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THE MAGAZINES WORKERS THEATRE, NEW THEATRE AND NEW THEATRE AND FILM AS DOCUMENTS OF THE AMERICAN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT OF THE NINETEEN-THIRTIES

by

FELICIA N. LISS FRANK

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

1976

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.

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Abstract

THE MAGAZINES WORKERS THEATRE, NEW THEATRE AND NEW THEATRE AND FILM AS DOCUMENTS OF THE AMERICAN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT OF THE NINETEEN-THIRTIES

by

Felicia N. Liss Frank

Advisor: Professor Daniel C. Gerould

This study traces the development of the magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre, New Theatre and Film--which, from 1931 to 1937, served as the organs of the American left-wing theatre movement. The dissertation examines the magazines in relation to their role as a stimulus to the growth of the left wing theatre movement and also as a reflection of that movement and of the more general American left-wing movement of the nineteen-thirties.

The discussion focuses on two basic areas of concern: (1) the social crusades which were pursued by the magazines--e.g., for an equitable position for the Negro in the American theatre; against war, fascism and censorship--and (2) the creative growth of the magazines and of the left-wing theatre movement, both in terms of production techniques and theatre criticism.

The conclusion of the dissertation emphasizes that, to a great extent, the magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film were the heart of the American left-wing theatre movement of the nineteen thirties. And although the movement and the magazines lasted barely six and one-half years

and engaged only a small percentage of the theatre workers of that period, they exerted a considerable influence on the development of the modern American theatre.

"Art is a Weapon"

. . . . . .

Group: Art is a weapon
theatre is a weapon
workers theatre is a weapon
workers theatre is a weapon in the class struggle.
A weapon in the class struggle.

Capitalist: Ladies and gentlemen, you are making an unfortunate mistake. Art soars miles above the commonplace of daily routine, above politics, above party strife. Art is the expression of our yearning for beauty and harmony.

Group: Art is the expression of our yearning--
yearning of slaves for freedom
yearning of the hungry for bread
yearning of the homeless for shelter
yearning of the persecuted for rest
yearning of the unemployed for work
yearning of the victims of capitalist brutality for justice
yearning of the mistreated negroes for equality
yearning of a supressed [sic] class for the abolition of all classes
yearning of the rebellious for the final conflict
art is a weapon
theatre is a weapon
theatre is a weapon in the class struggle

. . . . . .

Capitalist: This means destruction of culture.

Worker: This means destruction of a decayed culture of oppression and exploitation.

Capitalist: Destruction by means of the theatre?

Worker: Destruction by all weapons--also theatre.

Capitalist: That is revolution.

Worker: That is revolution.
The theatre of the future is the theatre of revolution.
We
awaken
enlighten
arouse
every working man
every working woman
every young worker
all proletarians
the masses
to action.
We do not play
for your and our entertainment
we play
because participation in the class struggle
is your
and our
duty.
We show
the exploitation of the workers
we show
the way out.--
mass organization
mass action
organized mass action.
That is what we play for
and fight for
we

Group: United Workers Theatres of New York
Workers Laboratory Theatre, New York
Proletbuehne, New York

Group: Theatre of Revolution.

--excerpt from "Art is a Weapon," published in Workers Theatre, July, 1931, pp. 16-17.

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INTRODUCTION

A pamphlet entitled The Awakening of the American Theatre--written by Ben Blake in 1935, during the heyday of the left-wing theatre movement--describes an important event in the growth of that movement: the birth of the magazine Workers Theatre.

> . . . In April 1931 the Workers Laboratory Theatre issued two hundred copies of the first number of Workers Theatre, the magazine that was to grow into the mature New Theatre [sic] of today. It was a lone voice urging the social responsibility of the theatre in the American dramatic wilderness. A labor of love and duty, the magazine appeared unfailingly each month thereafter. . . . With the August 1931 issue the Proletbuehne [sic] joined in the editorship. No editorial board has ever had a more comprehensive function. The work of the editors included everything from assigning articles, writing articles, illustrating them, typing the stencils, running them off on a hand mimeograph, assembling and clipping the pages together and wrapping them for mailing, right down to dropping the copies into the mailbox.[1]

"How can we reach the masses to urge them to organize, to awaken them?" the editors asked in the "Dedication" to the first issue of Workers Theatre.[2] Through the theatre, was the answer. And the purpose of this new magazine was to help accomplish this important objective: by planning the organization of nationwide class-conscious workers' theatres, by

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[1]Ben Blake, The Awakening of the American Theatre (New York: Tomorrow Publishers, 1935), p. 21.

[2]"Dedication," Workers Theatre, April