatedly. Berardo comes to admire the young student's faith and perseverance. They talk into the morning and eventually Berardo accepts the importance of the union. But he doubts his capacity to lead; a habitual loner, he fears he will be unable to organize the others. Then, in a burst of solidarity, he confesses to the inspector that he is the union agitator they have been searching for.

The stranger is released and now Berardo is brutally tortured for more information. He was conscious of the need for his act of altruism, but he was unaware of its painful consequences. Excruciated

by the harrowing torture, his faith in the union falters. He calls for the inspector to retract his confession. When the inspector shows him a new newspaper with the headline "Viva Berardo Viola!" he is jolted back to an understanding of the significance of his sacrifice. In the manner of Sydney Carton, Berardo accepts his decision to trade his life for the benefit of the cause and the community.

The last scene, the coda of the action, announces the obligatory "call to action." Scarpone has brought to Fontamara a creaky contraband press. The town will publish and distribute a clandestine farmer's paper. They will call the paper "What Must We Do?" The title will serve as a refrain repeated after each description of injustice. The paper's first story will be "They have murdered Berardo Viola—What must we do?" The paper's distribution will heighten and direct the Farmer's social consciousness. The lead story of Berardo's tragic fate is an object lesson on the need for collective resistance: "Berardo Viola the farmer is dead. This government murdered him. He sends you a message. No more fighting alone. No more fighting by ourselves. We must fight together—all the farmers--all the workers--together-------"[1]

The play is typical of agitational drama. It diligently defines the enemy and its callous injustices. Wolfson scores point after point against the Fascist regime. Blackshirt hirelings are nothing more than drunken thugs. The bellicose Fascists are on a one way road to war. To feed the war machine they expropriate the peasants' land and give it to absentee landlords for mass production. The government expects vigorous flag-waving and enthusiastic singing of the new anthem. Along the way,

---

[1]Ibid., Act 3, scene 4, p. 20.

unscrupulous, petty officials and avaricious businessmen, even the clergy, work hand in hand to amass personal fortunes at the expense of the peasants. Griping and complaining are treasonous and are dealt with accordingly. Repressive measures are taken to quash subversive thinking of any sort like the law forbidding discussions on political subjects. When these fail there are indiscriminate arrests, wanton violence, torture, and execution. Such are the symptoms of callous, self-serving, self-perpetuating dictatorship. Each facet of the government's brutal tyranny is documented, calculated to evoke indignation.

As in most proletarian dramas, the core of the action involves two interdependent progressions. First there is the movement from bad to worse. With each succeeding betrayal the lot of the peasant becomes more dire, his enslavement becomes more abject. Simultaneously, as his condition becomes unendurable, he turns from passive acceptance to active defiance. The peasant is jolted into this forward movement of discovering his own power by the shock of one man's martyrdom. He, in turn, accepts his destiny because, like Moses on Mount Sinai, he has received the new commandments. The lessons learned by the martyr are passed on to his people thus transforming a desperate insurrection into an informed, class conscious revolt, virtually guaranteed of success.

Wolfson's play maps the requisite territory and offers the necessary conclusions. The problem is that it is transparently tendentious. Its plot is mechanical, its characters are schematic. The action of the play suffers from the continuing need to demonstrate the viciousness of the Fascists and the helplessness of the peasants. The first act, as it presents the dual problems of the stream and the Fucino question, is efficiently constructed. Exposition about government injustices and the

suffering of the peasants is organically incorporated.

The second act, however, begins to show some strain. The act is crowded with incident and coincidences which jeopardize the credibility of the action. In the course of forty minutes, the approximate playing time, there are these developments: Sorcanera, the blousy proprietress of the wine shop, plays matchmaker for Berardo and Elvira; Berardo proposes to Elvira; the peasants are informed of a new law forbidding political talk; there is a debate about the advisibility of Berardo seeking work in Rome; the stream is diverted; the farmers realize the repercussions from the loss of the stream; they receive word about the Sulmona revolt; Berardo alienates himself from his people; the stranger/activist gives Berardo the newspaper; the Fascists invade Fontamara; the peasants are interrogated and one is shot. This litany of cruelty and oppression is significant ideologically, but demands more than a modest dose of suspension of disbelief dramatically.

The third act, with its focus on Berardo's epiphany, has less exposition, but is weakened by its polemical baggage. This act, too, follows the pattern of the proletarian drama, illustrating the conversion of the hero. In the prison cell, the stranger has the opportunity to tell Berardo what he "must do" and why. He teaches Berardo the lesson of solidarity. Berardo's doubts and hesitations elicit the encouragement and hopefulness of the stranger: "You'll learn, you'll see, Berardo. There aren't many of us yet, but farmers are learning to stop fighting by themselves, they are learning to fight with the Underground Union, you'll see. You must show them how. . ."[1]

---

[1]Ibid., Act 3, scene 2, p. 10.

In a lengthy monologue, odd for the normally reticent Berardo, the protagonist struggles to reconcile his past predilection for solidarity defiance with the present need for organized, collective resistance:

> All my life-I've been fighting-alone, or maybe with Raefael Scarpone here-fighting against taxes, against Abbachio-against the landlords. When I was a kid they used to pay me seven lire a day to pull out the weeds from the corn. Then they dropped my pay all of a sudden to four lire. Do you think I went and got all the boys together? No. Instead of pulling out the weeds by the roots, I simply covered them over with dirt. After the April rains the landlords found the weeds higher than the corn. That's all. And when the new government came in again I was fighting alone or with Scarpone here. Once in the first years we changed all the signs on the National highway so that travelers were traveling east when they wanted to go west. North when they wanted to go south. And now you come along and say to me Berardo-here-don't fight alone-here are hundreds and hundreds of other Berardos fighting the fascists. . . . Get them together. . . .You are a leader of this thing I never knew about-and now-now you've got to go before this Special Tribunal. I tell you it'd be much better for me to die-much better . . . . . [1]

The personal dilemma is transmuted to a question of ideology and strategy. At the end of this speech Berardo accidentally hits on his course of action. As if to reinforce the inevitable, however, Wolfson inserts a short scene where the prisoners witness in horror the secret execution of five Sulmona farmers. Thereupon, the inspector enters to fetch the stranger and Berardo intercedes with his confession.

The portrayal of the characters is as effective as the action is credible. In the first act, when we first meet the peasants, Wolfson begins to paint a convincing group portrait of the diverse personalities of the peasants. Zompa is an outspoken, sardonic farmer whose wit and insight incur Pelino's wrath. Losurdo is the timid, unassuming laborer,

---

[1] Ibid., Act 3, scene 2, pp. 10-11.

so helpless and defeated that his cowed posture is disturbed only by a frequent, desolate shrug. In the second act, as events accumulate, the characters remain static pawns as the author scores points against Fascism. The characters' responses are automatic and predictable; what they say and how they act are more a matter of dramatic convenience than intrinsic need. Additionally, the antagonists of the play suffer the endemic flaw of antagonists in proletarian drama--they are melodramatically villainous. Characters like Pelino, the Promoter, Don Circonstanza, and the inspector are so patently evil that they become manikins, symbols of the different brands of villainy that oppress man. Fascism is a given evil in this play and these stuffed Blackshirts are expediently thrust forth as functional tools of the dramatic action.

Compared to Silone's novel Wolfson's method and its weaknesses become clear. Both the novel and the play are intended as expose of the perfidious, dehumanizing effects of Fascism. They both seek to elicit anger and indignation. Compared to Silone, however, Wolfson seems blunt and strident. The novel is subtle, gaining its power through a controlled use of irony and humor.

One difference is Silone's emphasis on the peasants and their world. It is not the National Geographic world of quaint churches and rustic huts. The peasants of Fontamara certainly suffer. The grimness of their lives is ageless. Their misery, Silone tells us, is immutable. Also ageless is their isolation. There is a hard, insurmountable demarcation between the farmer and the towns people, who believe that peasants are there to be cheated and mocked. The peasants are treated like fools. They have been treated like fools for so long that they do in fact act like fools. This provides the novel with much humor. There

is the story of the time the Fontamarans marched out with great pomp to the main road to greet a new priest who turned out to be a disguised donkey. Or the time the women of Fontamara, with the slatternly Sorcanara at their helm, trudged into town to petition the mayor about the stream. Parched and thirsty from the dusty journey they approach a fountain only to have it fizzle away. As they walk away it shoots up. This phenomenon, repeated several times, baffles the women but delights the townspeople.

The affair of the stream also has its comic twists. To placate the farmers, Don Circonstanza proposes the three-quarter-three-quarter compromise. The stream will be rerouted so that three-quarters of its flow will irrigate the landlord's land and three-quarters will go to their land! The peasants are puzzled by the mathematics, but are content that they will have three-quarters possession. Later, when they discover the ruse, they accept yet another of the mayor's compromises that stipulates that the stream will be diverted for a period of only ten lustra, after which it will be returned to its original course. Reluctantly they agree although no one can figure out how long ten lustra is.

The foolishness of the peasants in the novel is meaningful. The process of learning is slow and deliberate; they learn only one thing at a time. The comedy has its pathos. The peasant may seem humble and comic but he is not impervious to the pain these jokes cause. It is like watching an infant learning to walk. The clumsiness of the initial efforts may appear funny, but we would not laugh if the child fell and hurt itself. Silone's peasants learn from each experience, step by step until they are ready to publish their crude farmers' paper.

The isolation of the peasants is underscored by the narrative form of the novel. Silone begins in the first person, but then has a

family of peasants--a man, a woman, and their son--deliver the story of Fontamara. The context for this device is that they have come to Silone, their compatriot, to tell him their sad tale in order to get some help. Using this approach, Silone creates the impression of insiders looking out. The narrative remains subjective; its field of vision constricted. There is no omniscient narrator. What they tell us by turns is what each one knows from experience. The result is a picture of a confusing world which makes taking action even more difficult. The peasants of Fontamara appear like so many Rosencrantzes and Guildensterns hovering anxiously on the periphery of a whirlwind which is bound to suck them in but they do no know how or when. Wolfson's drama fails to create this image which is integral to the meaning and impact of the story.

The subjective treatment of the story avoids, for Silone, the problem of facile villains. The antagonists of the novel are hardly present. When they make fleeting appearances they are seen through the eyes of the peasants. This mitigates any questions of their credibility. The focus of the novel clearly and unquestionably concerns the effects of totalitarian rule and not its causes. Moreover, the scarcity of the antagonists, the mystery of their nature--vividly established in the "What are you for?" inquisition--makes the plight of the peasants even more vexing. Before one can be defiant, one has to identify the enemy. The peasants, for a long while, recognize nothing. The enemy is wearing a strange new mask. They know Don Circonstanza and his chicanery. There is even a sort of symbiotic relationship between them based on mutual necessity. But this new force which upsets nature and upends ageless habits and customs bewilders them. The tension created as the Fontamarans learn to recognize the face of the enemy, gives the novel

added power. In the play, much of this power is lost because the enemy is clear from the beginning and we know at whom we must direct our outrage and anger.

A final distinction between the play and the novel is in the relative importance given to Berardo. Wolfson gives Berardo centrality in the story. It is his story and the drama, as we saw, follows the pattern of a "pendulum play." For Silone, on the other hand, the protagonist is the entire community of Fontamara. Berardo, to be sure, is the catalyst, but it is all of Fontamara that feels the tragedy. Silone even attenuates Berardo's heroism in prison. His Berardo also seals his doom by engineering the freedom of the union activist. He does so, however, after learning of the death of Elvira and knowing that his life has no promise. The ending of the novel, too, indicates Silone's emphasis. As it happens, the narrators are the sole survivors of Fontamara. While they were out of the village distributing the one and only edition of "What can we do?" the Fascists ransacked the village, massacring all its inhabitants. It is a moot question as to which ending --Silone's despair or Wolfson's hopefulness--is more conducive to social action. It is probable though that Wolfson's positive approach was tailored to the upbeat temperament of the American left.

At about the time Sons of Rome was ready for rehearsals, word had gotten around about the play and the Theatre Union was forced to change its title. Just as the black community had objected to the title Wharf Nigger, Italian groups frowned on the name Sons of Rome, pointing out that it might have misleading Fascist connotations.[1] The title the

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

Executive Board settled upon was Bitter Stream. The production committee named to supervise production work consisted of Martin Wolfson, Sylvia Feningston, Michael Blankfort, Charles Friedman, and Peter Xantho.

To direct the play the Board availed itself of someone outside of its own pool of talent for the first time since Peace on Earth. The man they chose was the forty-six-year-old, Russian born director Jacob Ben-Ami. Ben-Ami was a leading proponent of the Yiddish Art Theatre and also an accomplished actor. He was a familiar name to English-language theatregoers for his directorial work at the Theatre Guild (The Goat Song by Werfel 1926) and with Eva LeGallene's Civic Repertory Theatre (The Living Corpse by Tolstoy, 1929) and for his many roles on Broadway and with the Civic Repertory. With this assignment he was back at home on Fourteenth Street. However, after about a week of rehearsals, the Board found Ben-Ami's approach to the play deficient. According to Sklar, Ben-Ami's treatment of the play was ponderous, fostering "a heavy Second Avenue Jewish Theatre style."[1] Abe Ellstein, Sylvia Regan's husband, noting how meticulous he was, said that "He kisses every word goodbye."[2]

What Bitter Stream needed was a lighter touch so when Ben-Ami withdrew Charles Friedman was charged with the direction. The program continued to give Ben-Ami credit, acknowledging Friedman only as "Assistant Director." Friedman had extensive but untested background in the theatre.

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]Regan, 28 June 1978.

Abandoning his law studies at New York University, he joined the Guild Players at the University Settlement House, a theatre group founded by Elmer Rice. At about the same time, he began and continued for fifteen years to work in adult summer camps in the Catskills, producing original musical revues. Singlehandedly he wrote, designed, and staged each work.[1] His first Broadway venture came in 1932 when he staged Jamboree, a drama by Bessie Beatty and Jack Black which lasted only twenty-eight nights. Thereafter, he tried to produce three plays, none of which ever reached Broadway.[2] Walker, who had taken notice of him, brought Friedman to the Theatre Union during its first year as a business manager, to relieve himself of some of his routine chores so that he could devote more time to writing.[3] Friedman often sat in on rehearsals, contributing enormously. When the Board became anxious about Blankfort's direction of Stevedore, they called on Friedman to doctor it. Friedman also did the lighting design for Mother.

To play the leading roles the Theatre Union again looked to the professional theatre. Albert Van Dekker, who had appeared in the Theatre Guild's Volpone, R. U. R,.and Grand Hotel, was cast in the role of Berardo. To play Elvira, the Theatre Union found Lili Eisenlohr Valenty, a Polish born German actress, a refugee from Hitler's regime, who was making her American debut. Mannart Kippen, a Theatre Guild regular, was hired to play the role of the inspector. Annie

---

[1]"Tyros in 1937, New Veterans in the Theatre," Herald Tribune, 25 September 1938.

[2]New York Times, 17 December 1932, 30 January 1933, and 11 February 1934.

[3]Sklar interview with Williams.

Thomashevsky was to make her debut in an English-speaking role as the earthy, vigorous innkeeper, Sorcanara, but the role went instead to Francis Bavier who, as the program noted, "has done a good deal for the comedy scenes in several Theatre Union plays."

Continuing its policy of maintaining a nucleus of Theatre Union actors in each play, seven of the twenty-two players cast had been in one or more Theatre Union plays. Many of these, however, like Millicent Green, Hester Sondergaard, and Sidney Packer, had minor roles in this play. The cast had an additional eight extras, who played Blackshirts, farmers, and peasant women.

While rehearsals were taking place in a hall over a neighboring Bierstube, Cleon Throckmorton supervised the construction on the Civic Repertory Stage of his massive setting. To provide the four locales and achieve the quick shifts called for by the play, Throckmorton utilized a turntable. Fortuitously, Friedman had found abandoned in an old warehouse the thirty-foot in diameter revolve which had been created for the musical extravaganza The Bandwagon This, the largest turntable ever used up to that time in a New York theatre and which had cost $1,000 to build, Friedman bought for a paltry $150.[1] The turntable enabled Throckmorton to design elaborately realistic three dimensional scenery and still get the rapid changes he needed in the first and third acts.

All four settings were ingeniously and snugly arranged on the revolve. The Square of Fontamara occupied the largest wedge. Stage right, up three steps, was the entrance to the church. On the left was

---

[1]Financial Report, 1935-36.

the wine shop with table, benches, and stools in front of it. Upstage left center, protruding from behind the wine shop, was a dilapidated house, its balcony draped with drying wash. In the background was a vista of the road leading to the stream. For the next scene, the revolve was turned counterclockwise to disclose the Promoter's villa. It was tucked behind the church facade and its front lawn was decked out with growing grass. For the third scene, the turntable spun clockwise to show the alley in the market city of Avezzano where the peasants take part in the Fascist rally. This setting was behind the wine shop structure. Squeezed behind the house with the clean laundry was the gray prison cell. To facilitate the movement of the turntable without recourse to expensive electrical machinery, Ed Shulz, the Theatre Union's master carpenter, rigged the revolve so that only three men were needed to push it.[1]

Ever mindful of costs, the Theatre Union's technique of poverty prompted the technical crew to find ways of recycling scenic elements from previous productions. Before construction began the crew scoured the old "paint frame" for reusable stock items. Thus, the church was built out of flats used for the miners' shacks in Black Pit; planking from Stevedore was used to construct the hilly path that led to the stream; benches in the alley of Avezzano were first used in the union hall scene of Let Freedom Ring; and a chair in the wine shop was so

---

[1]"Life Under Fascism: A Novel of Life in Mussolini's Italy is Transferred to the Stage," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 3 May 1936.

versatile that it appeared in every production except The Sailors of Cattaro.[1] Nevertheless, the cost of the stage setting, including salaries, fees, materials, and lighting, was $4,415.03, more expensive than any previous design.[2]

As always, the Theatre Union was punctilious about details. Emily Brand and Liz Freund, the property mistresses, consulted with Italian immigrants, one of whom was from the region depicted in the play, to determine the authenticity of the props they gathered.[3] They advised the props committee on such details as local official flags, official headgear of commanding officers, and the various emblems and insignias used on the settings and for the costumes. Hard to find was the sturdy high-laced shoes which were required for the peasants who had to tramp through the grimy clay fields. After two futile forays through the pawn shops and the hand-me-down stores of the lower west side, they found one store which had a whole pile of the rare footwear all for the bargain price of $2.00.[4]

Despite all the economies Bitter Stream was a heavy show with a production cost totaling $11,640.84.[5] This was a thousand dollars more than Mother had cost. (We might recall, too, that the total cost for Mother was high because of the unusual postponement expense of

---

[1]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Financial Report, 1935-36.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]"The 'Bitter Stream' Shoe Isn't Worn in New York," Herald Tribune, 10 May 1936.

[5]Financial Report, 1935-36.

$2,000.) The increased costs of mounting a production was an additional strain on an already overburdened budget. In anticipation of the high cost, the Board held a fund raising dinner just prior to commencing rehearsals for Bitter Stream. The contributions though were disappointing. The dinner was held 18 February 1936 at the Aldine Club and guests paid $1.75 a plate. Heywood Broun presided and addresses were made by Julius Hochman (a vice-president of the ILGWU and the president of the Labor Stage), Arturo Giovanitti (an Italian anti-Fascist poet), John Howard Lawson, Sidney Kingsley, Lillian Hellman, Joseph Freeman, and Sylvia Feningston, the latter reporting on the progress of raising the $15,000 sustaining fund.[1] When it came time to pass the hat only thirty-nine guests dipped into their pockets for gifts ranging from $2.00 to $250.00. The total received was $930. This only came close to offsetting the expenditures for the evening of $1,076.82.[2]

The Theatre Union now took the suicidal step of cutting its low ticket prices still further. For Bitter Stream, the best seats in the house would sell for one dollar except on Saturday nights. Thus, the ticket prices, including the new five cent levy, came to $1.05, 80¢, 65¢, 50¢, 35¢.[3] It was a risky gamble in an effort to attract more of those workers who were hardpressed for cash.

Bitter Stream opened Monday evening, 30 March 1936. Six days earlier the Theatre Guild presented Robert E. Sherwood's Idiot's Delight,

---

[1]Invitation, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[2]Financial Report, 1935-36.

[3]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

a drama which in setting forth its anti-war, isolationist thesis, fleetingly glanced at the excesses of Italian Fascism. Prior to its opening night the Theatre Union ran four previews. The first, on the 25th, was bought by the Communist Party; the other three were bought by the Socialist Party.[1] These performances netted the Theatre Union $1,900.[2]

Bitter Stream faired poorly with the critics. Most dismissed it as puerile drama or as simple-minded, obvious propaganda. Coleman considered it an effective soporific: "like most of the Theatre Union's recent works, 'Bitter Stream' is obvious and unsubtle, loud, windy and dull. If it weren't for the noise, Mr. Wolfson's opus would be an excellent antidote for insomnia."[3] Gabriel compared it to the novel and found it wanting: "they have managed to make a masterpiece of protest supremely dull and not a little silly."[4] Hammond, in a particularly snide review, continued to do battle with the Theatre Union on the tattered Propaganda vs. Art front, derogating the play for "the fantastic excess of its propaganda."[5] Lockridge found the surfeit of exposition tedious--"His first two acts plod laboriously"--and unmitigated by the bits of roistering action later in the play: "Even this fury does not whip 'Bitter Stream' into stirring theatre, its flow having throughout the furious turbulence of a flow of lukewarm tar."[6] Isaacs shrugged it

---

[1] Herald Tribune, 23 March 1936.

[2] Financial Report, 1935-36.

[3] "'Bitter Stream' Theatre Union Stages Play From Novel," Daily Mirror, 31 March 1936.

[4] "'Bitter Stream' The Theatre Union's Dramatization of 'Fontamara,'" American, 31 March 1936.

[5] "'Bitter Stream,' Herald Tribune, 31 March 1936, p. 14.

[6] "'Bitter Stream,' Social Drama of Rural Italy, Opens at the Civic Repertory," Sun, 31 March 1936, p. 26.

off as "imitating playwriting" and Vernon, insisting on equal rights in drama, faulted Wolfson for characterizing all the Fascists as unadulterated "brutes and hypocrites."[1]

A handful of critics found some redeeming value in a drama that brought to the public forum a consciousness of the Fascist peril. For Anderson the play also "plods a little heavily" at times, however, it "strikes a subject of common sympathy and handles it with much power and understanding."[2] Mantle forgives Wolfson for the overuse of the martyr theme and the "vindictive bias and overstatement that afflicts all dramas of protest" because the play coheres as "a strongly anti-Fascist drama" and a "fairly convincing one."[3] Allen appreciated the play with his mind but was disappointed with his heart: "Now while I found this play interesting and informative as an authentic but academic exposition, I was never thrilled or excited by it. . . . 'Bitter Stream,' as drama, remains a flaccid and sometimes monotonous play."[4] Atkinson, on the other hand, could find nothing in it to appreciate except to admit that Fascism is a profoundly serious matter:

> But anybody with ordinary imagination could be knocked out of his normal complacency by a portrait of the methods of a dictatorship. For all its inexpertness of manner "Bitter Stream" does show how a dictatorship can storm into a self-contained neighborhood, grab, everything in sight and punish a difference of opinion with the rubber hose and the firing squad. Fascism is the natural enemy for

---

[1] Isaacs, "Saints and Lawmakers," Theatre Arts, May 1936, p. 339; Vernon, "Bitter Stream," Commonweal, 17 April 1936, p. 696.

[2] "'Bitter Stream' Revolt of Villagers Again Theme of Theatre Union," Evening Journal, 31 March 1936.

[3] "'Bitter Stream' is a Story of a Volunteer Martyr to the Cause of Italy's Oppressed Farmers," Daily News, 31 March 1936.

[4] "Bitter Stream," Women's Wear Daily, 31 March 1936.

everything a democracy stands for. The real Fascist play has yet to be written.[1]

Considering the drubbbing the critics gave the play, comments on the acting and the production became superfluous. Of those who bothered to note elements of the production, most evaluated them favorably. Garland, even though he thought the play was another example of soap box oratory, said that its production "reveals a new and desirable professionalism in the Theatre Union's physical apparatus."[2] The scenery was the one facet of the production everybody liked. It was said to be colorful, efficient, and appropriately atmospheric.[3] Of the direction only Mantle could find something nice to say.[4] Most agreed with Atkinson that it was "diffuse and stormy."[5] As for the acting, the consensus was that the actors managed as well as could be expected with the material at hand. Only Dekker, Valenty, and Kippen stood out enough from the ensemble to be judged individually, usually favorably.

Even the leftist press was hardpressed to endorse Wolfson's melodrama. To be sure, they found nothing objectionable about the play's message. The need to oppose Fascism was the burning issue of the day. It was important to educate the American worker in the evils of Fascism. This, they all concurred, Bitter Stream did. John Spivak prefaced his

---

[1]"Fascism of the Black Shirts the Theme of the Theatre Union's 'Bitter Stream,'" New York Times, 31 March 1936, p. 16.

[2]"Propaganda in New Play: 'Bitter Stream' at Civic Repertory Depicts Woes of Ruralists in Italy," World Telegram, 31 March 1936, p. 16.

[3]Mantle, "Volunteer Martyr," 31 March 1936; Anderson, "Revolt of Villagers," 31 March 1936; Atkinson, "Black Shirts," p. 16.

[4]"Volunteer Martyr," 31 March 1936.

[5]"Black Shirts," p. 16.

scant comments on the play with a lengthy anecdote describing his own encounter with the face of Fascism. Then he went on to underline the terrifying pertinence of the play's theme:

> Bitter Stream is a tragedy, a tragedy which at some points assumes heroic proportions--the tragedy of millions of people in the grip of a ruthless machine slowly grinding them down to the point of feudal servitude for the benefit of a handful of big landowners. It is the tragedy of what is happening to a great people. But what happened in Fontamara is only the first act of a greater tragedy played upon a greater stage which will one day leave its effect upon the whole world.[1]

John Gassner also emphasized the play's immediate political relevance, concluding his review with the following statement:

> In its simple, rugged manner it unrolls a tragic situation applicable to large sections of the world and of equal importance to America. It should sound a warning against the demagoguery that is straining every tear-duct with generous pity for the poor which it intends to gag and mulct. The story of the Fontamarans is history charged with lightening immediacy.[2]

The reviews in the Daily Worker and the New Leader were complimentary but equally platitudinous.[3]

Having given their pro forma encouragement to their readers to patronize the latest Theatre Union effort, even these critics could not help but concede the weaknesses of the production. Their disappointment was evident. There was agreement that the first act was weak: Shipley considering it "somewhat high pitched," and Gassner finding it "wordy

---

[1]John L. Spivak, "Bitter Stream" New Masses, 14 April 1936 p. 28.

[2]"Perspectives--Past and Present," New Theatre, May 1936, p.11

[3]Theodore Repard, "A Play of Facist Italy," Daily Worker, 3 April 1936, p. 7; Joseph Shipley, "On Ruins of Rome: "Bitter Stream,'" New Leader, 31 March 1936, p. 6.

and diffuse."[1] Additionally, Repard found the second act wanting: it "could stand some cuts and better timing. The shooting of the old peasant by the fascist corporal lacks sharpness and build up, for example."[2] And Spivak admitted that the last act "has too much of the soap box method."[3] Gassner was especially critical of Wolfson's dramaturgy, itemizing the faults of the play almost as if he were writing a primer on what to avoid in proletarian drama. Its satire, he said, was short-circuited by the blunt caricatures that pose as the play's villains. The play failed to take advantage of such dramatic (and politically pointed) incidents as the peasants' revolt and the diversion of the stream, both of which occur off stage. Berardo's self-sacrifice, the pivotal event of the story, is "rigidly and scantily" developed. Finally, the climactic scene, with the peasants groping to publish their paper, evinces more of what Gassner calls the social theatre's "fondness for leaflets" than it constitutes fully realized drama.[4]

As for the production itself, there were some kind words for the acting, but demurrals about the direction. Repard reported that the staging "leave[s] something to be desired and some judicious cutting and tightening would help out."[5] Gassner said simply that the direction was "stilted and insensitive" and that "the Theatre Union has not given the play its full complement of theatric investiture."[6]

---

[1]Shipley, "Ruins," p. 6; Gassner, "Perspectives," p. 11.

[2]"Fascist Italy," p. 7. [3]"Bitter Stream," p. 28.

[4]Gassner, "Perspectives," p. 11. [5]"Fascist Italy," p. 7.

[6]"Perspectives," p. 11.

Despite the reviews, Bitter Stream limped through an eight week run, struggling at the end of each week to show a profit. The summary of the weekly profits and losses indicates only two weeks totaling losses of $347.82 and six profitable weeks totaling $1,171.30. If this is the good news, the bad news is that to show such profits the Theatre Union added the receipts of the sinking fund, about $274 weekly. Without this supplementary income the balance sheets would have shown six weeks of losses totaling $210.13.[1] The use of the sinking fund to defray operating expenses must have been a disappointment, as it was intended to repay the sizeable production costs.

Bitter Stream's survival for sixty-one performances is attributable to several factors. First, of course, was the theatre's loyal audience. The Theatre Union could rely on at least a few weeks worth of business from the workers' audience it had nurtured. Within the first five weeks of the run of the Wolfson play the Theatre Union could report that 132 organizations had bought advance blocks of tickets.[2]

To bolster the support of its grass roots audience the Board had the foresight to organize a special "Labor Committee to Sponsor the Theatre Union Production of Bitter Stream." The committee was composed of thirty-three of New York's trade union and labor leaders. Among those on the committee were Luigi Antonini of the Italian Dressmakers Union; Joseph Baskin of the Workman's Circle; Heywood Broun of the Newspaper Guild; Frank Crosswaith of the Negro Labor Committee; Francis Gorman of

---

[1] Financial Report, 1935-36.

[2] Press Releases, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

the United Textile Workers of America; Julius Hochman of the ILGWU; and Carlo Tresca of the International Educational Bureau. In actuality, committee members did nothing but lend their name and prestige to endorse Bitter Stream. But this alone accomplished much. A coalition of organizations of many political shadings, it recalled and reinforced the Theatre Unions policy of the United Front. The Theatre Union in presenting an anti-Fascist play was in the mainstream of United Front thinking. Added muscle was given to the theatre's promotional efforts. When the Theatre Union wrote to labor organizations urging them to organize groups to see the play, the stationery had familiar and recognizable names on its masthead.[1]

Another factor which may have contributed to the run of Bitter Stream was current events. Italian Fascism was in the news daily. When the play opened, Ethiopia was making a vain effort to repulse the invasion. In May, the ancient state of Abyssinia was vanquished and officially annexed by Italy. In addition to Italy, the German military encroachment of the Rhineland in March (three weeks before Bitter Stream opened) was making it clear that Fascism was the foremost nemesis to peace. If news reports were insufficient to show the topical significance of an anti-Fascist play, the Theatre Union supplied editors with press releases that described in detail the ongoing tyranny of Mussolini's government. One of these was used

---

[1]Press Releases, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Sample copy of letter, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

by Wilella Waldorf in the New York Post.[1]

Concerned about Gold's strictures, after Mother, that the Theatre Union should concentrate on plays dealing with American workers' problems, the Board had Peters compose a detailed article illustrating the accuracy and significance of Bitter Stream. Peters listed the conditions in Rome which spelled reality for workers and farmers. They were overtaxed, wealth was disproportionately lodged in the hands of a few, peasant farmers led a serf-like life comparable to American share-croppers, workers suffered unemployment and wage-cuts, and their protests and strikes were brutally squashed. His argument is, in effect, that the plight of these farmers and laborers is universal. The only solution is the one proffered by the play--solidarity, workers and farmers must unite.[2]

One last factor affecting the run of the play were several requests in the left press that workers see the play more for what it stands for than for its actual merit. An editorial in New Masses entitled "Dramatic Necessity" makes a case for support by positing that the Theatre Union is the only institution where working class drama can find a hospitable home. Yet its existence is precarious. It should be steadfastly supported.[3] A similar appeal, based on a dire foreboding, appeared in New Theatre. In a survey of the season, John Mullen exhorts his fellow workers to unqualified support of the Theatre

---

[1]"Italy Under the Fascisti Protrayed in New Drama," Post, 28 March 1936.

[2]Paul Peters, "A Letter on Italy," Daily Worker, 11 May 1936, p. 7.

[3]New Masses, 28 April 1936, p. 5.

Union. Workers' audiences must tolerate its shortcomings as well as revel in its successes. Bitter Stream, he insists, should be, must be, better attended: "The play deserves attention, but unless people who can make it a success snap out of it soon, Bitter Stream may be the last show we will see for a long time below Forty-second Street."[1]

Some did respond to Mullen's plea but it was a case of too little, too late. Shortly after the Executive Board announced the closing date for Bitter Stream, ticket sales were so brisk that on one day 300 customers had to be turned away.[2] The last performance of Bitter Stream was Saturday night, 23 May. Its run cost the Theatre Union $8,917.36.[3]

In his review of Bitter Stream Brooks Atkinson sagely observed, "This has been the season of the Theatre Union's discontent. With the exception of 'Let Freedom Ring,' which found houseroom in Fourteenth Street after a bitter experience on Broadway, the Theatre Union has fallen on lean days."[4] Lean they certainly were both economically and artistically (and, one might add, politically). When the Theatre Union closed its books for that season on 23 May it had a paltry $197.82 in the bank. It also had an accumulated debt of $10,842.23 in upaid bills and loads. This included the $1,170

---

[1]Mullen, "Worker Looks at Broadway," p. 26.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Financial Report, 1935-36.

[4]"Black Shirts," p. 16.

Margaret Larkin had raised in Hollywood that spring in what had become the annual fund raising expedition out west.[1] If these fiscal assets and liabilities served as the basis for predicting the Theatre Union's future viability, the prognosis was dismal.

Artistically, the season was equally disastrous. Mother bored the workers' audience which regularly attended Theatre Union plays. The esoteric tampering with theatrical technique left them cold and detached, but not with the aesthetic coldness that Brecht wanted. This manipulation of style was a throwback to the self-indulgence of the New Theatre and a temporary derailment from the realistic track the Theatre Union was following. Moreover, contending with Brecht's cantankerous demands sapped the energy of the Executive Board, not to mention the theatre's pocketbook.

With Bitter Stream the Theatre Union seemed to be treading water. It was a bland play, given a mediocre production. Its anti-Fascist theme notwithstanding, it seemed out of place on the American workers' theatre stage. Perhaps Gold was right; maybe the Theatre Union had lost touch with the throbbing pulse of the workers' theatre.

The problem that faced Executive Board members as they departed for a summer of recuperation and resuscitation was how to reinvigorate their flagging organization, specifically, how to meet the bifurcated challenge of money and plays?

---

[1] Financial Report, 1935-36.

CHAPTER VII

THE FOURTH SEASON:

MARCHING SONG

The Theatre Union's fourth season was slow in starting. The company did not, in fact, present a production until 17 February 1937. The reasons for this delay were set forth in a report in the New York Times at the end of August 1936. The article, entitled, "Up From Union Square," summarizes the "innovations that were decided upon at the Board's annual six-day clam bake on Cape Cod. These innovations presaged the difficulties the Theatre Union was to encounter that fall. The first change, alluded to in the title of the article, was that the Theatre Union intended to relocate uptown to Broadway. The second change was the introduction of three new Board members. The third was the reorganization of the Board's operations and responsibilities. Lastly, there was the announcement that the repertory for the new season would begin with either Lawson's Marching Song or Sklar's Life and Death of an American, both plays being departures from the normal realism of Theatre Union plays.[1]

The move uptown was not voluntary. As might have happened in a typical Theatre Union play, the greedy brokers of capitalism were responsible for the change. That summer, the bank which owned the Civic Repertory Theatre notified the Board that it was going to increase the rent or raze the theatre to install a more profitable parking lot in

---

[1] New York Times, 30 August 1936.

its place. Maltz went to the bank to plead the Theatre Union's case. The bank representative listened politely to Maltz's description of the intent of the Theatre Union and its internal operations. He was nonplussed, however, when he heard that Board members worked without compensation. People who were irresponsible enough to work for nothing were not going to persuade him to lower the rent.[1] That was the end of the Theatre Union's residency at the Civic Repertory Theatre.

The search for a new home was the main cause for the late start of the season. The choice of a new house depended on the right answer to a complex of questions. Could the theatre, with its precarious finances, afford the rental of an uptown house the same size as the Civic Repertory? Would it be necessary to raise ticket prices and would such increases have a detrimental effect on the Theatre Union's working class patrons? Indeed, would the gloss and glitter of Broadway intimidate the Theatre Union's downtown regulars, frightening them away? For these reasons, especially the last, the Board initially wanted the Venice Theatre. Formerly the Al Jolson Theatre, the Venice was located on Seventh Avenue and Fifty-ninth Street, a remote, peripheral orbit of Broadway. At this remove the Theatre Union could escape the taint of the Great White Way. Unfortunately, arrangements for the Venice fell through shortly before the opening of Marching Song.[2]

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[2]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin. This release which announces the opening of Marching Song, has Venice Theatre crossed out and is amended to read "theatre to be announced."

Eventually, the Board settled on the Nora Bayes Theatre on Forty-fourth Street which was in the same building over the Forty-fourth Street Theatre. The agreement for the Nora Bayes would cost the Theatre Union about the same as the Civic Repertory. The weekly rent demanded uptown was $300 or ten percent of the gross, which ever was higher, plus $850 for house expenses like box office personnel, ushers and stagehands.[1] At the Civic Repertory, the Theatre Union had paid a flat $525 in rent and about $600 to $700 in salaries for house personnel. The problem, however, was that Nora Bayes was three quarters the size of the downtown theatre. Its 835-seat capacity meant that the potential income especially from the higher-priced orchestra seats, was reduced. Nevertheless, the Board believed that to increase prices to compensate for the smaller house would be suicidal. They therefore retained virtually the same price scale they had downtown with ticket costs ranging from 45¢ to $1.50.

Ostensibly, the addition of new Board members and the reorganization of the administrative structure of the Board seemed natural in the evolution of a theatre organization. These changes though signalled the erosion of the Theatre Union's vitality. The Board was enlarged for two reasons. First, there was a desire to tap the imagination and creativity of more experienced theatre people.[2] Second, new people were brought in because of the waning interest of many of the original Board members. Among these were Charles and Adelaide Walker,

---

[1]Financial Report, 26 May 1936 to 22 April 1937, loaned to author by Zelda Dorfman.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

Manuel Gomez, Sylvia Feningston, and Michael Blankfort.[1] Their disaffection with the theatre was largely due to unsettling political and ensuing personal rifts within the Board which we shall examine in the next chapter. But certainly this stress, compounded by the ever-present financial strain, made it hard for the company to overcome the inertia of the summer and get started.

The new Board members were Martin Wolfson, Charles Friedman (both familiar faces at the Theatre Union), and Lem Ward. Martin Wolfson was Victor's brother who had had leading roles in four Theatre Union productions and had extended his commitment to the Theatre Union through his involvement with the Studio.

Charles Friedman's association with the Theatre Union went back to Stevedore when he had served as technical director and as the Board's choice to assist Blankfort in its direction. He later did the lighting for Mother and served as replacement director for Bitter Stream when Ben-Ami left. These credits do not acknowledge all the other chores and favors Friedman performed for the Theatre Union because of his myriad talents. Ironically, Friedman himself lost interest in the company soon after his appointment to the Board was announced in August.[2] He had expected to be appointed General Manager of the Theatre Union.[3] That position went to Lem Ward. With that decision Friedman departed for the Labor Stage, using his experience in musical theatre to create Pins and Needles.

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978; Blankfort, 17 July 1978; Walker 9 September 1978.

[2]His name did not appear on the Marching Song program in the listing of Executive Board Members.

[3]Regan, 28 June 1978.

Lem Ward, whose blossoming career as a director was later tragically cut short by a fatal allergic reaction to a sulphur drug in November 1942, after directing The Eve of St. Mark for the Playwright's Company, was brought to New York from his native Philadelphia. Maltz first became acquainted with Ward in December 1935 when he journeyed to Philadelphia to see Ward's production of Black Pit for the New Theatre, a local left-wing theatre group founded by Ward in 1934. Ward a graduate of the Philadelphia School of Design and the University of Pennsylvania, had previously worked at the Hedgerow Theatre, founded the Labor Lyceum Dramatic Group, and had opened the Marionette Theatre which produced Oedipus and The Emperor Jones.[1]

Maltz was impressed with Ward's abilities as a director and sent Samuel Friedman to see the production as well.[2] New Theatre's production of Black Pit even got some attention in New Theatre whose reporter praised it by saying that it compared favorably with the New York production even though the Philadelphia group was amateur.[3] The Board decided that Ward was the kind of fresh blood the Theatre Union needed and invited him to take charge of the company. On 10 October he joined the Theatre Union in the salaried position ($40 per week) of General Manager.[4]

The position of General Manager was a new one created as part of the overhaul of the company's administrative structure. The major change was the attenuation of the Board's responsibilities. The job

---

[1]"Lem Ward Dies," Herald Tribune, 25 November 1942.

[2]Margaret Larkin to Lem Ward, 3 January 1936, Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

[3]"New Theatre in Philadelphia," New Theatre, February 1936, p. 30.

[4]Financial Report, 1936-37.

of administrating the theatre was placed in the hands of the General Manager, who was to consult regularly with a small administrative committee. Members of this committee, variously described as composed of four or six individuals, were to be drawn from the Executive Board. The General Manager functioned as producer, responsible for all day-to-day decisions regarding the company and the current production. The production committee remained operative, only now it answered to the General Manager and its members might no longer come exclusively from the Executive Board.[1] The enlarged Executive Board reserved the authority to establish overall policy and to select scripts. To a great extent this reorganization streamlined the management of the theatre. Now the cumbersome necessity of convening the entire Board to deliberate over the day-to-day problems of the company was obviated.

Aside from these concerns there was the inescapable problem of selecting the next play. At the close of the previous season, the Board had announced that its next production, which was to open in October, would be George Sklar's The Life and Death of an American. The play included music by Jerome Moross, who was going to complete the score at his summer retreat at the Yaddo Corporation headquarters on Lake George, and was to be directed by Charles Friedman.[2] Sklar had begun writing the play in the summer of 1935 but his

---

[1]"Up From Union Square," New York Times, 30 August 1936, sec.9 p. 1; Margaret Larkin, "On Becoming Acclimated to Broadway Surroundings." Daily Worker, 24 November 1936, p. 7; "Theatre Union's Project," New York Times, 7 February 1936, sec. 10, p. 2.

[2]"Gossip of the Rialto," New York Times, 28 June 1936, sec. 9 p. 1.

work on the project was interrupted when he was called to assist in the production of Mother.[1] In a letter to Barrett Clark requesting a recommendation for a Guggenheim Fellowship, he gives a brief characterization of his new work: "It'll be hugely experimental in form and will require loads of research time and patience."[2] Life and Death of an American was an experimental play in the sense that it departed from the realistic mold. It had the verve and bite of the last act of Peace on Earth. Employing a fragmented episodic structure, the play charts the life of Jerry Dorgan, a steel laborer who was born twelve seconds after midnight on 1 January 1900. This child of the twentieth century is the protypical American. Too poor to complete his college education, he barely ekes out a living during the depression, and is shot and killed on the picket line. This "dramatic biography," as the play is subtitled, illustrates the multiplicity of social forces in a capitalistic society which impinge on and direct the life of the average person. The play delivers its message through a kaleidescopic arrangement of music and mass chants laced through the action, reminiscent of the early agit-prop pieces.

Sklar did a reading of his play (along with a presentation of the music by Moross) before the Executive Board. At first the Board disliked it. After three or four rewrites they reconsidered and tentively decided to produce it.[3] During the summer, however, John Howard Lawson offered Marching Song to the Theatre Union. Lawson had first

---

[1] Post, 6 September 1935.

[2] George Sklar to Barrett Clark, 11 October 1935, Barrett Clark Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

[3] Sklar, 14 July 1978.

taken his new play to the Group Theatre, but Clurman rejected it saying "It struck me as cold, artificial, a creature of the author's will--lacking in spontaneity."[1] The play appealed to the Theatre Union, the Board particularly admiring the poetic sweep of the writing.[2] On 7 October 1936, the Board announced that Marching Song would open the fourth season in place of Life and Death of an American.[3] Originally the opening was to be 27 January, but this date was postponed due to complications in procuring a theatre.[4]

Lawson was the first non-Theatre Union playwright whose play the Theatre Union produced (Blankfort had translated The Sailors of Catarro and Peters had adapted Mother). Lawson was certainly no stranger to socially oriented theatre. He was born on 25 September 1894. His first produced plays (outside of New York), Standards and Servant, Master Lover coincided with his graduation from Williams College. After college he worked for a year as a Reuter's reporter and during the first World War he drove an ambulance on the French and Italian fronts.[5]

Between 1923 and 1937, Lawson wrote nine plays, all of which were produced in New York. The first, Roger Bloomer, was presented by the Equity Players on 1 March 1923 with Henry Hull in the leading role. Roger Bloomer was the first American play to use the techniques of expressionistic dramaturgy, antedating The Adding Machine by two weeks. In tracing the eponymous hero's odyssey toward maturity, Lawson condemns

---

[1]Clurman, Fervent Years, p. 186.

[2]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[3]New York Times, 7 October 1936.

[4]New York Times, 17 December 1936.

[5]"Theatre Union is to Move Uptown," Herald Tribune, 14 February.

the dehumanizing aspects of a society governed by materialistic values.

His next play, Processional, presented by the Theatre Guild 12 January 1925, made him one of the bright new talents on the theatre scene. This "Jazz Symphony of American Life in Four Acts" captured the vigor and complexity of the American mood, illustrating its prosperity and joy as well as the cross currents of sorrow and terror that percolated under the surface. Framed within the vaudevillesque quality of the play is a plot concerning a bitter strike in a West Virginia coal mining town. Capitalists strut about in high silk hats, and a Polish Communist agitator warns of a workers' revolution. Despite its satiric thrust, Processional, foreshadows the proletarian rebellion.

In 1926, Lawson, along with Jasper Deeter, Ida Ruth, and Mike Gold, founded the Worders' Drama League. Their purpose was to produce plays relevant to workers. But this group's work was sporadic and inconclusive. At this time, too, Nirvana, Lawson's third play opened. It is a limp, opaque drama addressing the question of religion and modern man.

A while later, Lawson became one of the guiding lights of the New Playwrights Theatre. For its debut, on 2 March 1927, the theatre offered Lawson's Loud Speaker, an impressionistic extravaganza of the American political system. Although it attempted to muster the same exuberance in style as Processional it was not nearly as successful. The New Playwrights also presented Lawson's next play, The International. Confused and confusing, this episodic, working man's picaresque is an

---

1937; C. Gerald Fraser, "John Howard Lawson, 82, Writer Blacklisted by Hollywood in '47," New York Times, 14 August 1977, p. 46.

attempt to give a jazz treatment to the Marxist-Capitalist struggle.

In 1928, Lawson went to Hollywood to write for the new talking pictures. His return to Broadway was signaled by the Group Theatre's presentation of his next play, Success Story, on 26 September 1932. The play marked a significant change in Lawson's playwriting career in that he drew back from experimenting with dramatic form. Unlike his previous plays which evinced a consciousness of the recent radical trends of European drama (the gamut of "isms" including expressionism, constructivism, surrealism, and futurism), Success Story was more realistic.

The social awareness evident in Lawson's plays continued unabated. Success Story is a "what-makes-Sammy-run" biography of Sol Ginsberg, an advertising executive who claws his way to the top of the heap despite his working class roots. Once an impoverished lower-east-side slum kid who espoused radical ideals, Ginsberg makes a Faust-like pact with the capitalist devil, dedicating himself to the great god Mamon. In the end, Ginsberg becomes a perverse Midas; he is rich but unhappy because all his contacts with people turn sour. In the tragic fate of Sol Ginsberg, Lawson spins out an object lesson on the hollowness of capitalism's tantalizing promises.

A year and a half later, Lawson delivered two more plays, both opening in the same week. In these plays Lawson attributes the anquished, empty lives of the central characters to a sterile, ruinous socio-economic order. The Pure in Heart, the first of the pair, couches its theme in the melodramatic tale of the stage-struck country girl who tries to make it big on Broadway; a common plot of the Hollywood romances. Gentlewoman, the second one, produced by the Group Theatre,

borrows the methods of the drawing room comedy to develop its Marxian message. Gwyn Ballantine, the Behrmanesque gentlewoman of the title, is trapped. She is the product of an effete bourgeoisie that is gradually destroying itself. An alert, sensitive woman, she has the integrity to realize this. She tries to rescue herself from the grip of the decadent system by wanting to marry Rudy, a radical revolutionary with a working class background. At the end, she releases Rudy as she comes to terms with the fact that her transformation has come to late and that she is doomed as the social order which spawned her.

Both plays were critical fiascos, running seven and twelve performances, respectively. In the preface to the published version of both plays, Lawson offered one reason for the hasty departure of these productions. The American Theatre, he said, was dominated by a band of reactionary, irresponsible, obtuse critics who were more interested in displaying their own wit and smugness then they were in understanding the intentions of a playwright. Their hegemony makes it impossible for Broadway, lumbered by its own entropy as well, to be the home of vital, innovative social drama. To the Broadway critics, submerged as they are in a "fake aesthetism," plays which deal with the realities of the class struggle are propaganda and have no place in "the pure 'Art' of the theatre."[1] Lawson's solution to this problem was simple: "the writer, actor or director who wishes to do genuinely creative work cannot function under the Broadway system. The stupid control exercised by the critics is an integral part of that system.

---

[1]John Howard Lawson, With a Reckless Preface (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1934), p. viii.

The only answer is to turn resolutely to the building of the revolutionary theatre."[1]

Michael Gold offered another reason for the failure of Lawson's latest dramatic works. Gold contended that Lawson's plays suffered from ideological ambivalence and inaccuracies due to the writer's unresolved conflicts. He accused Lawson of being a political fence-sitter in the world he criticized. Lawson, he claimed, was a fellow traveler who "is hiding from his own fervid desire for bourgeois success and the difficulty, often, of reconciling this dross with the revolutionary conscience." Gold avers that Lawson's plays fail because he has become obsessed with his own unacknowledged dilemma to the point where his own confusion intrudes on the conflicts and tensions of his characters. Thus, his plays, which as Gold allows, often begin with some truth of character, soon unravel as an unreal projection of Lawson's politically onanistic private concerns. The characters come to seem contrived, the language is often on "the verge of bathos," and the messages of the pieces are emasculated by a numbing and worn-out "futilitarianism."[2]

Gold's allegations elicited a prompt reply from Lawson. From his ideological confessional booth, Lawson was contrite, forthright and even a bit self-righteous. With his first breath he admitted that "seventy percent of Mike's attack" was true. But he insisted that Gold's

---

[1]Ibid, p. xviii.

[2]Michael Gold. "A Bourgeois Hamlet in Our Time," New Masses, 17 April 1934, pp. 28-29.

criticism is not balanced because it fails to view his work as a totality in the context of its "orderly development."[1] Viewed from this perspective Gold might recognize Lawson not as a "bourgeois Hamlet," the appellation he bestowed on Lawson in his attack, but rather as a revolutionary Hamlet. He was not, he said, a reactionary, counter-revolutionary writer in the guise of a fellow-traveler, but a real fellow-traveler who was engaged in the honest effort of reconciling his own envirenment and background with the exigencies of coeval social realities. Lawson acknowledged that he himself had been dissatisfied with his work because "the left tendency in my plays has been clouded and insufficiently realized," and he affirmed that "the only justification for my existence as a dramatist will lie in my ability to achieve revolutionary clarity."[2] His mission, he proclaimed, is to answer the question--the very question Gold found "monotonous"--"Where do I belong in the warring world of two classes?" "I'm sorry the question bores him," he concluded, "but I intend to make my answer with due consideration, and with as much clarity and vigor which I possess."[3]

Gold was not left to languish long for an answer. On 1 June 1934, New Theatre published an article written by Lawson entitled "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre: The Theatre--The Artist Must Take Sides." Speaking with the passion of a convert, Lawson zealously epouses the revolutionary Marxist theatre as the only purveyor of truth.

---

[1]John Howard Lawson, "Inner Conflict and Proletarian Art," New Masses, 17 April 1934 p. 29.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ibid., p. 30.

In this article Lawson unquestionably finds his niche in the "warring world of two classes." In 1934, he asserts, the class struggle has escalated to the point where the demarcation between the two sides is manifest. The cross-fire is so intense that it is impossible to stand in the "liberal" no-man's-land in between. "The artist," Lawson insists, "is forced to recognize the elementary facts of economic struggle; he is forced to take sides."[1] Lawson observed that in the theatre there exists that same schism between the bourgeois reactionary and the revolutionary. In a heated invective, reminiscent in tone of Third Period polemics, he renounces the Broadway theatre as tawdry, narrow-minded, and shallow, a reflection of the debilitated bourgeois society which it portrays. The revolutionary artist must "completely divorce himself from the Broadway game," and follow the trend of the nascent and vital revolutionary theatre, exemplified, as Lawson notes, by the Theatre Union.[2] In this quest, half-heartedness, ambivalence, wavering are the earmarks of a treacherous liberalism. The artist must be decisive, clear, direct in his renditions of the class struggle.

Lawson's advocacy of precision and directness in playwriting accounts for his criticism of Stevedore (previously examined on p. 261-62) for its failure to amplify the nature of the union of white dock workers who come to the aide of the blacks.[3] It may also have motivated Lawson to explore the connections between drama and social consciousness

---

[1]John Howard Lawson, "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," New Theatre, 1 June 1934, p. 6.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Lawson, "Straight from the Shoulder," p. 11.

which culminated, in 1936, in the publication of Theory and Technique of Playwriting. This treatise which offers standards by which the Marxist critic could judge a revolutionary play may also have been prompted by Lawson's complaint to Gold that the latter's criticism of him was weakened by its extreme posturings and its omission of any concrete recommendations to correct the writer's error's.[1] Theory and Technique of Playwriting is Lawson's most lucid exegesis of the faults he sees in the modern theatre as well as being a primer for the future wave of Marxist playwrights.

Marching Song was Lawson's ninth work, his last before he left New York for a career as a Hollywood screenwriter. The play is a sprawling proletarian tale at the center of which is the story of Pete and Jenny Russell. Pete, who was active in an earlier strike, has lost his job at the automobile plant as the result of a compromise settlement which his union was too weak to enforce. Because of the blacklist he is unable to find other employment in Brimmertown, a company town controlled by the unseen but omnipresent Brimmer.

As the play begins, Pete and his family have been dispossessed by the bank which owns his house for failure to meet the payments. Pete and Jenny find refuge in an abandoned wheel plant which has been inhabitated by a motley band of unemployed, male transients. There they are found by Bill Anderson, the mild mannered, but determined leader of the Auto Worker's Union. He promises to mobilize the union on the Russells' behalf to fight the eviction and the blacklist. The union organizes and gathers strength despite vigorous, violent opposition

---

[1]Lawson, "Inner Conflict," p. 30.

from the local constabulary which is a tool of the Brimmer concern as well as from an imported troop of ruthless vigilantes who call themselves The Law and Order Committee. In the end, after considerable loss--the Russells' baby dies and Bill Anderson is sadistically murdered—and after a narrow brush with defeat, the strikers succeed in activating a comprehensive and paralyzing strike.

The drama is preeminently concerned with a social conflict and an exertion of conscious will. In this case the conflict involves one group against another, an apt structural arrangement for a drama whose theme focuses on the ineluctable imminence of class warfare and social upheaval. The vast dramatis personae of the drama fall into two categories. On one side of the picket line is the collective protagonist. This is composed of Bill Anderson, the Russells, Hank and Mary McGillicuddy and the many other concerned and devoted neighbors of the Russells, Jenny's sister Rose Graham, several socially conscious denizens of the abandoned factory, and the off-stage workers at the auto plant and the electric power station. On the other side of the picket line are the corrupt police, the mercenary hoodlums who are hired to smash the union, and the industrialists who are committed to protecting their self-interest, all acting as the collective antagonist.

Indeed, the play does not so much involve the activities of individual characters as it does the movement and shifting configurations of various subgroups. Character in Marching Song is a function of social class with the determinants of behavior being the needs and demands of that class. Thus we have such groupings as the long-time unemployed men who have become unwanted outcasts rejected by all; the

currently employed who lead respectable lives but who are anxious because their tenuous job security can push them over the brink into destitution; the hardcore union supporters and the uncertain waverers.

Even among the helmsmen of the present social order the play suggests some subgroupings. There are the callous, unscrupulous businessmen like Brimmer who will resort to any means to retain power and accrue profits. Then there is a less aggressive, more humane, even sentimental, breed of bosses exemplified by Warren Winkle, the former owner of the now defunct wheel factory. They are guided by old-school business ethics, but they are being bought out and supplanted by the conscienceless Brimmers.

The mis-en-scene of the play, as indicated in the stage directions, reinforces the various groupings of characters. When Jenny's women neighbors come to the factory to offer their support and solace, Lawson describes the scene as follows: "The WOMEN remain in the sunny opening. The UNEMPLOYED MEN form a contrasting group in shadow at L. As the scene proceeds, the sense of latent hostility between the two groups increases."[1]

This approach is simultaneously necessary and weak. It is necessary because it complements the intent and design of a play which shows the crosscurrents of pressure in an unstable social struggle. Marxist aesthetics demand a dimunition of the individual as a significant entity. It sees man as a product of his social environment and defines his actions and relationships in terms of that stratified and

---

[1]John Howard, Marching Song (New York: Dramatists Play Service 1937), p. 23.

compartmentalized environment. The danger, however, of this loss of individuality is that the drama looses credibility. Characters become types, robots embodying a conceptual view of a historical condition.

The will of the parties involved in the central conflict of Marching Song focuses on the desire to set the strike in motion. This is established late in Act One after some long, rambling exposition. Bill Anderson spearheads the strike by making the resettlement of the Russells and the reinstatement of Pete the rallying point of the workers. This action, Anderson believes, will force a conclusive showdown between the workers and Brimmer. The obstacle to the realization of a general strike is, of course, Brimmer's henchmen, the forces of "Law and Order." They pursue Anderson and hound and harass other courageous workers, thinking that they can put down the strike by destroying the ring leaders. But they are mistaken. As the momentum of the strike grows and spreads, the so-called ring leader becomes less important because others assume initiatives. Once Anderson rouses the workers others take on leadership roles. For example, Mary McGillicuddy galvanizes the women into forming a picket line, Hank McGillicuddy persuades the electric workers to lend their support, Rose takes charge of printing and distributing flyers, and Lucky, a black man from Louisiana who was forcibly brought north to scab during the last strike, now becomes a convert enlisting his fellow black men in the current strike effort. A strike is not an individual enterprise, it is the effort of all workers. Thus, when Anderson is killed the strike does not die with him. The efforts of the Law and Order Committee are in vain because the workers by dint of their sheer mass will predominate. Solidarity leads to victory is the

play's message. Lawson makes it clear that the will animating the strike is not the will of an individual, but the collective will of the mass.

The forging of this will does not always proceed smoothly. Where most workers recognize the need for the strike and are actively involved in bring it about, some detach themselves to act alone. This is the case, ironically, with Pete Russell. Pete is disenchanted with the union, His union work during the last strike cost him his job and the blacklist has kept him unemployed. He is the image of the typical American worker. Once he was a robust, vigorous, proud laborer who was such an ardent worker that his nervous system was ignited by the buzzing of the machines he operated. He tells a friend that he could not live in the country because he had to be "where I could hear the machines."[1] A family man, his love for his wife and his son was all consuming. Suddenly, in 1932, his life began to fall apart. The closing of the old factory forced him into a job at the Brimmer plant. His son died accidentally and his marriage became barren and loveless. Soon he was buried under an avalanche of woes, driven to drink and whoring. Thrown out of his house, bereft of everything he could call his own--he even loses his flower garden--and unable to cope with the suffering in Jenny's eyes, he is brought to the point of suicide.

At this nadir in Pete's life Bill Anderson enters. He offers Pete the possibility of salvation and tries to dispel his morbid defeatism. Pete is hardly convinced. At the conclusion of Act One,

---

[1]Ibid., p. 33.

when Bill incites the workers to actions aimed at regaining Pete's home, Pete only half-heartedly agrees to join the effort. Pete's will has atrophied; he no longer is able to understand what is good for him. His only desire is to run away, abandoning his wife and his dark life in Brimmerton. He knows this is impractical though, just as he knows that Jenny's plan to live with her brother in the east is an impossible dream. In the next two acts he learns that he cannot divorce himself from the lot of his fellow workers.

This painful education is accomplished by a series of three choices Pete is forced to make, each turn bringing him closer to a reaffirmation of his committment to his class. First, when a spontaneous sit-in occurs at the plant, Bill asks Pete to join the picket line outside. With Jenny, concerned for his safety, hanging on his arm, he not only refuses to go, he denounces the effectiveness of the union. His second choice is more wrenching. It comes after Warren Winkle, his erstwhile boss, has arranged through his banker friend for Pete to repossess his house and obtain a job. This good news comes just as the police inspector, Hamilton Feiler, is questioning Pete about the whereabouts of Bill Anderson. Bill has been wounded and is hiding in the furnace room of the old factory, Feiler knows that Pete knows where Anderson is. Winkle who is present has just vouched for Pete as someone "who could be depended on." Feiler demands an answer; Pete is faced with the same dilemma that tore Joe Kovarsky assunder. If he informs he is rewarded with a secure job and a home, but he loses his self-respect. After a few agonizing moments, Pete refuses to cooperate. As a result he loses Winkle's help but he gains Jenny's love. For a few moments, Jenny and Pete share a new understanding of their re-

lationship; they rediscover their mutual devotion. This helps reconstitute Pete as a man, but he is still not interested in the union. His third choice comes at the hands of Binks, the vicious vigilante chieftan. Binks forces Pete back to the old factory from the bus depot where he and Jenny were waiting for a bus to take them east. Again he is questioned about Anderson's hideout. Binks offers a bribe and threatens a beating, but Pete, having been tested once before and finding strength in his resolve, refuses to answer. In response to the Law and Order Committee's appeal to a fraudulent, red-necked Americanism, Pete howls, "I don't know where I stand, walking in a fog; But I ain't with you."[1] Pete still has doubts but it is becoming increasingly difficult for him to side-step his responsibilities. He knows for certain at least what road he does not want to travel.

Shortly, the fog lifts and his doubts disappear. The bus Pete and his family board is attacked by the vigilantes. They want to abduct Pete and punish him for his stubbornness. A crowd of workers comes to his rescue and shooting breaks out. In the melee Pete's child is shot. With this, Pete finally aligns himself with the cause of the union. He has poignantly learned that alone the worker's efforts to make his peace, to achieve security, is doomed, that only by uniting with his fellow workers does he have a chance of success.

Lawson enhances the social conflict of Marching Song by imbuing his narrative with an array of precise, concrete historical facts. The central action of the drama is couched within a "social framework" that

---

[1]Ibid., p. 133.

is exhaustive. Following his own advice that the playwright adopt a process of historical analysis to show and explain the pattern of causation in his material,[1] Lawson provides a shopping list of social injustices. In the course of the drama Lawson alludes to and often expatiates on the plight of transients, the demeaning and negligible assistance of relief agencies, virulent racism against blacks and Jews, and backwardness of southern states, lynch mobs, child prostitution, the protection racket of petty street hoods, the gratuitous brutality of chain gangs, police brutality, the speedup in factories, the stupidity of war, ignorant xenophobic patriotism, and on and on.

There is no question that these are related issues that amplify the main theme of the play. There is also no question that Lawson is a deft craftsman able to integrate these issues smoothly into the fabric of the action. What is troublesome, however, is the effect this has on the apprehension of the play. With all this social outrage stuffed into it the play becomes bloated and begins to lumber. Instead of trotting briskly through its story like a Stevedore, it stumbles lugubriously through detours and side streets. This is not simply a matter of pace. Fundamentally, it concerns the playwright's confidence in his own material. The distension of the action insures that the playwright will convey his point to the audience. It's like the gunner who uses a cannon instead of a rifle to hit the target. Lawson falls victim to the pitfall of proletarian playwriting he himself referred to

---

[1] John Howard Lawson, Theory and Technique of Playwriting (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 200-202.

in Theory and Technique of Playwriting, what Herbert Kline called the "carry-all-plot." With the intention of giving the full scope of the action, Lawson compromises his theme by deflecting our attention to subsidiary matters that are not organic to his story. Instead of deepening our understanding, the play widens our curiosity and multiplies our questions.

Essentially, Marching Song is representative of proletarian drama, possessing the strengths and weaknesses of the genre. Its strength lies in its earnestness and commitment. Marching Song is a vigorous exhortation against the injustices of the social system. It is full of indignation, sometimes muted, sometimes self-righteous, and it arouses a sense of outrage in its audience. Its hopeful ending, offering the prognosis of future proletarian victories, reaffirms and strengthens the attitudes of those spectators sympathetic to the workers' cause (even if it does not persuade those opposed to it.) Its weakness lies in its predictable patterning. As a drama of social protest it employs common, even hackneyed, motifs. The ideological life-cycle of Pete is typical of what Blankfort called the pendulum play. The play documents the conversion of a perplexed worker from conservatism to militancy. Moreover, Marching Song gears up to and ends with the same overt call to action of many protest plays. The play's final words, "Power is people," has the requisite clenched fist quality that would bring the audience to its feet. The play is also laced with an ersatz symbolism that threatens to flatten the drama rather than enhance it. References to men marching and the gathering storm are meant to lend the drama resonances of mythic magnitude, but their obviousness makes them seem facile and ingenuous.

The most glaring aspect of the play's predictability is its unabashed use of melodrama. The emotional response to the play is assured by the bold demarcation of character groupings. The workers are all heroes. They fight on the side of right, their cause is just, and we know that despite temporary setbacks they will prevail in the end. The bosses and their agents are clearly the villains who will be foiled. At one point, in the action, Inspector Feiler distributes badges and blue armbands to members of the Law and Order Committee. These insignia are unnecessary. Their identity is broadcast in the bold strokes of characterization with which Lawson creates them. From their first appearance we recognize them as low-lifes and grade-B movie mobsters.

Lawson avails himself of other elements of melodrama as well. The action, once it gets going in the middle of the second act, is exciting, quick and violent. The inciting incident is the trite situation of the heartless banker evicting the destitute, forlorn family. There is, too, the sensationalism of brutal onstage torture. And Lawson gives his characters a poeticized sometimes lyrical dialogue that further separates them from reality and heightens the emotional impact of the play. The Theatre Union recognized the melodramatic qualities of the play and used them in promoting Marching Song. The stirring jargon of the following sample illustrates:

> But don't think the Theatre Union and its audiences are going high hat. Lisa Markah, as the secretary, and Manart Keppen, as the vigilante gangster, still get hissed at the proper evil moments. Even the women at Wednesday's matinee gasp in disgust when Joseph Taulane gives into threats and bribes and betrays the organizer's hiding place. And the thunder of applause that greets Rex Ingram's curtain speech when he asks them did they like it, is proof enough that the audience, new and old, is not going soft.[1]

---

[1]Ruth Pearse, Press Release, Exclusive for Sunday Worker, 21 March (1937), Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

To direct Marching Song the Theatre Union hired Anthony Brown. Brown, a former vaudeville dancer, had staged Tobacco Road. After several weeks of rehearsals the production committee found Brown's work unsatisfactory. Because of the play's wordiness and poetic qualities they felt it needed particular vitality in order to work. Brown's approach lacked tension. Outsiders like Dos Passos (a friend of Lawson's from New Playwrights days) were summoned to make objective observations. Their negative reactions precipitated a desire to replace Brown.[1] Conveniently, Brown who suffered from a chronic sinus condition, fell ill and Lem Ward stepped in as director.

From a set of notes Ward composed to guide non-professionals in producing this "difficult and appealing" play we can glean some aspects of his approach to Marching Song. Ward acknowledges that the poetic qualities of the play might suggest stylistic approach to its staging. This, he asserts, would be wrong since such a "decorative or impressionistic" interpretation would mitigate the impact of the play's theme. He suggests, instead, that the mode of presentation be one of "heightened realism." He does not elaborate though on what this means. Ward also stresses the importance of guarding against the schematic projection of the characters. Stereotypical characterizations, he avouches, will "kill the mass portrait designed by the author . . . . It is the mass with its many facets and diversified movement that is the hero of 'Marching Song.'" While the play is not about individuals,

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

the director must assure credible portrayals of individuals so that the mass will be believable and acceptable. To accomplish this, Ward recommends that the ensemble engage in extensive pre-rehearsal discussions that encompass the social and economic environment of Brimmerton, the circumstances of the action, and an imaginary biography of each of the characters. Ward then charts the fluctuations of tempo in the play and, in language which shows the influence of his Stanislavskian training, he delineates Marching Song's line of action, its architectonic structure. He concludes by assuring prospective directors that Lawson's poetry "is never artificial" and that a declamatory delivery must be avoided.

The scenery for Marching Song was designed by an energetic, young newcomer to Broadway, Howard Bay. Bay, who came from Centralia, Washington, and attended, among other schools, Carnegie Tech and the Chappel School of Art, had been designing on Broadway for only four years. His work on Marching Song and then in rapid succession his designs for Power and One Third of a Nation, two of the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers, firmly established his professional career.

Marching Song demanded only a single interior locale, the abandoned Winkle wheel factory in Brimmerton. Like Ward, Bay eschewed any stylization of the scenery: "Surface mannerisms of abstract constructivisms of space stages with neutral drapes would obviously violate the play's rousing objectivity. (sic)"[2] Bay's design is realistic and

---

[1]Lem Ward, (Notes for non-professional production of Marching Song), 9 April 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Howard Bay, (Notes on scenery of Marching Song), 29 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

functional. It had the concreteness and specificity necessary for proletarian drama. It renders the derelict factory not as a picturesque environment, a mere background for the action, but as an image of a decaying social order--capitalism's flotsom, its waste. As such the setting becomes an integral feature of the play. It is exemplary of what John Gassner later referred to as "dynamic realism"--the scenic approach of the 1930's social protest plays in which "space was organized and action was licalized dynamically in relation to the social conflict."[1]

Bay described the scene as a "scarred battleground," a place where the two major forces of the play confront one another.[2] The central visual image of the design is the old, nearly demolished dynamo. Set at a slight oblique angle and raised on a three-stepped platform centerstage, the dynamo is a dual symbol. It represents the nub of capitalist industry now gutted and at a standstill. Looking toward the future, it is also a hopeful image. The dynamo is the focal point of the workers. Marching forward in unity and strength, the workers will rebuild the dynamo, making it part of a new proletarian revolutionary world. Bay hopes that as the play surges to its conclusion, audiences will project "an image of the core being jubilantly shoved back into the skeleton of the dynamo, the crane shuttling back and forth and the

---

[1]John Gassner, "Social Realism and Imaginative Theatre: Avant-Garde Stage Production in the American Social Theatre of the Nineteen-thirties," Theatre Survey 3 (1962): 4.

[2]Bay, (Notes), Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

entire visual frame throbbing with life."[1]

Bay's design was practical as well, providing the director with the space to arrange the various groups which sustain the play's action. The factory was set on a diagonal so that the audience saw one corner and two walls of its vast interior. This gave the spectator a sense of immediacy as it also energized the lines of movement by ruling out static lateral movements. The large main entrance was in the stage right wall at the top of a broad ramp that forced all entering characters straight downcenter. Nine feet up, a cat walk girded the factory walls. Behind the catwalk, a wide bank of tall windows in the left wall overlooked the street outside. The entire interior had a rusty, molded look and was textured like the surface of the moon. The whole set was so lighted so as to accentuate its shadows.[2]

Again, as with previous productions, the Theatre Union was meticulous about costume and props. Barbara Guerdon designed costumes for each of the forty-five cast members. Maria Coxe, the productions assistant stage manager and property mistress, scouted Salvation Army stores and bargain counters, searched the Theatre Union's own well stocked wardrobe of proletarian garb, and borrowed some of the actors' old clothes to assemble the required costumes. Her resourcefulness was effective both aesthetically and economically. The entire company was dressed for $42.59.[3]

---

[1]Ibid.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Ruth Pearse, Press Release, Exclusive for Herald Tribune March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

The realism of the costumes was compelling. During one of the dress rehearsals a woman came backstage looking for Lem Ward. At the back of the theatre she found a motley group of shabby men stretched out on the lounges and loafing about in assorted attitudes of inactivity. Finding Ward, she complimented him for the theatre's concern and care of unemployed people, but she wondered where they would go when the play opened. Ward was amused and informed the woman that what she had taken for unemployed men were actually actors taking a break between scenes.[1]

The props, too, were selected with an eye for authenticity and appropriateness. The sparse possessions of the Russells which are brought into the factory after their eviction are exactly right down to Jenny's bird cage which Maria Coxe located in a junk shop whose proprietor had a penchant for reciting Shakespeare.[2] The biggest props problem was the Russell baby. Five babies were made before the stage manager, Theodore Corday, found the right one; large enough to look like a three month old, light enough to be carried, heavy enough to look real and tight enough not to leak sawdust.[3] With props, too, Coxe was frugal, procuring everything for $156.69.[4]

For Marching Song the Theatre Union assembled their largest cast ever. Thirty actors played thirty-one speaking roles and the ensemble

---

[1]Ruth Pearse, Press Release, Exclusive for Post, (March 1937), Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[2]Ruth Pearse, Press Release, Exclusive for Sunday Worker, 3 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Ruth Pearse, Press Release, Exclusive for Post, 22 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]Financial Report, 1936-37.

was augmented with sixteen supernumeraries. Only eleven performers had been in any previous Theatre Union production. Of these, only four--Francis Bavier, James MacDonald, Hester Sondergaard, and Martin Wolfson--can be counted as Theatre Union regulars having been involved in more than one other play. The notion of establishing a permanent company by repeatedly employing a nucleus of the same actors was steadily growing out of reach. Nevertheless, the cast of Marching Song, featured a number of actors who had experience with socially aware theatre groups. Grover Burgess (Pete Russell) performed for the New Playwrights and the Group Theatre; Frieda Altman (Jenny Russell) played in Paradise Lost; Curt Conway (Woody Rosenblum) studied at the Hedgerow Theatre and participated in the Theatre of Action; Alfred Herrick (Frank McGillicuddy) played in 1931, We, the People, the They Shall Not Die, Joseph Tulane (Joe Bell) was a young veteran of fifty-four plays with the Hedgerow Theatre. Among the actors with previous Theatre Union exposure the line-of-business, trademark of the old, nineteenth century repertory companies, appeared to be resurfacing. Actors recurrently appeared in the same kind of role. With Marching Song, Martin Wolfson (Bill Anderson) gave his fifth protrait of the union organizer/strike leader. After playing the Fascist police inspector of Bitter Stream, Manart Kippen easily slipped into the equally villainous Binks, the sleazy vigilante leader affecting a nasty snarl for the part.[1] Francis Bavier (Mary McGillicuddy) gave yet another image of the sturdy, aggressive sometimes militant working class woman, and Rex Ingam (Lucky) showed once more the courage and tenacity of the racially abused Black man.

---

[1]Ruth Pearse, Press Release, 16 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

Marching Song was the most expensive production the Theatre Union had yet mounted. Its total production cost was $9,871.67. This was paid for by gifts and loans. Zelda Dorfman made the annual fund raising journey to Hollywood. Her transportation costs and commission came to $224 but she brought back $650 in donations. The four largest donors, giving $100 each, were Kenneth MacGowan, S.N. Behrman, Melvyn Douglas, and Clifford Odets.[1] Other general gift income came to $2,565.05. A special Marching Song account brought in an additional $2,316 in gifts, with a donation of $500 from Katherine Hepburn at the top of the list. In addition to these donations of $5,531.05, the Theatre Union raised $4,675 in loans from twenty-seven generous investors. Later, Margaret DeSilva, a discriminating supporter of good causes and a personal friend of Lawson, loaned another $500 to help the Theatre Union out of a tight spot. Even with all this money the Theatre Union could not breathe freely. Besides the Marching Song production costs, it had summer expenditures totaling $305.40, and costs accruing from the move and the long hiatus before opening of $1,961.12.[2]

In an effort to ease its financial condition, the Theatre Union again under took a season subscription campaign. The move to Broadway, The Executive Board hoped, could broaden the theatre's audience base. The drive, which began in October, sought to find 10,000 members from the carriage trade. Selling a top priced seat for each of the two productions it planned for that season for a combined cost of $2.15, the Theatre Union figured it could insure the run of both

---

[1]Financial Report, 1936-37.

[2]Ibid.

plays for four weeks.[1] The Board made this decision, investing $1,084.86 in the effort, because it realized that theatre parties alone could not keep the Theatre Union viable.[2] No matter how well organized the benefit party system was and how responsive the workers were, it was insufficient because it was subject to the appeal of the ongoing production. If a play was poorly received, there would be a decline in theatre party reservations for the next. A subscription would at least eliminate this vagary within a single season.[3]

In reaching out for Broadway's middle-class audience, however, the Theatre Union feared that it might alienate its Union Square regulars. To prevent this the Theatre made a special effort to inform workers that the change in location implied no other change. Thus, an article in the Daily Worker headed "Uptown? Yes. Upstage? No." assured its readers that the Theatre Union would remember its old friends by maintaining its same low admission scale and its same repertory of social plays.[4] In the prospectus issued that year the Board reiterated its commitment to its original ideals: "The Theatre Union feels the time is now ripe to move to Times Square where it will find a wider audience. A new location, but no change in policy. The Theatre Union remains the only professional theatre in America which CONSISTENTLY produces social plays.[5] The Theatre Union explained to its

---

[1]Larkin, "Becoming Acclimated," p. 7.

[2]Financial Report, 1936-37.

[3]"Theatre Union's Project," p. 2.

[4]Daily Worker, 8 October 1936, p. 7.

[5]Theatre Union Prospectus, [1936], Theatre Union File, Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center.

constituents that the move was a positive step, illustrating the strength of the company that had begun to build a broader audience which it could develop only in a more comfortable, more modern, more accessible uptown theatre.[1] The vouchsafed rationale for the move was growth and pioneering development. As if to emphasize this, the Theatre Union promised to reactivate the Studio and establish a permanent company.[2] Plans were announced to simultaneously run Life and Death of an American in alternating repertory with Marching Song.[3] None of these plans were ever implemented.

Marching Song opened on Wednesday, 17 February 1937, after a single preview on Monday as a New Masses benefit. The preview receipts amounted to $407.07. After expenses the Theatre Union netted $90.19 which reduced the production costs to $9,781.48.[4] The Broadway season up to that point had been particularly undistinguished. The 1936-37 season, in fact, saw the number of new offerings fall below 100 for the first time in recent memory, a decline which persisted throughout the decade. Opening the season in late August was a visit from the D'Oyly Carte Opera Company doing ten of Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas. Up to 17 February, the big hit of the season was Kaufman and Hart's spirited farce You Can't Take it With You, the winner of that year's Pulitzer Prize. Other major attractions thus far in the year included Jacques Deval's comedy of the Russian aristocracy in Paris, Tovarich;

---

[1]"Theatre Union's Project," p. 2.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Press Release, 27 February 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]Financial Report, 1936-37.

a string of nine one-act tid-bits by Noel Coward, Tonight at 8:30; a slick farce about college life by John Monks and Fred Finklehoffe, Bother Rat; Clare Booth's caustic examination of femininity, The Women; and Maxwell Anderson's commentary on the threat to rugged individualism in the modern world, High Tor, the winner of the Critic's Circle Award. Also noteworthy that season were two revivals of Shakespeare: Hamlet with John Gielgud and Richard II with Maurice Evans.

Up until the opening of Marching Song the season included seven plays with socially conscious themes. The first, was Sidney Kingsley's Ten Million Ghosts. Produced and directed by the author, it was a trite romance which scored munitions manufacturers on both sides for perpetuating war. It disappeared after eleven performances. The Group Theatre presented Johnny Johnson, their only production that season. Paul Green's drama set to music by Kurt Weill was a stylized treatment of the horror and insanity of war. Will Geer was featured in the Actor's Repertory Theatre production of E. P. Conkle's 200 Were Chosen. The drama, which documents the American colonization project at Matanuska, Alaska, included a "sit-down" strike by the former mid-western reliefers who were transported to the wilderness. Lillian Hellman's Days to Come, about labor-management strife in a quiet mid-western factory town, made a brief appearance in December. In January, the Theatre Guild offered But For The Grace of God by Leopold Atlas. Directed by Benno Schneider, this melancholy drama was an indictment of the wretchedness and exploitation of the big city's slum environments. The most sensational socially oriented play that year was John Moffitt's and Sinclair Lewis's It Can't Happen Here produced by the Federal Theatre Project on Broadway and simultaneously

in twenty other theatres across the country. This parable warned that a Nazi-style demagogue could suddenly take power in the United States. The last play, produced two weeks before Marching Song at the Forty-fourth Street Theatre below the Nora Bayes, was George Brewer Jr.'s Tide Rising. This melodrama focused on the labor-management dispute in a small mill town. The tide that is rising is the majority of those in the middle who are fed up with both sides.

Interest in Marching Song was given a boost by current events. The week before it opened, on 11 February, the United Auto Workers ended its long, acrimonious sit-down strike at General Motors' Fisher Body Number One Plant in Flint, Michigan. The strike had begun fourty-four days earlier at General Motors plants across the country. At its height it embraced fourteen states and 135,000 men.[1] General Motors workers were waging a battle for recognition of their union, the nascent United Auto Workers, headed by the Reuther Brothers. The battle for unionization was fought against all three giants of the auto industry--General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler--but in December 1936 General Motors, the largest, became the testing ground.

Aside from recognition, workers wanted relief from the evils of the speedup, grievance committees, a system of seniority, a forty-hour week, and time and a half for overtime.[2] Workers at General Motors earned less than $1,000 a year, were the victims of the relentless, merciless speedup of the moving belts, and were subjected to an intricate, wide-spread, efficient spy network which viciously squashed all ex-

---

[1]Wecter, Age of Great Depression, p. 114.

[2]Manchester, Glory and Dream, p. 156.

pressions of discontent. The tactic adopted by these slaves of the assembly line was the sit-down strike. This was not the first use in this country of this strike technique, but it was the most publicized. The sit-down strike was the ultimate threat to the sanctity of private property. The spectacle of workers coopting the company's machinery made industrialists livid with rage. Workers, however, found the sit-in a more effective tool than the picket line in their arsenal of weapons. The sit-in was safer than marching with signs in front of the plant where workers were exposed to the artillery and tear-gas of police, militia, and vigilantes. It also made it impossible for the company to undermine the strike by hiring scabs.

The General Motors strike started in Cleveland, but soon its vortex shifted to Flint, Michigan, the heartland of the auto industry. General Motors harnessed all the resources it could muster against the strike. Police and armed National Guard units were brought to the scene. Troops of undercover union busters were activated. General Motors obtained injuctions ordering evacuation from the plant from a judge who turned out to be a major stockholder in the company. The workers held fast throughout. When General Motors demanded that Michigan Governor Frank Murphy order a bayonet attack to expell the workers the issue came to a head. Murphy, weary of the long siege and regretting the blood already shed, refused. Finally, General Motors, its profits eaten away, capitulated. Auto workers, a collective David, had smitten the Goliath of big business using the sit-in as its sling shot. So effective was this strike maneuver that it spread like a brush fire to numerous and diverse industries. During that year alone 477 such

strikes, involving 398,117 workers, took place.[1]

Life's melodrama ran its course and though we may wonder how it would be reviewed in New York, we only know what the critics said about Marching Song. Once again, the press divided on ideological lines. With a Pavlovian reflexive response, Broadway critics rejected the play and leftist critics praised it. The first group evaluated it using the standards of traditional drama criticism; the second saw it as an indictment of the social system as well as a piece of drama.

The most serious complaint lodged by critics against Marching Song was that it was amorphous and cluttered. Critics faulted Lawson for a lack of self-discipline, claiming that his revolutionary zeal exceeded his craftsmanship. "Mr. Lawson is a playwright by indirection with a great many related things on his mind," explained Brooks Atkinson, "If he were a dramatist with a knack for the organic unities of theatrical expression, 'Marching Song' might well be a proletarian dramatic poem instead of a bewildering splutter in many directions."[2] Edith Isaacs likewise found the uncontrolled, centrifugal plot of the play vexing:

> If Marching Song did not continually try to go two ways or more at once, and with too much noise and too much insistence, it would have done its job better. Mr. Lawson does not believe in dramatic economy as a means to persuasion, which is his misfortune. He knows so many better than most how to take a dramatist's large canvas and fill it; it is too bad that he should almost invariably

---

[1]Bernstein, Turbulent Years (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 499-571; Manchester, Glory and Dream, pp. 153-156; Wecter, Age of Great Depression, pp. 112-115; Robert Goldston, The Great Depression (Greenwich, Connecticut; Fawcett Premier Book Publications, 1968), pp. 216-219.

[2]"John Howard Lawson's 'Marching Song' brings the Theatre Union to Broadway," New York Times, 18 February 1937, p. 18.

> spoil his own composition by too many separate red spots that will not focus.[1]

Other critics were less patient with the play's lack of focus. Douglas Gilbert, for example, thought of Lawson as more of a bookkeeper than a playwright, "setting down every item of evil wreaked upon the wretched warriors waging labor's right for recognition," to create an "encyclopedic summary of their hurts."[2] Others, too, found Marching Song's surfeit of detail in plot and theme aimless, meandering, undigested, and unsynthesized.[3]

Even those few critics who were sympathetic toward Lawson's intentions, finding some virtues in the play, were forced to recognize its most significant deficiency. Arthur Pollock, who claimed it was the best play the Theatre Union had yet done, ruefully observed,

---

[1]"Broadway to a National Theatre: Marching Song," Theatre Arts, April 1937, p. 265.

[2]Fine Cast Performs in 'Marching Song' John Howard Lawson's Play at Bayes Theatre An Indictment of Capitalism," World Telegram, 18 February 1937.

[3]Stark Young, "Left, Right and Wrong," New Republic, 17 March 1937, p. 166; Joseph Wood Krutch, "Strike Play," Nation, 27 February 1937, p. 248; Grenville Vernon. "Marching Song," Commoneal, 5 March 1937, p. 528; Richard Lockridge, "Marching Song; a Theatre Union Drama, Opens at the Bayes Theatre," Sun, 18 February 1937; Burns Mantle," 'Marching Song,' Theatre Union Takes Over Bayes Theatre for John Howard Lawson Drama, "Daily News, 18 February 1937; Wilella Waldorf, 'Marching Song' Staged by the Theatre Union: John Howard Lawson's Play Pictures the Organization of a Strike in Brimmerton, U.S.A., "Post, 18 February 1937; Robert Coleman," Labor's Sermon Draws Moral of Strike,": Daily Mirror, 18 February 1937; Richard Watts, "Marching Song," Herald Tribune, 18 February 1937.

"Mr. Lawson's aim is to write a symphony. Occasionally, it sounds like a medley."[1] In a subsequent examination of the play, he adds that Lawson "covers altogether too much ground in his longing to achieve a universal validity for his drama."[2] Eugene Burr lauded Marching Song as a stirring, beautifully written, often tremendously effective play but did not like how it "marches off in all directions" thus dissipating "its own effects by surging forward over too many terrains, by failing to husband its own attributes, by contenting itself with a cross-section that leaves all its play threads in the air."[3]

Another criticism leveled at Marching Song was that it was a melodrama whose plot was dishonestly contrived because its characters were schematized and unreal. This time it was Douglas Gilbert's turn to deliver this frequently sounded attack on proletarian plays, especially strike plays:

> As with all these leftist tub-thumpers, Mr. Lawson is so ennobled by his cause he forgets to visit similar virtue upon his plot. His business men are poltroons, his policemen arrant knaves, his strike-breakers bestoal sadists--all moving with diabolical intent toward further inquisitions upon the honest give-us-a-chance workmen, who are glorified as helpless slaves. [4]This is nonsense, and a dishonest bravura that ruins the play.

Others, like Coleman and Sedgwick, echoed these sentiments and Willela Waldorf asserted that even as melodrama the play is weak because it

---

[1]"The Theatre Union Presents John Howard Lawson's New Play, 'Marching Song,' at the Bayes Theatre," "Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 18 February 1937.

[2]Arthur Pollock, "Mr. Lawson Attempts A Bit Too Much," Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 28 February 1937.

[3]"Marching Song." Billboard, 27 February 1937.

[4]"Cast Performs Indictment," 18 February 1937.

"fails to pack a good old melodramatic wallop."[1]

Several critics noted that the play rather than being intensified by current events was upstaged by them. Thomas Dash said:

> To give all the details. . .would be equivalent to rehashing all the headlines of the day. As a matter of fact, that is the salient weakness of "Marching Song." It is reiterative and it is banal. It does not present any particularly novel or illuminating point of view. . . .There have been a dozen proletarian plays in recent years that covered much the same ground more probingly Lawson's drama does not add one iota to what has gone before.
>
> Besides the force of "Marching Song" has been discounted by the drama in the news headlines during the recent auto strike. This dessenter found the news dispatches from Flint and Detroit more dramatic than the first two talky and dullish acts of "Marching Song."[2]

John Anderson and Burns Mantle concurred.[3] They all found the play descriptive, more of the same exposition of conditions without any penetrating analysis of the whys. This becomes a significant weakness because without such insight the play fails to persuade, it fails, in other words, to "arouse an understanding partisanship."[4] That, after all, is the main goal of Lawson's proselytizing, homiletic drama. What it comes down to then is that Marching Song is simply what Krutch called a "revolutionary peptalk," of interest to a specialized audience of labor sympathizers who will never tire of hearing a recitation of the same litany of injustices.[5] On the other hand, notes Vernon,

---

[1]Coleman, "Labor's Sermon," 18 February 1937; Ruth Woodbury Sedgwick, "From G106-107," The Stage 14 April 1937, p. 78; Waldrof, "Play Pictures Organization," 18 February 1937.

[2]"Marching Song," Women's Wear Daily, 18 February 1937.

[3]John Anderson, "Embattled Strikers in New Play Mirrored in Recent Headlines," Evening Journal, 18 February 1937; Mantle, "Theatre Union Takes Over," 18 February 1937.

[4]Mantle, "Theatre Union Takes Over," 18 February 1937.

[5]"Strike Play," p. 249.

"Those who demand more balance, intellectual integrity, the deeper sense of character, suggestiveness and beauty of language, will look for this in vain."[1]

Part of the reason the play fails to persuade is that Lawson approached his theme with a monolithic certitude. He does not ask questions because he takes the answers for granted and assumes his audience will do so also. Though his certitude might inspire frenzy among hardcore labor supporters it leaves others unmoved. The problem is that for a play to engage the indifferent spectator, the playwright must open his heart and show the toil, and sometimes the pain and anguish, involved in moving from questions raised at the play's outset to conclusions arrived at its end. Joseph Wood Krutch makes this observation, attributing it to Lawson's ideological peregrinations:

> Before he embraced Communism he was too confused to write a really effective play; since his conversion he has been almost too clear. Knowing all the answers is, for a playwright, almost as bad as not knowing any. It is difficult to search for something throughout three acts when you know where it is all the time.[2]

Harold Clurman had virtually the same opinion when Lawson first showed him the manuscript of Marching Song. He felt that Lawson was motivated to write the play because of his "study, conviction and sense of duty." Clurman suggests that the working class milieu was foreign to Lawson's experience and that the playwright was more convincing when he wrote about the middle class.[3] Lawson came to the story of Marching Song

---

[1]"Marching Song," p. 528.

[2]"Strike Play," p. 249.

[3]Fervent Years, p. 187.

not by intuition and instinct but by deliberate, conscious choice. His purpose was to cut the cloth to fit his ideological needs. Consequently, the cloth is stiff and starchy.

The play's language underscores this point. Lawson unconsciously reveals his background with a heightened, poeticized speech pattern. The diction and cadences of these stout proletarian figures has more to do with the idiosyncracies of Clifford Odets's conversationalists than it has to do with the patterns of street talk. The result is oddly incongruous and fatuous. Richard Lockridge comments:

> And there is always the problem of Mr. Lawson's rhetoric. He is easily captivated by fine writing, particularly if it is a little salted with symbolism, and he puts a lot of it into the mouths of his proletarians, where it achieves resounding falseness. Negro laborers, union stenographers, labor leaders, foremen, newsboys, striking automobile workers--all are similarly given to high-form outbursts of excessively minor poetry, and when they have these moments it is impossible to tell them apart. The gentle rise and fall of the cliche lulls much of "Marching Song" from its purpose, and weakens its propoganda.[1]

The reaction from the leftist press was uniformly positive. All segments of the widely divergent left were united with their endorsement of Lawson's drama. Joseph Shipley of the New Leader considered Marching Song the author's best play since Processional because it exposed a cancerous sore in our industrial civilization."[2] John Herling, Mary Fox's husband writing for the Socialist Call, affirmed, "'Marching Song' is lively and bitter and it has quick beauty and steady power. With little exaggeration of language it brings to the Broadway

---

[1]"'Marching Song' Opens," 18 February 1937.

[2]"The Iron's Hot," New Leader, 27 February 1937.

theatre the sordidness of living and the aspirations for a better life among the workers of Middletown, U.S.A."[1]

Charles E. Dexter of the Daily Worker was equally enthusiastic about Lawson's strike play of "Exploited Workers and Exploiting Bosses." For him, Marching Song was an impeccable proletarian drama, a dream come true:

> "Marching Song" is a great show as well as an impressive social drama. There is not a dull moment in it and many an episode that will stir you to anger, rouse you to action, melt you to sympathetic tears, tickle you to laughter and, finally, urge you to action. For this is not only a great American play but today's American Reality, as fresh as the headlines of your newspaper (always provided you boycott Hearst).[2]

To the charge that the play was "encyclopedic," the left retorted that it is precisely that which gives it its power and meaning. The play, says Alexander Taylor, speaks for itself and must be judged according to its own lights: "Well, the important question is not whether it interests or bores its audiences, whether it moves a relatively backward auditor to a relatively progressive position."[3] John Gassner urges that we suspend the norms of drama criticism in order to recognize the raw vibrancy of Lawson's work:

> Be conventional standards Lawson's play seems a crowded drama, tantalizing because it fails to develop any individual story, melodramatic because it piles evil upon evil, and suffering

---

[1]"Lawson's Drama is a Stirring Picture of Auto-Sit-Down Strike, Socialist Call, 27 February 1937.

[2]"'Marching Song' Vital as Today's Newspapers," Daily Worker, 19 February 1937, p. 7.

[3]"The Theatre Union's 'Marching Song' and Ibsen," New Masses, 9 March 1937, p. 37.

> upon suffering. Actually, the effect of the play is that of a pillar of fire. Lawson has written a stormy dramatic poem, throbbing with anguished excitement.[1]

Finally, Nathanial Buchwald states that the play's form illuminates and corroborates its theme. The protagonist of Marching Song, he says, is the working class. To realize the "character" and "truth" of this protagonist, Lawson is forced to diverge from standard dramaturgical practice:

> "Marching Song" is not a "well-made-play" according to conventional standards. Any journeyman of commercial playmaking will tell you that the structure is "loose" and that the author is trying to say too many things at the same time. But what the dramatic critics of the metropolitan press have missed is the unifying mood and the organic spiritual unity of the play. The various episodes, while structurally not related to a single dramatic line of action, are perfectly related to the drama of mass heroism. It is indeed difficult to make a whole class of protagonist of a drama without making the protagonist an abstraction.[2]

Those benighted critics of the "metropolitan press" were not only uninformed they were prejudiced to boot. As with previous Theatre Union plays and other proletarian drama, the left defended the play by trying to discredit the opinions of the daily critics. Their views, we were told, were jaded, sectarian, myopic. Charles E. Dexter, in the hectoring manner that was by now standard, led the attack. The jaundiced bourgeois critics, he said, refuse to admit the play's merits because secretly they know its message is true: "For the first time in theatrical history, certain dramatic critics are yowling because

---

[1] "Wings Over Broadway," New Theatre and Film, April 1937, p. 20.

[2] "'Marching Song' Finest Labor Play Says Critic: Buchwald Calls Lawson's Drama the Most Eloquent and Poetic Dramatization of the Class in Our Time," Daily Worker, 2 March 1937, p. 7.

a play has too much good stuff in it. . . .and it is my opinion that the critics' qualms are due to their dread that John Howard Lawson's incisive attack on capitalism will be a hit."[1] A week later, Dexter followed this frontal attack with a more precisely aimed missile at Douglas Gilbert. In a scathing, no-holds-barred article, Dexter denounced Gilbert as a "fanatic about the status quo," a blind, reactionary, effete aesthete who insists that getting "excited about injustice" has no place in the theatre.[2] The argument was a bit worn and even the rhetoric seemed to smolder more than burn. Gilbert merely acknowledged Dexter's article, opening his column to two letters written by readers dissenting from his views.[3]

In at least one area there was some general agreement between the left press and the other critics. No matter what their views of the play, most everyone affirmed that the production was skillfully presented. Even Douglas Gilbert admitted that the acting was accomplished by a fine cast who deliver its Phillipics with a gloat."[4] Others said that the acting was effective, adroit, and convincing.[5] The critics most frequently remembered and admired Rex Ingram's dignity and strength in his

---

[1]"Lawson's Play Carries Truth of America's Industrial War," Daily Worker, 20 February 1937, p. 7.

[2]"Fanatics and a Sense of Humor and Douglas Gilbert's Ideas," Daily Worker, 26 February 1937, p. 7.

[3]"Critic is Belabored by 'Marching Song,'" World Telegram, 8 March 1937.

[4]"Cast Performs Indictment," 18 February 1937.

[5]Waldorf, "Play Pictures Organization," 18 February 1937; Anderson, "Embattled Strikers," 18 February 1937; Isaacs, "Broadway to National," p. 266.

portrayal of Lucky. Grover Burgess and Martin Wolfson were also identified for their compelling performances. Only one lead, Frieda Altman, seemed to falter in her rendition.[1]

Even though Lem Ward shepherded the production to its opening night, Anthony Brown received the kudos for its direction. The direction we learn was "sharp and clarifying," possessed "unusual power and effectiveness," was successful with the ensemble scenes, and was smooth in its timing of exists and entrances.[2] The most lauded production element was Howard Bay's setting. It was praised for its beauty and functionalism. It was called brilliant, magnificent, vivid, and beautiful.[3] Gassner and Atkinson concurred that the setting also explained and unified the action.[4] The "Spotlight Department" of Vogue magazine chose it as the best stage setting of the 1936-37 season.[5]

After the reviews came out the Theatre Union made some effort to promote the production, but less vigorously than in earlier seasons. The thrust of this campaign was to stress the topicality of the play.

---

[1]Gassner, "Wings," p. 20.

[2]Anderson, "Embattled Strikers," 18 February 1937; Gilbert W. Gabriel, "'Marching Song' Mr. Lawson Gives the Theatre Union Its Year's First Play," American, 18 February 1937; Gassner, "Wings," p. 20; Coleman, "Labor's Sermon," 18 February 1937.

[3]Anderson, "Embattled Strikers," 18 February 1937; Dexter "Vital as Newspaper," p. 7; Whitney Bolton, "John Howard Lawson Redeems Self in Masterful Play at Theatre Union," Morning Telegraph, 19 February 1937; Ibee., "Marching Song," Variety, 24 February 1937.

[4]Gassner "Wings" p. 20; Atkinson, "Lawson's 'Song,'" p. 18.

[5]Press Release, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

Albert Maltz wrote a long, bristling account of his first hand observations in Flint, Michigan, showing how the events of Brimmerton parallel those of Flint.[1] Rex Ingram, appearing with Lem Ward on WEVD, referred to his recent trip through Arkansas, Alabama, and Georgia to claim that the situations of Marching Song are not exaggerated.[2] The Theatre Union also submitted, to the usually cooperative New York Post, copy for an editorial which related the current sit-down strikes in the Five and Ten Cent Stores to the central theme of Marching Song.[3] The Post politely declined.[4]

Attendance was low. Workers' groups and other Theatre Union regulars responded to requests for theatre parties. Burns Mantle was right when he said, "if you feared that with this change from the Civic Repertory and Fourteenth Street the Theatre Union would also try out a new high hat, or perhaps a pair of spats, your fears were groundless, the Theatre Union is still 125 percent for the workers."[5] The problem was that others were disinterested. The subscription effort was a dismal failure, garnering only 779 subscribers.[6] Box office sales were low, no doubt due to the reviews, and the revenue from group sales only covered half of the weekly running expenses. On 25 February, one week after opening night, Lem Ward wrote to Myla

---

[1]Marching Song: Flint, Michigan and Brimmerton, U.S.A.," New Theatre and Film, March 1937, pp. 13, 56.

[2]Script for Broadcast, 14 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[3]Editorial copy, 15 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[4]Isidore Feinstein to Ruth Pearse, 22 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

[5]"Theatre Union Takes Over," 18 February 1937.

[6]Financial Report, 1936-37.

Jo Closser, a Queens resident who had made a hundred dollar investment loan to the Marching Song Special Account, to inquire if she knew of anyone who could help the Theatre Union off-set a $2,000 shortage that week.[1] Ward was certain that if they could hold on another week or two, word of mouth would increase attendance.

A month later, the Theatre Union was still struggling. It had given up the idea of running Life and Death of an American in repertory with Marching Song; Lawson's play would run indefinitely and Sklar's was postponed until next season.[2] To maintain appearances, the Theatre Union reported that it was ready to plunge into the new season since for the first time in its existence it had more suitable scripts under consideration than it could hope to produce. There were Sklar's play, a new play about the steel industry by Paul Peters, Iron City, and a play about child labor by Francis Faragoh, Sun Up To Sun Down.[3]

Actually the Theatre Union was listing badly. The first four and a half weeks of the Marching Song run showed losses. The theatre was $2,111.83 behind its running expenses.[4] Then came Holy Week in which performances were suspended but the rent was still being paid. Maltz and Peters sent out an S.O.S. to contributors, friends, and subscribers appealing for contributions of any size.[5] It was too late. The Theatre Union withdrew as producers of Marching Song 10 April 1937.

---

[1]Lem Ward to Myla Jo Closser, 25 February 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin; Financial Report, 1936-37.

[2]New York Times, 26 March 1937.

[3]"So This is Broadway," World Telegram, 29 March 1937.

[4]Financial Report, 1936-37.

[5]A.M. and P.P. to Friends, 29 March 1937, Maltz Papers, Wisconsin.

The eight week run had an operating loss of $2,937.37. Added to the production costs, the total loss on Marching Song came to $11,678.79.[1]

Marching Song continued, however, after the Theatre Union's withdrawal, limping along for another week. When the Executive Board had posted closing notices, about thirty company members applied to Actors Equity for permission to assume the management of the production and to operate it on a profit-sharing basis. For the first time in several seasons, Equity agreed to such an agreement. Under the chairmanship of Theodore Corday, an executive committee of seven took charge of the Marching Song Acting Company. Since many in the cast were Theatre Union veterans, they dispensed with an administrative staff and took over the chores of promotion and audience development. With this and other austerities they managed to trim the weekly nut to less than half of the $3,700 the Theatre Union had had to live with.[2]

For the remainder of the season the Theatre Union was publicly silent, but the inevitable was becoming apparent. On 23 June the die was cast. At a meeting at Zelda Dorfman's apartment, the Executive Board voted to disband the Theatre Union.[3] It was a moment of sadness and emptiness. Samuel Friedman wept.[4] Manuel Gomez remembers a "kind of desolate feeling. Desolate professionally, desolate personally,

---

[1]Financial Report, 1936-37.

[2]"Acting as a Business," Herald Tribune, 11 April 1937; "'Marching Song' Cast Enters Lists as Producer," World Telegram, 10 April 1937.

[3]Minutes of the Theatre Union Board, 23 June [1937], loaned to author by Adelaide Walker.

[4]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

as an individual, that something has come to an end and it had come to an end with a whisper."[1]

The official announcement was made at the end of August with the following terse epitaph:

> If (the Theatre Union) hopes, however, that it has contributed something in the way of management and content to the American Theatre. In officially dissolving, it feels that special recognition is owed to Charles R. Walker, whose work was indespensible in founding and sustaining the theatre; to Victor Wolfson, who was business manager, director and author for it; to Margaret Larkin, its representative and secretary; to the playwrights and directors who worked under limited funds to make its plays effective, and to the many friends who gave it their money, time, thought and labor.
>
> It is the Theatre Union's hope that its aim of an inexpensive playhouse for the great mass of the people will go into the American theatre tradition.[2]

---

[1]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[2]"Gossip of the Rialto," New York Times, 29 August 1937, sec. 10, p. 1.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEMISE OF THE THEATRE UNION: SOME ASSESSMENTS

Why did the Theatre Union come to an end? Why did it end when it did? Could it have continued? There is no definitive answer to these questions. One single event or reason was not responsible for the Theatre Union's demise. There are, of course, obvious factors that immediately come to mind: for example, the twin albatrosses of lack of money and of plays. The difficulties of raising money and finding good plays plagued the Theatre Union from its inception. Yet despite such fundamental problems the theatre managed to endure, sometimes with startling results, through four seasons. In fact, as Michael Gordon observed, "The compelling question is how did it stay together as long as it did?. . . The wonder is its survival, not its demise."[1]

But to explain why it ended--to probe its weaknesses and limitations--is also to understand its strengths and its virtues. The dissolution of the Theatre Union was due to a confluence of economic, artistic, personal and historic reasons. Within this complex of factors it is possible to distinguish between internal conditions and external circumstances. Internal conditions are those factors over which the

---

[1]Gordon, 14 July 1978.

theatre exercised some control or which directly impinged on its affairs. These include the fiscal status, the repertory and the choice of plays, the decision to move uptown, the theatre's ability to organize its audience, the dispersion of interest of the Theatre Union's organizers and governing body and political dissension within the Executive Board. External circumstances are historical factors that were beyond the control of the Theatre Union but which affected its program. Foremost among these was the creation of the Federal Theatre Project and the greater social consciousness in play producing which it brought about. Also important was the change in the country's political climate and with it the collapse of the worker's theatre movement.

The Theatre Union's chief difficulty, as we have seen repeatedly, was its inability to achieve economic solvency. The accumulated deficit of the first three seasons coupled with the loss from Marching Song must be recognized as the immediate cause of the theatre's cessation. "We couldn't pay our bills," says Maltz, "No one would carry us, a normal bankruptcy."[1]

The figures tell the story. At the end of the fourth season, the Theatre Union had a total debt of $16,034.48.[2] Loans, some of them two years old, were outstanding. Vendors who had supplied goods and services for Mother and Bitter Stream had yet to be paid. The first season was the only one in which the Theatre Union finished in the

---

[1]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[2]Financial Report, 1936-37.

black; it ended with $8,071.86 more in receipts (plus gifts) than in expenses.[1] Otherwise each season ended with an excess of expenses over receipts: $10,970.31 in 34-35; $7,331.53 in 35-36; $5,364.95 in 36-37.[2]

The same depressing picture emerges if we examine the net loss or profit of each production. Only Stevedore, in both its initial run and its revival, made a profit. Of the others, Sailors of Catarro came close to breaking even and it was the last production, with the exception of Let Freedom Ring, which could be considered a box office success. After it, the Theatre Union met with disaster after disaster: Black Pit lost $7,247.62; Mother lost $9,272.43; Bitter Stream lost $8,917.36; Marching Song lost $11,678.79.[3]

By the end of the first two years the Theatre Union was beginning to adjust to its economic Catch-22. They were producing plays which were popular enough to off-set their running expenses. But the low ticket price policy kept them from repaying their production costs. Their success with gifts and contributions on the other hand, made it possible to mount new plays. At best this was a tenuous hand-to-mouth existence. The series of failures in the third and fourth seasons led to the fiscal dead end. "Money for these productions had never been easy to get," says Peters, "but now it probably just vanished."[4]

---

[1]Financial Report, 1933-34.

[2]Financial Reports, 1933-34; 1934-35; 1935-36; 1936-37.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Peters, 20 August 1978.

Why this series of failures at the end? Mother, Let Freedom Ring, Bitter Stream, and Marching Song were all generally decent plays, well put together, with strong messages. Therein may lie the problem. The message was strong but it had been broadcast before, probably with greater cogency, in the first group of plays. One week after the Theatre Union's death notice, Brooks Atkinson delivered a eulogy in which, among other reasons, he suggests that the Theatre Union was handicapped by its repertory: "for the fact seems to be that proletarian drama had difficulty in escaping from a formula. As a topic for the drama, labor insurgence is not abundantly endowed with variation."[1] True or not in a general sense this was certainly true of the Theatre Union Repertory. In Theatre Union plays the faces changed, the locale was different, the situation was altered, but the dialogue and the message were always the same. The formula utilized in Theatre Union dramas was succinctly identified by Nathaniel Buchwald in his review of Marching Song. It is simple and direct: "We suffered, we fought, we won."[2] This paradigm appears in every one of the Theatre Union's plays, any one plot of which could be summarized as follows: In the first act conditions of oppression are established--the machinations of industrialists secretly preparing for war; discrimination and race hatred; maltreatment of sailors; the hopeless unemployment of miners

---

[1]"Hail and Farewell: The Theatre Union Gives Way to the Federal and Mercury Theatres," New York Times, 5 September 1937, sec. 10, p. 1.

[2]"Finest Labor Play," p. 7.

caused by the blacklist; the exploitation and torment of factory workers; the exploitation and torment of southern mill workers; the Fascist abuse and harassment of the Italian peasantry; the exploitation and torment of midwestern automobile factory workers.

We are driven to a sense of outrage by particular examples--First Amendment rights are squelched; a black man is framed for a fictitious rape because he needles the bosses; the inept mistakes of the military leadership is paid for by the enlisted man; the treachery and deceit of the mine superintendent who denies the company doctor to his own kin; the brutality of the Czarist secret police; the danger of the speedup, the inhumanity of child labor and arbitrary wage cuts; cheating peasants out of the last meager resource for their sustenance; callous evictions, child prostitution and dispiriting relief lines.

The class nature of the struggle is emphasized through the action which revolves around a group--liberal intellectuals, black dock workers, sailors, miners, factory workers, mill workers, unemployed auto workers--which is symbolic of a class. One member is vividly portrayed to induce audience identification. Sometimes this protagonist is a resolute leader of his people who is portrayed as a savior/marty --Lonnie Thompson, Franz Rasch, Kirk McClure. At other times the protagonist is a simple man or woman, a waverer plagued with doubts or an individualist blind to the demands of class solidarity--Pete Owens, Joe Kovarsky, Pelegea Vlassova, John McClure, Berardo, Pete Russell. These figures are the victims of painful dilemmas until their social consciousness is stimulated and they are converted to the cause.

In most of the plays, especially those with a converted hero, there is the character of the informed, often charismatic strike leader/ union organizer--Walter McCracken, Lem Morris, Tony Lakavitch, Pavel Vlassova and his friends, the Stranger, Bill Anderson. He is the pivotal character who articulates the source of the group's problem and impels them to take action against the oppressors. At the point in the play where the need to act is strongest, the hero or his mentor delivers a stinging exhortation to the group admonishing their reluctance to fight, spelling out the direness of their plight, and/or leading them to the picket line.

The antagonist in this struggle is also a representative of his class. He is the boss, the manipulator of power. He is self-serving, seeking only to enrich himself or enlarge his dominion and strengthen his control. Sometimes he is intelligent, sophisticated, suave--John Andrews, the Captain, Chester Wentworth. Most often, though, he is sly, corrupt, deceitful, and brutal, not the ultimate power but its henchmen, a mermidon of exploitation, a simple executioner--Walcott, Prescott, the Czarist Inspector, the Fascist Inspector, Binks.

The action directly or indirectly involves some strike or mass protest. It is the means through which the oppressed group locks horns with its oppressors. The strike becomes the expression and focal point of the central need of the group--prevent war, unite black and white dock workers, oppose tyrannical leadership, make the mines safe, spread the revolutionary philosophy, fight layoffs and wage cuts, protect property, recognize the union. It is interesting to note that in five of the Theatre Union's eight plays there are scenes in strike offices or union headquarters and in six the ubiquitous mimeo-

graph machine, the most important of all strike paraphernalia, makes an appearance or is referred to.

The stress and strain of the struggle leads to an emotional crisis which is marked by conflict and open violence. The resolution of the crisis is always favorable to the oppressed group. Sometimes there is an outright victory which serves as a stirring example of the fortitude of the workers--in Stevedore the black dock workers prevail with the help of the white union; in Marching Song the auto strikers win with the help of the electrical workers (victory demands solidarity). More frequently though there is only an implied victory or the beginnings of one-in Peace on Earth Pete Owens is executed as an anti-war demonstration builds offstage; in The Sailors of Catarro Rasch and fellow mutineers are led off as Sepp tucks their flag away and says, "Next time better"; in Black Pit Joe Kovarky is exiled for his heinous betrayal but the strike begins; in Mother a mass demonstration with an inexorable momentum concludes the play; in Let Freedom Ring Kirk's murder brings unity to the mill workers; in Bitter Stream Berardo's sacrifice brings about the first phase of the peasants' fledgling militancy.

To a great extent, the sameness of the Theatre Union plays is a weakness not only of the Theatre Union repertory but of proletarian literature in general. The breadth of subject matter, as Brooks Atkinson observed, is limited because the purpose of this type of literature is narrowly circumscribed. Its purpose is to enlighten and persuade audiences of prevailing social ills. It seeks to activate its adherents by activating their biases or propagandize others by spreading these biases to them. To accomplish this efficiently it hews to a narrow

perspective: conditions are bad, sympathetic workers suffer at the hands of antipathetic bosses, they revolt, they win. The same formula appeared with numbing regularity in the proletarian novel. Sinclair Lewis sardonically comments on this:

> But a surprising number of new talents plod up the same dreary Communist lane, and produce, all of them, the following novel: There is a perfectly nasty community--mining or pants-making or sharecroping--but in it one Sir Galahad who, after a snifter of Karl Marx, rushes out, gathers the local toilers into an organization of rather vague purposes, and after that everything will be lovely, nobody will have hayfever again, nor the deacon ever wink at the widow.[1]

The repetition, one might add, was almost necessary. If the purpose is education then repetition, as every good pedagogue knows, is part of the method. We can compare the social protest play to the television commercial. Both try to sell their audience something; the former a message, the latter a product. Both do so by repeatedly reminding us how much we need what they are selling. This is the source of the recurrent battle between the left wing critics who defended Theatre Union plays and the bourgeois critics who attacked them. The first group said that the message was important and the public had to learn. The second said that art is made numb by repetition and that education is better accomplished through a lecture or a pamphlet.

Theatre Union plays not only followed the formula of proletarian literature, they followed the pattern of the simple melodrama. The world of these plays was a world of polarities. A bold, clear line (the picket line?) was drawn between the characters. On one side

---

[1]Cited by Rideout, Radical Novel, p. 198.

were the workers who stood for all that is right. Opposing them, on the other side, were the bosses, the profit mongers of modern capitalism, who stood for everything that is wrong. None of the characters, good guys or bad guys, are ever troubled by inner conflicts, by real doubts. Not a single one of the villains, even the kind-hearted, avuncular Warren Winkle of Marching Song, is ever troubled by any pangs of conscience. The dilemmas that face the worker protagonists are simple ones: Should they be loners or joiners? Should they yield to the temptations dangled before them by the capitalists or should they remain loyal to their proletarian brethren? The choice springs not from the inner nature of the character, but from external circumstances.

The action of each of the plays, in fact, turns on victimization. The innocent worker is unjustly abused, exploited by the boss figure. He is trapped within a system, created by the nefarious bosses, which dictates that the rich shall multiply their prosperity while the meek shall inherit poverty and suffering. His only recourse, each play asserts, is to revolt. But for this defiance to succeed the worker must develop social awareness, unity and solidarity. Achieving these values, the victims will free themselves from the shackles of oppression.

The plots of the Theatre Union plays have all the structural ingredients of melodrama. The action is swift as it moves from incident to incident. Villains pursue heroes. Fighting and violent death are often an integral part of the play's suspense as worker and boss clash in the battle for dominance. If the bosses are stronger and look as if they will triumph, fear not, for other workers or their allies will come to the rescue in the last minute, just before the log slips under the whirring blade, as it were. These dramatic tactics combine to arouse the emotions of the spectator.

The repertory of the Theatre Union (including Brecht's Mother in the Theatre Union's treatment of it) played on the audience's emotions. The sharply defined characters made identification with and empathy for the hero workers instantaneous. It was easy, too, to revile and detest the villain bosses. The inhuman persecution of the blameless proletarians stirred torrents of indignation among audience members. As we have seen, reports of each performance tell of hisses and foot stomping from the house accompanying every outrage and injustice perpetrated on the stage. The crisis of the plays was designed to produce an emotional catharsis. The audience was sent into a rage which was expected to carry over into action outside the theatre which would once and for all purge the world of its societal cruelties.

It is natural that Theatre Union plays should adopt the mode of melodrama. For one thing, its founders and supporters stated over and over again that the Theatre Union was to be a theatre for the workers, for the ninety percent of the population which was too poor to attend the Broadway theatre and would not want to even if it could because Broadway spoke in a foreign language. The Theatre Union was to speak for the masses in a voice they could understand. The legacy of melodrama, of course, is the legacy of theatre's original mass art. In the nineteenth century it was the foremost theatre for the populace. It was bold, direct, uncomplicated, easily comprehensible and entertaining.

It was also fulfilling, which brings us to the second reason. Melodrama is reassuring in that it affirms basic moral and ethical truths. The strict dichotomy of characters and the unambiguous ending brought a sense of satisfaction and peace. There was order and justice

in the world, it proclaimed. The virtuous are rewarded, the bad are punished. The Theatre Union's protest plays provided the same hopeful world view. Those who are right, namely the workers, will be rewarded with victory. Those who are wrong will have to adjust to a new and more equitable social order.

Finally, melodrama is inherently didactic. Its lack of equivocation in structure contributes to its tendentious purpose. Traditional melodrama seeks to inculcate standards of morality. Protest plays seek to inculcate a particular political ideology. The use of melodrama to champion political reform or to bring enlightenment to social problems is not new. Uncle Tom's Cabin forged the crusade for abolition. In this sense--a melodrama crusading for equal rights--it is the progenitor of Stevedore.

The weakness of melodrama being used to educate people about the necessity for social reform is that it presupposes a partiality toward that view to begin with. Those opposed to that thesis are rarely persuaded to change their minds. The plays fail to convince, they are one-sided, the cards are stacked. Polemics trample persuasion. These people walk away feeling cheated. The play's message, they say was self-evident. It lacked pith. It demonstrated only that capitalists are ruthless, poverty is pathetic, strikes are brutal affairs and injustice is rampant.

One reason why the Theatre Union was unable to emerge from the rut of the formula play was the orientation and intent of the people who comprised its Executive Board, the group in charge of determining the repertory. According to Sklar, the Board was composed of "people who were limited in their theatre experience and didn't have the

theatrical imagination to see how far you could go and what direction you could go. It was safe to do the formula thing of conditions are lousy, you go on strike, you win or you lose the strike. . . . There was a failure of imagination, a catastrophic one."[1]

Seven of the original sixteen Board members were would-be playwrights. The others were all novices to the theatre, interested more in political action than in stage action. Walker, appraising the Theatre Union from a distance of two years, acknowledges this imbalance as a source of difficulty.

> Few Theatre Union plays, however, except "Stevedore," achieved the organic theatrical distinction of, say, a Welles revival, or the productions of the WPA's "Living Newspaper." This was partly because the Union was pioneering in a new technique but more basically, I believe, because it lacked talent and carried a topheavy load of organizers and playwrights on its governing board.[2]

No theatre people were included on the Board until the last season and the Theatre Union never had the benefit of a Philip Moeller, a Lee Strasberg, a Harold Clurman, or an Orson Welles. Moreover it didn't really want such a theatre genius. From the beginning its interest was not in the theatre as an art, an end in itself, but the theatre as a platform, a means of reaching the constituency of the country's underprivileged. Michael Blankfort articulated the theatre's guiding principle in 1934: "We are less interested in new artistic 'merits' of our plays than we are in making them true and right for our audience of workers."[3]

---

[1]Sklar, 14 July 1978.

[2]"Theatre on the Left," Nation, 24 June 1939, p. 731.

[3]"Behind Scenes," p. 5.

The Board was shortsighted about the variety and scope of the plays it chose. It missed several opportunities for doing new plays which deviated from the formula. For example, Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead was rejected because it seemed too experimental.[1] Albert Maltz admits that the musical revue Parade and the "multi-media" drama Life and Death of an American, two plays which he originally voted down, were good plays and should have been tried. "I think we were a little too caught in a certain mold and not imaginative enough," he realizes today.[2] The mold was probably also responsible for the rejection of Archibald Macleish's verse drama Panic, which Adelaide Walker read and wanted to do.[3] Gomez even speculates that because of Odets's close association with the Theatre Union at that time, the Theatre Union could have had Waiting For Lefty if it had gone after it. But due to its imaginative inertia it did not do so.[4] The lack of any theatrical imagination also precluded the possibility of opening up the repertory by reviving old classics with a contemporary slant like the Julius Caesar of Orson Welles. Herb Kline had suggested that workers' theatres emulate the Soviet theatre in this respect, especially since good new plays were hard to come by.[5]

Another reason for the sameness of the theatre's repertory is the parochial nature of the Theatre Union's policies. The Theatre

---

[1]Sklar, 18 July 1978.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[3]Walker, 9 September 1978.

[4]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[5]"Writing for Workers Theatre," p. 23.

Union was avowedly political. It stressed in its plays a definite political attitude or "line." The Theatre Union, in contradistinction to the Group Theatre, placed the accent mark on the political content of its plays. Michael Gordon explains:

> We all felt that social consciousness was an important part of the theatre; the Group would never have done a play with a wrong or wicked thesis. But they never worried about a 'line,' about whether a play was defeatist or negative, which were considerations in the deliberations of the Theatre Union people. In the Group we were really socially conscious rather than political.[1]

Not only, therefore, did the plays follow a formula, but the formula always led to the same conclusion.

A further complication was the Theatre Union's special need to propagate the political platform of the United Front. To avoid offending either the Communists or the Socialists, the plays gingerly straddled a narrow political fence. The so-called method of "collective criticism" insured that the "right elements" were enhanced and unhelpful points were weeded out. This elicited complaints that Theatre Union plays were blended, homogenized, "pre-digested." Lee Simonson, a self-designated "bourgeois liberal," was sympathetic to the Theatre Union's ideals to the point of considering its failure "nothing short of a calamity." In the spirit of supportiveness, he offered some constructive criticism:

> My hunch is that you--and by you I mean what the Theatre Union typifies--are too concerned about being Marxian and impeccably orthodox in everything you present. And by the time a script has

---

[1]Gordon interview with Jay Williams.

> had a couple of orthopedic operations performed, been disinfected, deloused and shot with a couple of anti-toxins and serums, it has the strength of a convalescent and nothing more.
> . . . . . .
> My point is that if the united front is to be anything more than a dress parade, the left wing thinking presented will have to be less superficial, naive, pre-set and less orthodox in its adherence to fixed alternatives. If we can be objective, disinterested, analytical and soundly critical of the real issues involved, we may get somewhere. Otherwise we won't.[1]

The problem was that the Theatre Union by its very nature could not be "objective, disinterested, analytical." From its inception right through to its end it was partisan, tendentious, prepossessed.

Finding good social plays was difficult enough, finding good social plays with precisely the limited goals of the Theatre Union was almost impossible. It is no wonder then that four of the seven plays originally produced by the Theatre Union (leaving out Let Freedom Ring because it was a transfer) were written by Board members and two others were adapted by Board members. Mid-way in the Theatre Union's career the suspicion arose in theatre circles that the Union was a closed shop, a tight little coterie which admitted no outside talent. True or not, the rumor discouraged playwrights from submitting their work to the Theatre Union. It is interesting to note that with the advent of the Federal Theatre, the script famine disappeared as a relatively large number of social protest plays were produced. Jerome Moross, trying to understand why the Theatre Union shot up like a rocket and then precipitously died, bluntly states: "I do think the Theatre Union started as a group of friends and when their fertility was over

---

[1]Lee Simonson to Michael Blankfort, 21 December 1935, pp. 4-5, Blankfort Papers, Special Collection, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.

the Theatre Union was over."[1]

The foreclosure of the Civic Repertory Theatre was, of course, circumstantial and not the choice of the Theatre Union. But the decision to relocate uptown in the heart of the detested Broadway was a serious, albeit secondary, factor in the demise of the group. The move cost money, to be sure. Office space had to be rented and life was generally more expensive under the glittering lights of the Great White Way. But the real cost was ineffable. In a sense, the Theatre Union, despite disclaimers and efforts to the contrary, lost its identity. Its home was in Union Square. There it was part of a cultural environment where social thinking and activism were common. The ambience sustained it. Transplanting it to Broadway, not to mention being tucked away on the upper level of a building accessible only by elevator, cast suspicion on the theatre's significance and its ability to carry on its mission.

The move uptown touched off some criticism of the Theatre Union's shortcomings with regard to organizing workers' audiences: "with a tremendous audience already existing in New York, and a still greater one potentially awaiting them, the Theatre Union has not achieved any actual audience organization of a type that would bring their supporters close to their problems."[2] Ben Compton suggests that closer

---

[1] Moross, 29 June 1978.

[2] Ben Compton, "Facts and the Left Theatre," Daily Worker 3 January 1937, p. 13.

and broader contact with the mainstay of its audience would have explained the necessity for the move uptown and nullified the criticism that the Theatre Union was a "closed corporation with no room artistically for new talents." Compton implies here that these two factors were responsible for the dwindling interest in the Theatre Union. Compton is diplomatic in his reproof, stressing how the theatre has "overcome terrific problems" already. However, he insists that the theatre remains limited without the necessary and healthy contact it should have with its audience at all times. He recommends that the Theatre Union improve its public relations by holding regular forums at which audience members can share their views of the plays with the artistic leadership of the theatre, creating mobile troupes to perform at union halls and settlement houses and reinstituting the studio so that new talent could be trained.[1]

Compton's essay raises the question of what indeed were the theatre's priorities with regard to audience? Certainly labor groups and workers were the prime target. Sylvia Regan's tireless work with theatre parties and the long list of political organizations, trade union groups, labor clubs that repeatedly reserved seats for performances testifies to that. Moreover, Executive Board members never tired of insisting that their theatre was devoted to the workers. As late as spring of 1937, Albert Maltz, speaking in Detroit to members of the Contemporary Theatre, stated unequivocably that a social theatre must

---

[1]Ibid.

find its base support amongst "the vast audience of the labor movement."[1] But this audience had its limitations. It was less affluent than the middle- and upper-class audiences that went uptown. Ticket prices had to be lower and this had an adverse impact on the finances of the theatre. It was also not habitually a theatregoing group. Therefore, the Theatre Union could only muster enough support for an average ten to twelve week run. The Theatre Union was caught in a vise. Once worker support waned the play had to close, leaving no surplus fund left to pay for a new production.

To avert this cycle, a strong effort was made to gain the patronage of the "carriage trade." This succeeded only in bringing more criticism down on the heads of the theatre's directors. From the second season on, first under the direction of Helen Thompson and then under the more experienced Eleanor Fitzgerald, the Theatre Union tried to sell subscriptions. The results were meager. All the handbills included citations from any "bourgeous critic" who had anything nice to say about the production; as if to reach out to their readers for their attendance. This made Robert Forsythe wonder whether the Theatre Union was excessively fretful over the verdict of the bourgeois press. For him, to be Broadway-tropic meant diluting the strength of the message, debilitating the energy of the play, for to make the drama palatable to the conservative or "tired liberal" Broadway sector it had to be watered down and tamed.

---

[1]"Shifting Scenes," New Theatre and Film, April 1937, p.8. Curiously, Maltz echoed Compton by urging the creation of mobile theatre units and the establishment of public relations-type ties with Unions.

Forsythe recalls:

> One of the most pathetic pictures of those days was the cast of the Theatre Union waiting up anxiously for the early morning papers to see how "uptown" was going to take the new play. Even down on Fourteenth Street it was necessary to get the carriage trade if the more expensive seats were to be sold. There was a continual inner struggle between the desire to do plays which would be afraid of nothing and the knowledge that such productions would be lambasted by the critics and avoided by the moneyed patrons. As a final ironic touch, the company emigrated uptown and produced its last show in the middle of the theatrical district, somehow hopeful that the gap could be bridged between vigor and violets.[1]

The problems of money, plays, and audience were all serious, but surmountable provided the theatre retained the energetic drive of its Executive Board. What allowed the Theatre Union to survive for four years, to answer Michael Gordon's question, was the collective dedication of the men and women who created it. Their never-say-die attitude gave them the strength and determination to meet every challenge. Their shared purpose gave them cohesion and assurance. During the fourth season, though, their interest in the Theatre Union waned. There was a significant and palpable falling off. For some it was the discouragement of the last season's failures, for some the time had come to move on to other things, for some their purpose was accomplished--they had made converts to social theatre--so the mission ended, and for some idealism ebbed as the struggle was strained with weariness. There was, too, a surfacing of personality conflicts, inevitable when any collective enterprise experiences stress. "We really didn't have conflicts of that kind," says Sklar, "Although I think that towards the end when we were losing

---

[1]"Wanted: A Theatre," New Masses, 18 October 1938, p. 15.

money and having plays that were not getting across, that element of personal difference didn't make us pull together as we might have and try to overhaul the thing."[1]

Many of the key people left the Theatre Union or became occupied with other projects. Charles Walker spent much of 1936 in Minneapolis researching and preparing a sociological history of that midwestern city. His book, American City: A Rank and File History, was published in spring 1937. Victor Wolfson was busy putting the finishing touches on his play Excursion which opened 9 April 1937, the day before the Theatre Union withdrew from Marching Song. On 21 March 1937, the Rebel Arts Players at the Labor Stage presented The Brave and the Blind by Michael Blankfort. Manuel Gomez recalls that he "lost interest" at about this time: "The thing was clearly doomed and it was the end. I paid very little attention. I'm not even sure I saw Marching Song."[2] George Sklar was cool to the theatre for turning down his most recent play, but he nevertheless served on the production committee of Marching Song. Liston Oak, Margaret Larkin and Albert Maltz, for personal reasons, also suffered diminished enthusiasm for the Theatre Union.[3] Important non-Board members who were no longer around included Charlie Friedman, Sylvia Regan and Millicent Green.

The addition of new blood to the Executive Board during the summer of 1936 was not as it turned out a matter of augmenting, but of sustaining

---

[1]Sklar, 18 July 1978.

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[3]Gomez, 8 October 1978; Walker, 9 September 1978.

the life of the theatre. Because of the falling-off of interest there did not seem to be any heartbeat left to the organization. To an outsider like Lawson, in fact, the Theatre Union ceased to exist before Marching Song was premiered: "Marching Song was planned after the Theatre Union was virtually out of business. Internal conflicts had prevented the management from functioning, and Lem Ward and I took over the disrupted organization, with Lem Ward as head of it."[1] Lawson's view, however, was only half true. Though the Board was quiescent that year--especially so because of the administrative restructuring which delegated all of the production responsibilities to Ward--it had not terminated.[2]

The "internal conflicts" that Lawson alluded to were mainly of a political sort. The tremors of discord that shot through the Executive Board coincided with the dissolution of the United Front. In the atmosphere of 1933 there was a sense of harmony; common interests submerged differences. In 1936-37, the slender rapproachment of the United Front was disintegrating as precipitously as it had been forged. Distrust and suspicion riddled the left. The year 1936 was an election year and the Communist Party, while grudgingly supporting Roosevelt, sniped at Norman Thomas's bid for high office. The left was also riven by controversy over the Moscow purge trials which began in August 1936. Trotsky and his supporters were long considered renegades, now they were

---

[1]John Howard Lawson to Jay Williams, 11 February 1973, Williams Papers, Special Collection, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston Massachusetts.

[2]Maltz, 15 July 1978; Sklar, 18 July 1978.

vilified as pariahs. Not only were their political doctrines abhorrent, but they were detested personally as well. As an index to the rabid hatred of Trotskyites it is instructive to recall the remarks of a New York Party official cautioning Communist Party delegates at a state convention to shun the wicked apostates: "A few instances have come to our attention in which comrades showed tolerance and even social friendliness to some of these rats. Just as we turn away in disgust when we see a fascist, so must we do when we see these fascist agents."[1] Socialists, who often lined up with Trotskyites, were accorded the same treatment. Throughout 1937, the Daily Worker repeatedly prohibited Communists from any contact with Socialists.[2]

In the midst of the acrimonious atmosphere, Charles and Adelaide Walker became Trotskyites. They had traveled to Russia and Spain. They were disaffected by what they had seen and came to espouse the Trotskyite point of view.[3] With John Dewey and a group of other anti-Stalinists, they participated in a "Commission of Inquiry" which declared that Trotsky and other prominent "Old Bolsheviks" who were then on trial were not guilty.[4] Oak, who had also been to Spain, and Gomez also split from the orthodox Party line. They sympathized with the Trotskyites in their criticism of the Communist Party leadership.[5]

---

[1]Cited by Howe and Caser, American Communist Party, p. 328.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[4]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

[5]Ibid.

The fierce antagonism and open hostility which characterized this persecution of the Trotskyites infiltrated the Theatre Union as well. If after a late night Board meeting the Walkers were seen in the subway heading uptown instead of downtown to their home in the village, there was the assumption that they were going to a political gathering of a hostile group.[1] At one point, Walker tried to forcibly remove the records of the Theatre Union from the theatre's offices.[2] This stormy strife eroded old friendships. For example, Peters relates the following sad episode:

> At one point when I tried to raise $500 to pay back a loan made by a school teacher to the Theatre Union, Walker wanted guarantees that the money would not be diverted to the Communist Party. As an old friend of his, who had once, when he was away, lived in his house to see that the children were properly taken care of by the maid and cook, I was offended. I replied that he was accusing me of stealing money.[3]

Suspicions were rampant on all sides. As people became progressively more politicized it became harder to bridge the differences. At the point the Theatre Union ended, however, these differences affected the plays and the operation of the theatre less than they did the interactions of the people on the Board. The political divisions, asserts Sklar, "didn't make for any change in the plays that we did. . . I would say that had we continued, this might have become a difficulty, but it didn't while we were still functioning."[4]

---

[1] Ibid.

[2] Maltz, 15 July 1978.

[3] Peters, 20 August 1978.

[4] Sklar, 18 July 1978.

The effect on the artistic operation of the theatre was secondary. The political thing vitiated personal relationships first, thus sapping the energy and enthusiasm of Board members to go on. The sense of purpose that had brought them together was now being destroyed by edginess, aloofness, and suspicions of conspiratorial treachery. In that atmosphere, where one could not trust the other's judgment, it became impossible to function.

The depth of the discord is manifest in the last official act of the Theatre Union. At the 23 June 1937 meeting, the Board adopted the following resolution:

> The charges made by Michael Gold that Charles and Adelaide Walker sabotaged the Theatre Union are completely untrue.
>
> On the contrary, Charles and Adelaide Walker who helped found, maintain and run the Theatre Union, have been among the mainstays of the organization since its inception, and have loyally, devotedly and consistently supported its work.
>
> A copy of this resolution shall be made public.[1]

The resolution was never made public. Margaret Larkin, who was directed to publish the disclaimer, never did. She was unfriendly to the Walkers at that time so she neglected her obligation.[2] Apparently there was considerable opposition to the resolution, and support of Larkin's inaction, because on 11 August 1937 Peters circulated a memo to all Board members offering a substitute statement. He voted against the original resolution out of principle because "it involved the theatre in a political

---

[1]Minutes of Board, 23 June [1937].

[2]Gomez, 8 October 1978.

battle it has always hithertofore scrupulously avoided."[1] The neutral statement he proffered was accepted and was the one that appeared in the New York Times later that month. It does not speak of the political skirmishes within the Board but recognizes Walker's contribution to the theatre along with that of Wolfson and Larkin.

Gold, however, would not let the matter rest with an innocuous obituary listing. He was convinced that the Theatre Union died at the hands of some dastardly culprit. In a scathing, vitriolic article he wrote. "Pardon me if I now open the door to a dark cellar and a bad smell comes forth. I am doing it for the purpose of fumigation. After it is over we can go back to the fresh air." The Theatre Union, he insisted, was done in by "Trotsky poison" which was delivered by those "notorious Trotskyites" Liston Oak, Manuel Gomez, and Charles and Adelaide Walker.[2]

Political functionalism swept away every vestige of the personal and working relationships of the group. A year after the demise, Executive Board members reconvened to dispose of various monetary and administrative loose ends. It was a strange body that got together. An alien thing had crept in. There was a strained formality. "We had been intimate," recalls Sklar sorrowfully, "the closeness had gone with the theatre."[3]

---

[1]Paul Peters, Memo to Board Members, 11 August 1937, Wolfson Papers, Special Collection, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston, Massachusetts.

[2]Michael Gold, "Change the World: Put it All Together it Spells Traitors," Daily Worker, 9 October 1937, p. 7.

[3]Sklar, 18 July 1978.

Another factor in the termination was the changed political complexion of the country in 1937. It is evident that Theatre Union plays followed a stylistic and ideological formula. That formula was the product of 1933 thinking. In 1933, American capitalism was crumbling. Unemployment was over fourteen million. The national income had hit rock bottom at $41.7 billion, about half of what it was in 1929 before the crash. Manufacturing was down by fifty percent of what it had been and was getting worse with no end in sight. Organized labor, which was fighting an uphill battle before 1929, was decimated by layoffs and massive unemployment. Before the collapse, "welfare capitalism" had put the employer in the drivers seat. Now, when the squeeze was on industry and manufacturing, employers would certainly not yield to labor's demands.[1]

The country was penurious, grim, and without hope. The spectre of anarchy and chaos lurked in the shadows. The mood was for radical revolutionary change. The country was prepared to swing left or right. In 1932, membership in the Communist Party had doubled from what it had been four years earlier. The fiery "radio priest" Father Coughlin had built up a strong following across the country from his home base of Detroit. In the Mississippi Delta, Governor Huey "King Fish" Long was gaining grass-roots support for his "Every-man-a-King" program. In 1932, an election year, Senator David A. Reed is quoted as saying, "I do not often envy other countries their governments, but I say that if this country ever needed a Mussolini it needs one now."[2]

---

[1]Wecter, Age of Great Depression, pp. 16-18; Goldston, Great Depression, pp. 61-68.

[2]Congdon, Thirties, p. 123.

In the turbulence of 1933, the Theatre Union's platform was not only relevant, it was necessary. By 1937, however, it was anomalous. There was a new attitude in the air. Hope had replaced despair. The crushing torpor of seemingly endless economic inertia was stopped by the determination of Americans to roll up their sleeves and dig their way out. To be sure, the grip of the Great Depression was not loosened overnight. Unemployment continued to hover around the ten million mark. Difficulties and hardships persisted, but the country had turned a corner, morale was up. There was now a confidence, a sanguine optimism, that there were answers to what had seemed insoluble.

The nation's champion was the tall, articulate man with the buoyant smile, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and his New Deal. The bustling legislation of the Hundred Days took the country by its shoulders and rattled it out of despondency. If fear was the only problem then the tonic was to distract people with work. To get people working, the government, to the dismay and horror of conservatives and fiscal traditionalists, spent money and dipped its hands into the private industrial arena. A spate of acts issued forth from an overworked Congress designed to achieve recovery and lasting reform. The National Industrial Recovery Act sought to stimulate business. This was implemented by the boldly experimental and controversial National Recovery Administration. Farmers received assistance through the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

The most dramatic measures, amidst a sea of drama, were those which directly helped the unemployed. The Civilian Conservation Corps gave temporary employment to a quarter million young men. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration doled out five-hundred million dollars to the workless. The Civil Works Administration took four million people

and put them to work on public projects. This was superceded by the gargantuan Public Works Administration which was appropriated $3.3 billion--the largest peacetime appropriation yet of any government--to create work for the unemployed. Another shot in the arm of the jobless came on 6 May 1935 with the Works Progress Administration. Its mandate was to put people to work quickly without competing with private industry. It did so for nearly three and a half million people and eventually spent nearly five billion dollars.[1]

The New Deal not only created jobs for the unemployed, it also took steps to improve conditions for those already employed. For the first time in decades, labor had a friend in Washington. Section 7-A of the National Industrial Recovery Act outlawed company unions and stipulated the right of employees "to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing." When the National Industrial Recovery Act expired, the safe-guards of Section 7-A were maintained through the Wagner-Connery Act which provided for the establishment of the National Labor Relations Board. In addition to encouraging unions, the New Deal made progress in abolishing child labor and in setting standards of minimum wages and maximum hours.

Roosevelt's actions succeeded in restoring faith. He demonstrated that the system could be made to work. The New Deal offered liberals and intellectuals an alternative to Communism or Huey Long. The Communists,

---

[1]Goldston, Great Depression, pp. 111-125; Manchester Glory and Dream, pp. 80-91; Wecter, Age of Great Depression, pp. 71-80.

aware that fellow travelers were attracted to the ideals of the New Deal, attempted to stem the tide away from the left by broadening its program. The United Front was officially proclaimed in 1935. Now instead of hating New Dealers, Communists pictured themselves as exponents of its reforms. With the economy on the road to recovery, the new enemy became Fascism. But the broad appeal of the Communists was drastically reduced the next year with the advent of the Moscow trials and their attendant parodoxes and hypocrisies.

In 1937, the country was in a new frame of mind. The new American revolution never happened. Social protest had become, to a degree, institutionalized and accepted. The polemical tone of the Theatre Union became worn and outmoded:

> Suddenly the rigidity of the Theatre Union thinking was wrong. It was out of tune with the times. It had been all right in '33 and '34 but in '35 and '36 it was off. They hadn't moved with the time. . . . It was the attitude of hope and they were the theatre of despair. The ardent shrillness of the Theatre Union was no longer the tenor of the times.[1]

The New Deal had a more direct impact on the Theatre Union in the form of the Federal Theatre Project. When Congress approved the Works Progress Administration on 8 April 1935 it advanced a step in the policy of relief by providing jobs for the unemployed within the area of their own skills and trades. Harry Hopkins, the administrator of the program believed that artists were as needy as other workers so he established a white-collar division of the Works Progress Administration

---

[1]Moross, 29 June 1978.

for musicians, writers, artists and theatre practitioners. To take charge of the theatre project Hopkins appointed his former classmate, the vibrant and spirited Hallie Flanagan.

For Flanagan, the Federal Theatre Project was not simply a relief agency. It was the opportunity to create a genuine national theatre. Unfettered by the restraints of the box office, a federally subsidized theatre could take risks with plays that commercial producers would not attempt. (Murder in the Cathedral, a New York production in the first season of the Project, was turned down by the Theatre Guild.) It could do plays that could reach out to every segment of the population and its low ticket prices (25¢ to $1.10 in New York, a high of 50¢ in other cities) would facilitate its becoming a people's theatre. It could discover and nurture a new talent across the country and it could reflect the diversity of the nation in plays with regional settings.

Flanagan also wanted the Federal Theatre to have a social conscience. She herself was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship which she used to study European and Russian Theatre, and she was the author, with Margaret Clifford, of Can You Hear Their Voices?, a drama of the drought-stricken Arkansan Farmers. Flanagan strongly believed in a theatre which addressed social issues:

> In an age of terrific implications as to wealth and poverty, as to the function of government, as to peace and war, as to the relation of the artist to all these forces, the theatre must grow up. The theatre must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order or the changing social order will ignore, and rightly, the implications of the theatre.[1]

---

[1]Jane Dehart Mathews, The Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p. 43.

Here was the same program which had been offered by the Theatre Union. With the exception of the Marxian bent (and even that surfaced in some of the plays though it was not officially sanctioned) the Federal Theatre produced socially meaningful plays, directed at a mass audience at affordable prices.

In New York, the Federal Theatre began operations 2 February 1936, eight weeks before Bitter Stream opened, with a drama concerning the exploitation of southern blacks in the north, Walk Together Chillun by Frank Wilson. This was followed by several social dramas among them Samuel Warshawsky's anti-war play, a chimerical fantasy called A Woman of Destiny; Harold Clarke and Maxwell Nurnberg's expose of abuses in the academic world, Chalk Dust; the first of the didactic, exhortative Living Newspapers, Triple A--Plowed Under and 1935; another anti-war play, a one-act by Emjo Basshe, Snickering Horse, in a double bill with The Miser in an adaptation by Al Saxe; Orrie Lashin's and Milo Hasting's Class of '29, an examination of the growing up problems that faced the young generation of the Great Depression; and Michael Blankfort and Michael Gold's biographical drama of the insurrectionist John Brown, Battle Hymn.

After this first season it became increasingly clear that the Federal Theatre would coopt the Theatre Union. George Sklar attributes a large measure of the Theatre Union's demise to the exuberance and momentum of the Federal Theatre's program:

> A major element [in the termination of the Theatre Union] was that the Federal Theatre was on the scene by then. Our function was being accomplished by them in a much bigger way all over the country as well as in New York. They were doing plays that we might have done and had all the resources in the world at their command. There was no reason for the Theatre Union to go on actually at that point.

> We couldn't; we just didn't have the money and we couldn't dig up any more.[1]

It would have been impossible for the Theatre Union to compete with the Federal Theatre even if the Board could have raised the money. They were doing social plays, attracting the same talent, and vying for the same audience. But it was no contest. The Federal Theatre was less restrictive and more venturesome with its repertory, offered greater stability to its employees and provided more variety to its audiences.

The Federal Theatre, as Brooks Atkinson noted, became the "inexpensive playhouse for the great mass of the people" that the Theatre Union had envisioned in its own last announcement.[2] In a way, it took over where the Theatre Union left off. It produced plays that had been turned down by the Theatre Union. Among these were Battle Hymn, Professor Mamlock, and Life and Death of an American, the latter having the dubious distinction of being the last play presented by the Project in New York. Many people formerly associated with the Theatre Union joined forces with the Project. For example, Lem Ward directed One Third of a Nation and a revival of Lawson's Processional; Vincent Sherman, who had acted in The Sailors of Catarro, Black Pit, and Bitter Stream, embarked on a directing career with Chalk Dust, Battle Hymn, and It Can't Happen Here; Charles Friedman assisted with the direction of the musical revue Sing for Your Supper; and Cleon Throckmorton, Tom Cracraft,

---

[1] Sklar, 18 July 1978.

[2] "Hail and Farewell," p. 1.

and Howard Bay, though they were not intimately connected with the Theatre Union, had worked for it, and each designed several Federal Theatre productions. The Federal Theatre was also responsible for revivals of Stevedore, one in Seattle and one in Boston.

The Federal Theatre Project was also a contributing factor to the collapse of the entire left theatre movement. Aside from absorbing the Theatre Union, it soaked up the Theatre of Action and the Theatre Collective. All the energies of the left--the Daily Worker, the New Masses, New Theatre, and the newly formed Theatre Arts Committee (a United Front organization spearheaded by a Theatre Union alumna, Hester Sondergaard)--were directed at supporting the Federal Theatre and attempting to persuade it to do more and stronger social drama. To the community of the left, the Federal Theatre was the embodiment of the people's theatre they had sought for many years. Though they occasionally quibbled about the lack of political concreteness of some of the dramas, they always endorsed the social plays and urged their readers to see them.[1] When Congress discontinued the Federal Theatre on 30 June 1938, the only socially-conscious theatre remaining was the Group Theatre, and it tepidly endured through only three more productions.

The decline of the left theatre movement was inevitable and would probably have occurred even without the Federal Theatre Project.

---

[1]For a fuller account of the reactions of the left press to Federal Theatre Productions see Morgan Y. Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon: The Left Wing Theatre in New York 1929-1941 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), pp. 89-110.

New Theatre Magazine, the beacon of the movement, ceased publication in 1937. Its successors, the quarterly Theatre Workshop and the monthly pamphlet New Theatre News, were issued sporadically and had none of the luster of the earlier journal. The New Theatre League lingered anemically until 1942, but with a diminished constituency and less vitality. The New Deal had taken the sting of indignation out of the movement and without this sting it seemed to be fighting paper tigers. The movement also probably withered because of the United Front policy. Walter Rideout postulates that the proletarian novel became dehydrated after 1935 and eventually disappeared because the United Front, in shifting the emphasis from the class struggle to Fascism, deprived the radical writer of the animus for his work.[1] Since protest plays subscribed to the same ethos as the proletarian novel, the same might be said of them.

Was the Theatre Union a success or a failure? This is a difficult question to answer because judging success or failure depends on perspective and ultimately involves subjective value judgments or depends on what criteria are used to make an evaluation. Since value judgments are personal they do not help us draw any overall conclusions. Let us then examine the Theatre Union against two standards.

If we judge the Theatre Union by asking what tangible, lasting contributions did it make to American theatre, we will find that it is of little significance, only a footnote in American theatre history. It did demonstrate that audiences, especially groups not accustomed to

---

[1]Rideout, Radical Novel, pp. 243-244.

theatregoing, could be organized through theatre parties. Though it was temporary, lasting only through the end of the decade, it also broadened the types of audiences attending theatre. For a while, the theatre was not the province only of the rich, the middle class and intellectuals, it was opened to laborers and blacks. For the first time, blacks were not discriminated against in a theatre auditorium outside of Harlem.

Otherwise the Theatre Union achieved very little. It had only a transitory existence and left only a slight, fragmentary imprint on the theatre subsequent to itself. "It died stillborn," says Michael Blankfort, "it lived and it died and it had no progeny. No playwrights came out of it; no actors of great note came out of it; no technical thing; nothing came out of it. It was a great mother/father without children."[1] The Theatre Union had no Odets, no O'Neill, and it never discovered any "Shakespeare in overalls." It was not interested in exploring theatrical technique so it never looked for a Welles, a Strasberg, or a Joe Losey. Its dream of creating a permanent company was perfunctory and the ideal of finding a new, revolutionary staging technique was constrained by its politics and its short-sighted adherence to traditional realism. Its studio, therefore, never had the vibrance or the impact

---

[1]Blankfort, 17 July 1978. Other Theatre Union people, looking back on their work today, concur with Blankfort. Maltz, using the same image, said, "So far as I can tell at the moment, I don't think its overall significance has been very much. It had no children; no continued existence." (Maltz, 15 July 1978). Manuel Gomez states, "I would have to say that its value is very hard to trace historically, I mean to find any continuity flowing from it." (Gomez, 8 October 1978). Victor Wolfson says, "It contributed no notion. The Studio [the Group's] created actors; we contributed nothing." (Wolfson, 22 June 1978). Millicent Green says simply, "It made a little splash." (Green, 30 June 1978).

of the Group's. Moreover, it did not produce any memorable or historically significant productions like Waiting for Lefty, Julius Caesar, One Third of a Nation, Awake and Sing. The only possible exceptions might be Stevedore and Mother, but the former is of interest more because of the audience it reached and the latter's noteworthiness is due to the stature achieved by its author later in life.

If we judge the Theatre Union though within the scope of its own generation, we will find that it was quite effective. Comparing its results to its goals, a fair standard for judgment, we find that it achieved what it set out to achieve. In its original manifesto it promised to present plays of "deep-going social conflict" that would interest working people, give these plays professional productions, maintain low box office prices and organize audiences through theatre parties and subscriptions.

The subscriptions, of course, never substantially materialized. But in all other respects the theatre realized its objectives. Its plays were all uniformly, undeviatingly, unflinchingly social. Its productions were all polished, possessing the same professional quality found on Broadway in more lavish productions. Over and over again, though they took exception to the plays, many of the enemy "bourgeois" critics acceded to the competence of the productions, finding little to fault in the way of direction, design and acting. Ticket prices were consistently kept low even when this policy exacted austerities in the budget and imposed hardships in finding money to pay for the next production. And theatre parties were, of course, the centerpiece of the Theatre Union.

In its time the Theatre Union was a significant force. It held a predominant position in the left theatre movement. It forsook the left's antipathy for Broadway methods, finding proletarian virtues in bourgeois techniques. It sensed the political winds of the future and implemented a United Front organization before that policy was officially announced. This less sectarian political stance enabled it to attract Broadway talent, unavailable to the more parochial theatres of the left, which benefited it with admiration from the left for its professional excellence and some measure of respectability from others. The Theatre Union became the flagship in the left theatre's fleet. Across the country, in Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, and Los Angeles, its program and its methods were emulated by local socially-minded theatre groups. It serviced these groups with plays and advice.

George Sklar would like to think, too, that the Theatre Union influenced playwrights on Broadway, and the Broadway ethos in general, by making it more amenable to socially oriented plays:

> Aside from definitely establishing the fact that such a theatre with a definite social point of view could establish itself and could, for a fairly decent amount of time, continue to exist and build an audience, the other positive thing about it was its influence on playwrights. The fact that people like Lillian Hellman who was leaning toward the left, got a little stronger in her feeling about the kind of play she would do. . . that Robert Sherwood, who had limited himself to comedies usually with an ancient setting. . . could go on to do an anti-war play, could go on to do a play about Abraham Lincoln which had a definite social point of view. . .and could bring forth your Irwin Shaw, our Sunday night things made Clifford Odets possible. . . But I think, overall, the fact that we did serve as an example and gave so many writers the confidence to go ahead with plays that had some substance, social meaning, is really something you can't measure, but I think it was considerable.[1]

---

[1]Sklar, 18 July 1978.

Sklar is right on both his points: 1) that the Theatre Union contributed to wearing down Broadway's reluctance to produce social plays and 2) that this supposition is conjectural and difficult to demonstrate objectively. Statistically, in fact, one could argue that the Theatre Union and like-minded organizations made no dent on the Broadway facade. Each season the number of plays with social themes offered on Broadway was a small percentage of the total output. In 1933-34, the year that the Theatre Union began, 9 of the 130 productions had some socially conscious message; four out of 133 in '34-'35; eight out of 114 in '35-'36; eleven out of 114 in '36-'37; four out of 96 in '37-'38; ten out of 83 in '38-'39; seven out of 86 in '39-'40.[1] But what the statistics fail to explain is that many of these plays were written by well established playwrights like Robert Sherwood, Sidney Howard, George Kaufman, Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, S. N. Behrman, and several important new voices like Lillian Hellman, Sidney Kingsley, Irwin Shaw. Such writers seemed to be beginning to consider their work in terms of the social and political events around them. The Theatre Union's success in reaching a new audience, especially during its first two seasons, may account for this interest in social plays uptown.[2]

Nor would it be stretching the truth to assert that the Theatre Union paved the way for the Federal Theatre. Brooks Atkinson, from his

---

[1] Himelstein, Drama was Weapon, pp. 182-211.

[2] On the other hand, one cannot help but wonder whether the intensity of the circumstances would have compelled some writers to do so without a Theatre Union or a left theatre movement.

vantage point as an eye witness to the death of one group and the birth of the other, felt that the Federal Theatre took over from the Theatre Union its fresh, unadulterated, eager audience and its commitment to social theatre but was spared its predecessor's baneful economic shortcomings.[1] In the sense, therefore, that the Theatre Union was a forerunner to the closest thing the American theatre ever had to a national theatre, it achieves some distinction.

But the Theatre Union is also important in its own right. Viewed from today's perspective some of its plays seem facile and even ingenuous. But in its time the theatre's repertory was vigorous because it was topical. Workers were being exploited, blacklists were devastating, relief was dehumanizing, vigilante groups did use violence to undermine the workers' efforts to unite, strikes were necessary and scabs and informers could sabotage the gains made by strikes. The organizers of the Theatre Union believed that theatre should not be indifferent or Platonic about these problems. Art could not retreat, they felt, into a serene, complacent quietism. Such a posture would be downright immoral under the circumstances.

It achieved what the Workers' Drama League and the New Playwrights hoped to achieve because the times were different. The depression gave dimension and a sense of exigency to the goals of the left theatre movement and the Theatre Union implemented these in its program. It was an utilitarian theatre; not merely entertaining or escapist; not objectively philosophical or contemplative. If its plays were melodramatic,

---

[1]"Hail and Farewell," p. 1.

they were so because the times were melodramatic. The plays were a direct response to the urgency of the times and their primary functions were to educate, inform and politicize: functions which lent themselves to melodrama.

If we return to searching for the lasting contribution made by the Theatre Union it might be in its being so forthrightly and devotedly political. Prior to the 1930s the American stage had been singularly apolitical. The New Playwrights were political but were compomised by their selfconscious concern with style. During the Depression years, the Theatre Union emerged as the strongest of the political theatres. With the war and the succeeding McCarthy period, political theatre organizaions virtually vanished. It was not until the ferment of sixties and the issue of Vietnam that theatre groups once again advocated political positions. In this respect, groups like the Living Theatre, the Bread and Puppet Theatre, El Teatro Campesina, the Negro Ensemble Company, to name but a few, are inheritors of an American tradition of social and political concern, framed in the 1930s and established by the Theatre Union, among others.

Finally, we can say that the Theatre Union is not only important in terms of theatre history, but is a part of the social history of our country. The 1930s were a period of stress and turmoil. Many hard questions had to be asked about the basic values the country has professed since its inception. It was a time of change and reform. The Theatre Union's contribution was in serving as a voice for the many disenfranchised Americans who were shut out of the system. It gave shape to a vision of America that was humane and just.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Plays

Bein, Albert. Let Freedom Ring. New York: Samuel French, 1936.

Brecht, Bertolt. Gesammelte Werke. Band 2, Stuecke 2: Die Mutter, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkemp Verlag, 1967.

_____. "Mother." Adapted by Paul Peters. Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, 1935.

_____. "Mother." Promptbook. Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, 1935.

Lawson, John Howard. Marching Song. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1937.

_____. "Marching Song." Promptbook. Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, 1937.

Maltz, Albert. Black Pit. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935.

_____. "Black Pit." Promptbook. Loaned to author by Peter Xantho.

Peters, Paul. "Dirt Farmer." (Three scenes from the play). Left, Autumn 1931, pp. 3-19.

_____. "'Men of Steel': A Scene from a Proletarian Play." New Masses, December 1930, pp. 6-8.

_____. [Harbor Allen]. "Mr. God Is Not In." New Masses, December 1926, pp. 5-9.

_____. "'On The Wharf': A Scene From a Proletarian Play." New Masses, April 1930, pp. 12-14.

_____. "'Wharf Nigger': A Scene from a Proletarian Play." New Masses, November 1929, pp. 6-10.

Peters, Paul and Sklar, George. Stevedore. New York: Covici Friede, 1934.

_____. "Stevedore." Promptbook. Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, 1934.

Sklar, George and Maltz, Albert. Peace on Earth. New York: Samuel French, 1934.

_____. "Peace on Earth." Promptbook. Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library, 1933.

Stevenson, Philip. "God's In His Heaven." New York: The Script Library of the Theatre Union, 1934.

Walker, Charles R. and Peters, Paul. "Get That Bonus." New Masses, December 1932, pp. 22-24.

_____ . "The Third Parade." Loaned to author by Adelaide Walker.

Wolf, Friedrich. Gesammelte Werke. Band 3: Die Matrosen Von Cattaro. Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1960.

_____ . The Sailors of Cattaro. Translated by Keene Wallis. Adapted by Michael Blankfort. New York: Samuel French, 1935.

Wolfson, Victor. "Bitter Stream." Loaned to author by Victor Wolfson.

Books

Aaron, Daniel. Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism. New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1961.

Bernstein, Irving. The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Co., 1966.

_____ . The Turburlent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Co., 1970.

Blake, Ben. The Awakening of the American Theatre. New York: Tomorrow Publishers, 1935.

Blankfort, Michael. A Time to Live. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1943.

Block, Anita. The Changing World in Plays and Theatre. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1939.

Brecht, Bertolt. Brecht on Theatre. Edited and Translated by John Willett. New York: Hill & Wang, 1964.

_____ . Gesammelte Werke. Band 17: Schriften zum Theatre 3. Redaktion: Werner Hecht. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1956.

Clurman, Harold. The Fervent Years. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975.

Congdon, Don, ed. The Thirties: A Time to Remember. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962.

Flexner, Eleanor. American Playwrights 1918-1938: The Theatre Retreats from Reality. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1938.

Gagey, Edmond McAdoo. Revolution in American Drama. New York: Columbia University Press, 1947.

Goldstein, Malcolm. The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

Goldston, Robert. The Great Depression: The United States in the Thirties. Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1968.

Gorelik, Mordecai. New Theatres for Old. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1962.

Hart, Henry, ed. American Writers' Congress. New York: International Publishers Co., 1935.

Hicks, Granville; Gold, Michael; Schneider, Isadore; North, Joseph; Peters, Paul; Calmer, Alan, eds. Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology. New York: International Publishers Co., 1935.

Himelstein, Morgan Y. Drama Was a Weapon: The Left Wing Theatre in New York 1929-1941. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963.

Howe, Irving and Coser, Lewis. The American Communist Party: A Critical History. Boston: Beacon Press, 1957.

Innes, C.D. Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre: The Development of Modern German Drama. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

Kozlenko, William, ed. The One Act Play Today. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1938.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. The American Drama Since 1918. New York: George Braziller, 1957.

Lawson, John Howard. Theory and Technique of Playwriting. New York: Hill & Wang, 1960.

Manchester, William. The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972. New York: Bantam Books, 1975.

Mantle, Burns, ed. The Best Plays of 1929-30 through The Best Plays of 1939-40. 11 vols. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1930 - 1940.

Mathews, Jane DeHart. The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1967.

Phillips, Cabell. From the Crash to the Blitz. New York: Macmillan Co., 1969.

Piscator, Erwin. The Political Theatre. Translated by Hugh Rorrison. New York: Avon Books, 1978.

Rabkin, Gerald. Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964.

Rideout, Walter. The Radical Novel in the United States: 1900-1954 Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956.

Silone, Ignazio. Fontamara. Translated by Harvey Fergusson II. New York: Atheneum, 1960.

Smiley, Sam. The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972.

Steinberg, Mollie B. The History of the Fourteenth Street Theatre. New York: Dial Press, 1931.

Taylor, Karen Malpede. People's Theatre in Amerika. New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1972.

Tertz, Abram. On Socialist Realism. New York: Pantheon Books, 1960.

Wecter, Dixon. The Age of the Great Depression: 1929-1941. New York Macmillan Co. 1952.

Williams, Jay. Stage Left. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974.

Wolf, Friedrich. Aufsaetze Ueber Theatre. Band 13. Herausgegeben von Else Wolf and Dr. Walther Pollatschek. Berlin: Aufbau--Verlag, 1957.

Newspapers, Magazines, and Periodicals

"Actors Arrested in Store Picketing." New York Times, 10 February 1935.

Anderson, John. "'Stevedore' vs. 'Wharf Nigger': Collaborators Act Upon Theory that 'Problem' in South is Economic Not Racial." Evening Journal, 28 April 1934.

Atkinson, Brooks. "Fiddling at the Old Tunes." New York Times 17 March 1935, sec. 8, p.1.

_____. "Hail and Farewell: The Theatre Union Gives Way to the Federal and Mercury Theatres." New York Times, 5 September 1937, sec. 10, p. 1.

"Backstage View of 'Stevedore.'" New York Times, 24 June 1934, sec. 9, p. 1.

Basshe, Emjo. "The Revolt in Fifty-second Street." New York Times, 27 February 1927, sec. 7, p. 4.

Baxandall, Lee. "Brecht in America, 1935." Tulane Drama Review 12 (Fall 1967): 69-87.

Bernard, Heinz. "A Theatre For Lefty: USA in the 1930s." Theatre Quarterly 1 (October-December 1971): 53-56.

"'Bitter Stream' Introduces Victor Wolfson as Playwright." Post, 2 May 1936.

"The 'Bitter Stream' Shoe Isn't Worn in New York." Herald Tribune, 10 May 1936.

Blankfort, Michael. "Behind the Scenes of 'Stevedore.'" Daily Worker, 27 April 1934.

_____. "Facing the New Audience: Sketches Toward an Aesthetic for the Revolutionary Theatre." New Theatre, June 1934, pp. 11-12; July-August 1934, pp. 14-15; November 1934, pp. 25-27.

_____. "Writers' Congress." New Theatre, April 1935, p. 29.

Bonn, John. "Dram Buro Report." Workers Theatre, May 1932, pp. 7-10.

_____. "Situations and Tasks of the Workers' Theatre in the U.S.A." Workers Theatre, June-July 1932, pp. 8-9.

_____. "Workers' Theatre." Workers Theatre, August 1931, p. 1.

Brecht, Bertolt. "The German Drama: Pre-Hitler." New York Times, 24 November 1935, sec. 9, p. 1.

Buchwald, N. "Narrowing the Field of Workers' Theatre." Workers Theatre, October 1931, pp. 6-9.

Burnshaw, Stanley. "First 'Theatre Union' Night and a Letter to Artef." New Masses, 25 February 1936, p. 28.

"Call for an American Writers' Congress." New Masses, 22 January 1935, p. 20.

Carmon, Walt. "Paul Peters." International Theatre 1 (1934): 50-52.

"Collective Drama at the Civic Repertory Theatre: A Radical Theory of Dramatic Production is Tested and Found True." Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 29 March 1936.

Compton, Ben. "Facts and the Left Theatre." Daily Worker, 3 January 1937.

Crowther, Bosley. "Dr. Friedrich Wolf--Bad News to Hitler." New York Times, 24 March 1935, sec. 8, p.1.

_____. "Theatre of the Left." New York Times, 14 April 1935, sec. 9, p. 1.

Dos Passos, John. "Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?" New Masses, August 1929, p. 13.

"Drama—and the Full Dinner Pale." New York Times, 20 October 1935, sec. 10, p. 2.

"Editorial Paragraphs: The Theatre Union." Nation, 6 March 1925, p. 263.

Flanagan, Hallie. "A Theatre is Born." Theatre Arts, November 1931, pp. 908-15.

Forsythe, Robert. "Wanted: A Theatre." New Masses, 18 October 1938, p. 15.

Freeman, Joseph. "'Peace on Earth:' The First Theatre Union Production." Daily Worker, 2 December 1933.

Friedman, Samuel H. "The Editor Comments." New Leader, 2 March 1935, p. 8.

Gaines, Richard. "Utopia Along Broadway." New York Times, 6 January 1935, sec. 9, p. 3.

Garland, Robert. "Authors of 'Stevedore' Offer an Explanation." World Telegram, 28 April 1934.

Garlin, Sender. "Paul Peters--Revolutionary Playwright--An Interview." Daily Worker, 15 May 1934.

_____. "When Negro, White Unite in Struggle." Daily Worker, 16 May 1934.

Gassner, John. "The Drama in Transition: A Book Review of the Season." New Theatre, August 1935, pp. 13-14, 26-30.

_____. "The Person in the Play." New Theatre, February 1936, pp. 14-16, 36-37.

_____. "A Playreader on Playwrights." New Theatre, October 1934, p. 9-11.

_____. "Playwrights of the Period." Theatre Arts, September 1960, pp. 19-22, 69, 71.

_____. "Social Realism and Imaginative Theatre: AvantGarde Stage Production in the American Social Theatre of the Nineteen-thirties." Theatre Survey 3 (1962): 3-18.

Glick, Carl. "The Drama Handed from Pillar to Post." Springfield Republican (Illinois), 25 April 1934.

Gold, Michael. "A Bourgeois Hamlet in Our Time." New Masses, 10 April 1934, pp. 28-29.

_____ . "Change the World." Daily Worker, 5, 6, 10, 11, 30, 31 December 1935.

_____ . "Change the World: Put It All Together It Spells Traitor." Daily Worker, 9 October 1937.

_____ . "Proletarian Realism." New Masses, September 1930, pp. 4-5.

Goldbeck, Eva. "Principles of Educational Theatre." New Masses, 31 December 1935, pp. 27-28.

Gomez, Manuel. "The Meaning of the Bank Crisis." New Masses, April 1933, pp. 14-18.

Gordon, Eugene. "From 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' to 'Stevedore.'" New Theatre, July 1935, pp. 21-23.

Gorelik, Mordecai. "Brecht: 'I am the Einstein of the New Stage form." Theatre Arts, March 1957, pp. 72-73.

_____ . "Theatre is a Weapon." Theatre Arts, June 1934, pp. 420-33.

"Gossip of the Rialto." New York Times, 29 August 1937, sec. 10, p. 1.

Groce, Morris. "Friedrich Wolf: Exiled German Worker and Brillant Revolutionary Dramatist." Daily Worker, 7 December 1934.

Hicks, Granville. "Revolutionary Literature of 1934." New Masses, 1 January 1935, p. 36.

Himelstein, Morgan Y. "Theory and Performance in the Depression Theatre." Modern Drama 14 (February 1972): 426-35.

Kline, Herbert. "'Stevedore' Cast Votes 'NO.'" New Theatre, 1 June 1935, p. 15.

Larkin, Margaret. "Building an Audience." New Theatre, October 1934, p. 26.

_____ . "On Becoming Acclimated to Broadway Surroundings." Daily Worker, 24 November 1936, p. 7.

_____ . "On Propaganda." New York Times, 18 March 1934, sec. 9, p. 2.

_____ . "Social Play Gets an Audience." Herald Tribune, 28 October 1934.

_____ . "Theatre Union --- Its Tasks and Problems." Daily Worker, 15 May 1935.

Lawson, J. H. "Inner Conflict and Proletarian Art." New Masses, 17 April 1934, pp. 29-30.

_____. "Straight From the Shoulder." New Theatre, 1 June 1934, pp. 6-7.

Lecky, Eleazer. "New Theatre." Modern Drama 6 (December 1963): 267-76.

Lunacharsky, A. V. "Problems of Style in Socialist Art." International Theatre (Moscow) 5 (1933): pp. 3-7.

Lyon, James K. "Der Briefwechsel zwischen Brecht und der New Yorker Theatre Union von 1935." In John Fuegi, Reinhold Grimm, and Jost Hermand, eds. Brecht Jahrbuch 1975 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1975), pp. 136-55.

McDermott, Douglas. "Agitprop: Production Practice in the Workers' Theatre, 1933-42." Theatre Survey 7 (November 1966): 115-24.

_____. "Propaganda and Art: Dramatic Theory and the American Depression.: Modern Drama" (May 1968): 73-81.

_____. "The Theatre Nobody Knows: Workers' Theatre in America, 1926-1942." Theatre Survey 6 (May 1965): 65-82.

Magil, A. B. "Pity and Terror." New Masses, December 1932, pp. 16-19.

Maltz, Albert. "'Black Pit' vs. 'Black Fury:' Which Play is Propaganda?" Post, 17 April 1935.

_____. "The Left Wing Theatre in America." New Republic. 24 July 1935, pp. 302-304.

_____. "Man on a Road." New Masses, 8 January 1935, pp. 19-21.

_____. "Marching Song: Flint, Michigan and Brimmerton, U.S.A." New Theatre and Film, March 1937, pp. 13, 56.

_____. "What is Propaganda?" New York Times, 28 April 1935, sec. 10, p. 3.

"'Marching Song' Cast Enters Lists as Producers." World Telegram, 10 April 1937.

Miner, Worthington. "Actors' Repertory Company." New York Times, 15 November 1935, sec. 11, p. 3.

Mok, Michael. "'Peace on Earth' in Seventh Week at Civic Repertory Theatre--Worker is Audience." Evening Post, 13 January 1934.

Mullen, John. "A Worker Looks at Broadway." New Theatre, May 1936, pp. 25-27.

Northrup, Emery. "Meet the Theatre Union." New Theatre, February 1934, pp. 8-10.

Oak, Liston. "Theatre Union Actors' Solidarity with Ohrbach Strikers Defended." Daily Worker, 21 March 1935.

_____ . "Theatre Union Replies." New Theatre, November 1934, p. 12.

"'On You.' 'On Me' Sings Negroes Working on Dock in 'Stevedore.'" Brooklyn Eagle, 15 July 1934.

Pack, Richard. "Dramatist in Exile." New Theatre, December 1934, p. 5.

Peters, Paul. "A Birthday on Fourteenth Street." Brooklyn DailyEagle, 2 December 1934.

_____ . "Do Workers Want Culture?" Daily Worker, 23 January 1934.

_____ . "A Letter on Italy." Daily Worker, 11 May 1936.

_____ . "On Writing and Selecting Plays for Workers." Daily Worker, 27 February 1935.

_____ . "'Peace on Earth' Arouses Class Anger of Reviewers." Daily Worker, 5 December 1933.

Piscator, Erwin. "The Social Theatre." New Masses, July 1929, p. 14.

_____ . "The Work of Friedrich Wolf." New Masses, 11 June 1935, pp. 23-25.

"A Playwright Who Disappeared." Sun, 25 January 1935.

"Praise Offends This Stage Designer." Herald Tribune, 13 January 1935.

Prentis, A. "Relationship Between Content and Form." Workers Theatre, September 1931, p. 10.

Rahv, Rhilip. "The Literary Class War." New Masses, August 1932, pp. 7-10.

Reines, Bernard. "Our Widening Front." Workers Theatre, September-October 1932, pp. 3-4, 19.

"Rendezvous on Fourteenth Street." World Telegram, 16 November 1934.

Rice, Elmer. "Project for a New Theatre." New York Times, 8 October 1933, sec. 10, pp. 1-2.

"Salty Sea Plays Tax the Wits of Property Men." Herald Tribune, 30 December 1934.

"Send Us Scripts: The Workers Theatre Appeals for Scripts." New Theatre, September 1934, p. 26.

"750 Props Used in 'Stevedore' Cost Only $123." Herald Tribune, 3 June 1934.

"Stevedore." (Editorial) World Telegram, 4 May 1934.

Sklar, George. "Negro Actors in the Theatre Union Play 'Stevedore.'" Daily Worker, 9 May 1934.

_____. "Workers Theatre Advances." New Theatre, September 1934, p. 8.

Sklar, George and Maltz, Albert. "The Need for a Workers' Theatre." Daily Worker, 16 December 1933.

"Strength in the Theatre Union." New York Times, 9 December 1934, sec. 10, p. 2.

Thatcher, Molly Day. "Revolutionary Staging for Revolutionary Plays." New Theatre, July-August 1934, p. 26.

"Theatre Union to Prepare Three Plays." Post, 3 June 1933.

"Theatre Union's Project." New York Times, 7 February 1937, sec. 10, p. 2.

"Towards a Workers' Theatre." (Editorial) New Republic, 27 December 1933, p. 184.

"Thus the Union Figures." New York Times, 26 January 1936, sec. 9, p. 3.

"Up From Union Square." New York Times, 30 August 1936, sec. 9, p. 1.

"Uptown? Yes, Upstage? No." Daily Worker, 8 October 1936.

Walker, Charles. "'Peace on Earth' on Broadway." New Theatre, April 1934, p. 14.

_____. "Theatre as a Weapon." Fight, May 1934, p. 4.

_____. "Theatre on the Left." Nation, 24 June 1939, pp. 730-31; 1 July 1939, pp. 18-19.

_____. "We Went to Harlan." New Masses, December 1931, pp. 3-4.

Walker, Dorothy. "A Critique of the Theatre Union." Barnard Quarterly, Christmas 1934, pp. 21-24.

Wolf, Friedrich. "Dramatizing Our Times." New Theatre, February 1934, p. 24.

Zheutlin, Barbara and Talbot, David. "Albert Maltz: Portrait of a Hollywood Dissident." Cineaste 8 (1978): 2-15, 59.

Reviews of Plays

Abel. "'Stevedore.'" Variety, 24 April 1934.

Alexander, Leon. "Sailors of Cattaro and Gold Eagle Guy." New Theatre, January 1935, pp. 24-25.

_____. "Stirring Play of Sailors' Revolt." Daily Worker, 11 December 1934.

Allen, Kelcey. "'Bitter Stream.'" Women's Wear Daily, 31 March 1936.

Anderson, John. "Authors of 'Merry-Go-Round' Retain Their Carbolic Mood in Thrust Against War." Evening Journal, 1 December 1933.

_____. "'Bitter Stream.' Revolt of Villagers Again Theme of Theatre Union." Evening Journal, 31 March 1936.

_____. "'Black Pit' Theatre Union Hits Mark With Play Revealing Life in Coal Fields." Evening Journal, 21 March 1935.

_____. "Embattled Strikers in New Play Mirrored in Recent Headlines." Evening Journal, 18 February 1937.

_____. "Premiere of 'Mother': Drama Tells Old Women's Struggle Through Dark Bolshevist Period." Evening Journal, 20 November 1935.

_____. "'Sailors of Catarro': Tale of Mutiny in Fleet and Revolution That Failed, Told in Play." Evening Journal, 12 December 1934.

_____. "Tense and Exciting Drama of New Orleans Waterfront Draws Loud Cheers." Evening Journal, 19 April 1934.

Atkinson, Brooks. "'Black Pit,' Being Albert Maltz's Drama of Coal Miners in West Virginia." New York Times, 21 March 1935.

_____. "Drama of the Race Riot in 'Stevedore' Put on by the Theatre Union." New York Times, 19 April 1934.

_____. "Fascism of the Black Shirts the Theme of the Theatre Union's 'Bitter Stream.'" New York Times, 18 February 1937.

_____. "'Let Freedom Ring,' Being a Tragic Drama About the Fortunes of Labor in Cotton Mills." New York Times, 7 November 1935.

_____. "'Mother' Learns and Teaches the Facts of Life at the Theatre Union in Fourteenth Street." New York Times, 20 November 1935.

_____. "Propaganda for Peace in Drama by the Authors of 'Merry-Go-Round.'" New York Times, 30 November 1933.

_____. "Rioting on the Waterfront." New York Times, 29 April 1934, sec. 9, p. 1.

_____. "'Sailors of Cattaro' by the Theatre Union." New York Times, 11 December 1934.

B., M. "'Black Pit' Opens at Civic Repertory, Is Stirring Drama." American, 21 March 1935.

Barnes, Howard. "'Mother.'" Herald Tribune, 20 November 1935.

Benchley, Robert. "Just One." New Yorker, 28 April 1934, p. 48.

Bolton, Whitney. "John Howard Lawson Redeems Self in Masterful Play at Theatre Union." Morning Telegraph, 19 February 1937.

_____. "'Stevedore' Docks in 14th Street, But its Acting Belies Humble Berth." Morning Telegraph, 20 April 1934.

Bowen, Stirling. "A Labor Theatre." Wall Street Journal, 4 December 1933.

_____. "Propoganda and Drama." Wall Street Journal, 22 March 1935.

_____. "The Theatre Union." Wall Street Journal, 12 December 1934.

_____. "The Theatre Union Play." Wall Street Journal, 20 April 1934.

Brown John Mason. "The Theatre Union, Inc., Presents George Sklar's and Albert Maltz's 'Peace on Earth' at the Civic Repertory." Evening Post, 1 December 1933.

_____. "The Theatre Union Presents Alan Baxter in 'Black Pit,' A Play by Albert Maltz." Evening Post, 21 March 1935.

_____. "The Theatre Union Presents the Mssrs. Peter's and Sklar's 'Stevedore' Down at the Civic Repertory." Evening Post, 19 April 1934.

_____. "The Theatre Union's Production of 'Sailors of Catarro' Down on Fourteenth Street." Evening Post, 20 December 1934.

_____. "The Theatre Union Takes to the Soap Box Once More - 'Stevedore' and the Race Problem in America." Evening Post, 21 April 1934.

Buchwald, Nathaniel. "Can 'Sailors of Cattaro' be Called a 'Defeatist' Play?" Daily Worker, 5 February 1935.

_____. "'Marching Song' Finest Labor Play Says Critic: Buchwald Calls Lawson's Drama the Most Eloquent and Poetic Dramatization of the Class Struggle in Our Time." Daily Worker, 20 March 1937.

Burnshaw, Stanley. "The Most Important Play in New York." New Masses, 25 December 1934, pp. 28-29.

_____. "The Theatre Union Produces 'Mother.'" New Masses, 3 December 1935, pp. 27-28.

Burr, Eugene. "Stevedore." Billboard, 28 April 1934.

Chapman, John. "'Sailors of Cattaro': Theatre Union Stages Austrian Naval Mutiny." Daily News, 11 December 1934.

Coleman, Robert. "'Bitter Stream': Theatre Union Stages Play From Novel." Daily Mirror, 31 March 1936.

_____. "Labor's Sermon Draws Moral of Strike." Daily Mirror, 18 February 1937.

_____. "'Mother': Novel of Gork: Used as Basis of Drama." Daily Mirror, 21 November 1935.

Cowley, Malcolm. "The Biography of a Strike." New Republic, 9 March 1932, pp. 98-99.

Dash, Thomas R. "Black Pit." Women's Wear Daily, 21 March 1935.

_____. "Marching Song." Women's Wear Daily, 18 February 1937.

_____. "Mother." Women's Wear Daily, 20 November 1935.

_____. "'Peace on Earth' Aims to Bring Good Will to Men." Retailing, 1 January 1934.

Dexter, Charles E. "Lawson's Play Carries Truth of America's Industrial War." Daily Worker, 20 February 1937.

_____. "'Marching Song' Vital as Today's Newspapers." Daily Worker, 19 February 1937.

Edgar, Harold. "Play of New Orleans Negro Longshoremen Seethes With Struggle." Daily Worker, 20 April 1934.

Farrell, James T. "Theatre Chronicle." Partisan Review and Anvil, February 1936, p. 29.

Field, Rowland. "'Black Pit' a Melodrama of the Coal Mines Is Presented by the Theatre Union at the Civic Repertory Theatre." Brooklyn Times Union, 21 March 1935.

_____. "'Peace on Earth' Presented at the Civic Repertory." Brooklyn Times Union, 30 November 1933.

Gabriel, Gilbert. "'Bitter Stream': The Theatre Union's Dramatization of 'Fontamara.'" Journal American, 31 March 1936.

_____ . "'Marching Song': Mr. Lawson Gives the Theatre Union Its Year's First Play." Journal American, 18 February 1937.

_____ . "'Mother': Theatre Union Begins With a Musical Version of a Gork: Tale." Journal American, 20 November 1935.

_____ . "'Peace on Earth'" A Bad Jab Below the Theatrical Belt by the Messrs. Sklar and Matlz." Journal American, 30 November 1933.

_____ . "'Stevedore': An Exciting Plea by the Theatre Union Shakes up Fourteenth Street." Journal American 19 April 1934.

_____ . "The Sailors of Cattaro." Journal American, 11 December 1934.

Gardener, William. "Peace on Earth." New Masses, 16 January 1934, pp. 29-30.

Garland, Robert. "'Black Pit' Offering of the Theatre Union: Play Given at Civic Repertory Shows a Picture of Life in Coal Mines." World Telegram, 21 March 1935.

_____ . "'Mother' Produced at Civic Repertory: Tells story of Transformation of a Woman from a Conservative to a Radical." World Telegram, 20 November 1935.

_____ . "Propaganda in New Play: 'Bitter Stream' at Civic Repertory Depicts Woes of Ruralist in Italy." World Telegram, 31 March 1936.

_____ . "Propaganda is Polite in 'Peace on Earth.'" World Telegram, 1 December 1933.

_____ . "'Sailors of Cattaro' at Civic Repertory: Melodrama with World War Background is Produced Here by the Theatre Union." World Telegram, 11 December 1934.

_____ . "'Stevedore' Exciting, Full of Violent Vitality." World Telegram, 23 April 1934.

Gassner, John. "Let Freedom Ring." New Theatre, December 1935, pp. 12-13.

_____ . "Mother." New Theatre, December 1935, p. 13.

_____ . "Perspective --- Past and Present." New Theatre, May 1936, pp. 10-11.

_____ . "Wings Over Broadway." New Theatre and Film, April 1937, pp. 19-20.

Gibbs, Wolcott. "The Mine and the Market." New Yorker, 28 March 1935.

Gilbert, Douglas. "Fine Cast Performs in 'Marching Song' John Howard Lawson's Play at Bayes Theatre on Indictment of Capitalism." World Telegram, 18 February 1937.

Gold, Michael. "Change the World." Daily Worker, 26 December 1934.

_____ . "Stevedore." New Masses, 1 May 1934, pp. 28-29.

H., E. J. "'Stevedore,' a Vibrant and Dynamic Play of Fiery Racial Prejudices in the South." Brooklyn Citizen, 19 April 1934.

H., J. K. "'Stevedore' Reopens in Fourteenth Street." New York Times, 2 October 1934.

Hammond, Percy. "Bitter Stream." Herald Tribune, 31 March 1936.

_____ . "Black Pit." Herald Tribune, 21 March 1935.

_____ . "Proving That There is No Peace." Herald Tribune, 1 December 1933.

_____ . "'Stevedore' Objects Skillfully to the Plight of the Negro in the Sunny South." Herald Tribune, 20 April 1934.

_____ . "Worthy Causes Seldom Make Bulging Tills in the Box Office." Herald Tribune, 29 April 1934, sec. 5, p. 1.

Herling, John. "Lawson's Drama is a Stirring Picture of Auto-Sit-down Strike." Socialist Call, 27 February 1937.

Ibee. "Marching Song." Variety, 24 February 1937.

Isaacs, Edith J.R. "Broadway to a National Theatre: Marching Song." Theatre Arts, April 1937, pp. 265-66.

_____ . "Distance Lends Enchantment: Mother." Theatre Arts, January 1936, pp. 13-15.

_____ . "News-Reel Theatre: Peace on Earth." Theatre Arts, February 1934, pp. 88-93.

_____ . "Other New Plays: Black Pit." Theatre Arts, May 1935, pp. 331-32.

_____ . "Ring Out the Old: Sailors of Cattaro." Theatre Arts, February 1935, pp. 100-101.

_____ . "Saints and Lawmakers: Bitter Stream." Theatre Arts, May 1936, pp. 339-40.

_____ . "Stevedore." Theatre Arts, June 1934, pp. 408-409

Kauf. "Black Pit." Variety. 21 March 1935.

_____ . "Sailors of Cattaro." Variety, 18 December 1934.

Kline, Herbert. "Black Pit." New Theatre, April 1935, pp. 20, 33.

Krutch, Joseph Wood. "Black Bread and a Circus." Nation, 4 December 1935, pp. 359-60.

_____ . "Case History." Nation, 3 April 1935, pp. 399-400.

_____ . "Drama on the Barricades." Nation, 2 May 1934, pp. 515-16.

_____ . "Poor White." Nation, 20 December 1933, p. 718.

_____ . "Red --- And White and Blue." Nation, 26 December 1934, pp. 749-50.

_____ . "Strike Play." Nation, 27 February 1937, pp. 248-49.

L., E. "'Sailors of Cattaro' is a New Play of Theatre Union." Journal of Commerce, 12 December 1934.

Lewis, Theophilus. "Harlem Sketchbook." Amsterdam News, 28 April 1934.

_____ . "'Bitter Stream,' Social Drama of Rural Italy, Opens at the Civic Repertory." Sun, 31 March 1936.

Lockridge, Richard. "'Black Pit' a Drama of the Coal Mines is Offered in 14th Street." Sun, 21 March 1935.

_____ . "The Guild Offers 'Valley Forge' --- 'Sailors of Cattaro' Opens Downtown." Sun, 11 December 1934.

_____ . "'Marching Song,' a Theatre Union Drama Opens at the Bayes Theatre." Sun, 18 February 1937.

_____ . "'Mother' Propaganda with Music Opens at the Civic Repertory." Sun, 20 November 1935.

_____ . "'Peace on Earth,' Propaganda Drama is Acted at the Civic Repertory." Sun, 1 December 1933.

_____ . "'Stevedore,' a Drama of Race Conflict Opens at the Civic Repertory." Sun, 19 April 1934.

Lyman, John. "Stevedores and Saints." Opportunity, May 1934, pp. 148-50.

Mantle, Burns. "'Bitter Stream,' is a Story of a Volunteer Martyr to the Cause of Italy's Oppressed Farmers." Daily News, 31 March 1936.

_____ . "'Black Pit' at the Civic Repertory: The Case for the Exploited Coal Miner is Honestly Argued in Drama." Daily News 21 March 1935.

_____ . "Drama of New Orleans Docks Excites a Sympathetic Audience in Fourteenth Street." Daily News, 19 April 1934.

_____ . "'Marching Song,' Theatre Union Takes Over Bayes Theatre for John Howard Lawson Drama." Daily News, 18 February 1937.

_____ . "'Mother,' Soviet Primer in Action: Pre-Revolutionary Russia Revealed in Simple Drama Extolling the Workers." Daily News, 20 November 1933.

_____ . "Peace on Earth is Against War: Theatre Union Takes Over Civic Repertory for Propaganda Drama." Daily News, 30 November 1933.

Nathan, George Jean. "Post Mortem." Vanity Fair, February 1934, p. 41.

North, Joseph. "Joseph North Answers Jack Stachel on 'Black Pit.'" Daily Worker, 30 April 1935.

_____ . "Theatre Union's Black Pit." New Masses, 2 April 1935, pp. 42-43.

Olgin, M.J. "Mother: The Theatre Union's New Play." Daily Worker, 22 November 1935.

Pollock, Arthur. "'Black Pit,' Well Presented, Remains only a Picture." Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 24 March 1935.

_____ . "Mr. Lawson Attempts a Bit Too Much." Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 28 February 1937.

_____ . "'Peace on Earth,' a Melodrama Designed to Prove That There is no Such Thing, Opens in Fourteenth Street." Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 1 December 1933.

_____ . "'Stevedore,' a Play About Negroes and Injustice in the South Opens at the Civic Repertory." Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 19 April 1934.

_____ . "Theatre Union Opens Its Season With 'Mother,' a Play as Violent as a Zephyr." Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 20 November 1935.

_____ . "The Theatre Union Presents John Howard Lawson's New Play, 'Marching Song,' at the Bayes Theatre." Brooklyn Daily Eagle, 18 February 1937.

Reeve, Carl. "Despicable Role of Scab." Daily Worker, 23 March 1935.

"Renaissance of Art in Chicago." New York Times, 13 January 1935, sec. 9, p. 1.

Repard, Theodore. "A Play of Fascist Italy." Daily Worker, 3 April 1936.

Ruhl, Arthur. "Theatre Union's Play of Protest is Incidentally a Good Show." Herald Tribune, 31 March 1935.

_____ . "'Sailors of Cattaro' Friedrich Wolf Play at the Civic Repertory Theatre." Herald Tribune, 11 December 1934.

_____ . "'Stevedore' A Play About Negro Labor at the Civic." Herald Tribune, 22 April 1934.

S., J. T. "'Peace on Earth': A Great Fight Against War." New Leader, 16 December 1933.

Sedgwick, Ruth Woodbury. "From G106-107." Stage, April 1937, p. 78.

Shapiro, Jack. "Peace on Earth." New Theatre, January 1934, p. 11.

_____ . "Stevedore." New Theatre, May 1934, p. 13.

Sherburne, E. C. "Peace on Earth." Christian Science Monitor, 23 December 1933.

Shipley, Joseph. "The Iron's Hot." New Leader, 27 February 1937.

_____ . "On Ruins of Rome: 'Bitter Stream.'" New Leader, 31 March 1936.

_____ . "Theatre Union Wins Again." New Leader, 5 May 1934.

Sobel, Bernard. "In 'Stevedore' Players Earn Credit for Work." Daily Mirror, 23 April 1934.

_____ . "'Peace on Earth' Has Premiere at Civic Repertory." Daily Mirror, 30 November 1933.

_____ . "'Sailors of Cattaro': Male Cast Feature of New Piece." Daily Mirror, 10 December 1934.

_____ . "'Stevedore' Gives Thrilling Session of Able Acting." Daily Mirror, 19 April 1934.

Spivak, John L. "Bitter Stream." New Masses, 14 April 1936, p. 28.

Stachel, Jack. "On the Theatre Union's Play 'Black Pit.'" Daily Worker, 29 April 1935.

Sterling, Philip. "Stirring Labor Play 'Stevedore' Reopens at Civic." Daily Worker, 4 October 1934.

Taylor, Alexander. "The Theatre Union's 'Marching Song' and Ibsen." New Masses, 9 March 1937, p. 27.

Thomas, Norman. "Hail 'Peace on Earth.'" New Leader, 2 December 1933.

Vernon, Grenville. "Bitter Stream." Commonweal, 17 April 1936, p. 696.

_____ . "Black Pit." Commonweal, 5 April 1935, p. 654.

_____ . "Marching Song." Commonweal, 5 March 1937, p. 528.

_____ . "Mother." Commonweal, 6 December 1935, p. 162.

_____ . "Sailors of Cattaro." Commonweal, 21 December 1934, p. 236.

Waldorf, Wilella. "'Marching Song' Staged by the Theatre Union: John Howard Lawson's Play Pictures the Organization of a Strike in Brimmerton, U.S.A." Evening Post, 18 February 1937.

_____ . "'Mother' Opens Theatre Union's Third Season: Fourteenth Street Organization Stages Primer for Revolutionists With the Aid of Stereoptican Slides." Evening Post, 20 November 1935.

_____ . "'Sailors of Cattaro': Friedrich Wolf's Play of Mutiny in the Austrian Battle Fleet is Produced by the Theatre Union." Evening Post, 11 December 1934.

Watts, Richard. "Marching Song." Herald Tribune, 18 February 1937.

Wyatt, Euphemia van Rensselaer. "Black Pit." Catholic World, May 1935, pp. 213-15.

Young, Stark. "Congratulations." New Republic, 2 January 1935, p. 223.

_____ . "Left, Right and Wrong." New Republic, 17 March 1937, pp. 166-67.

_____ . "Of Blackest Midnight Born." New Republic, 17 April 1935, p. 289.

_____ . "Stevedore." New Republic, 9 May 1934, p. 367.

_____. "Workers in General." New Republic, 18 December 1935, p. 175.

Interviews and Correspondence

Blankfort, Michael. Los Angeles, California. Interview, 17 July 1978.

Dorfman, Zelda. New York, New York. Interview, 26 June 1978.

Gomez, Manuel and Feningston, Sylvia. Redding, Connecticut. Interview, 8 October 1978.

Gordon, Michael. Los Angeles, California. Interview, 14 July 1978.

Green, Millicent. New York, New York. Interview, 30 June 1978.

Maltz, Albert. Los Angeles, California. Interview 15 July 1978.

Moross, Jerome. New York, New York. Interview, 29 June 1978.

Peters, Paul. Monte Estoril, Portugal. Letters, 17 June; 20 August; 9 September 1978.

Regan, Sylvia. New York, New York. Interview, 28 June 1978.

Sklar, George. Los Angeles, California. Interview, 14, 18 July 1978.

Walker, Adelaide. Wellfleet, Massachusetts. Interview, 9 September 1978.

Wolfson, Victor. South Wellfleet, Massachusetts. Interview, 22 June 1978.

Xantho, Peter. New York, New York. Interview, 26 May; 27 June 1978.

Additional Sources

Boston, Massachusetts. Boston University, Mugar Memorial Library. Michael Blankfort Papers. Albert Maltz Papers. Jay Williams Papers. Victor Wolfson Papers.

Financial Reports. January 1933 to 28 July 1934. (Loaned to author by Zelda Dorfman) 1 August 1934 to 6 June 1935. (Loaned to author by Adelaide Walker) 1 June 1935 to 25 May 1936. (Loaned to author by Adelaide Walker) 26 May 1936 to 22 April 1937. (Loaned to author by Zelda Dorfman).

Frank, Felicia N. Lisa. "The Magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre, and New Theatre and Film as Documents of The American Left-wing Theatre Movement of the Nineteen-thirties." Ph.D dissertation, City University of New York, 1976.

Madison, Wisconsin. Wisconsin Center For Film and Theatre Research. Albert Maltz Papers.

Malpede, Karen. "Play for Revolution: The Theatre Union, 1933-37." Master's thesis, Columbia University, 1970.

New York, New York. Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center, New York Public Library. Theatre Union File; Scrapbooks and Clipping Files of the Theatre Union Plays.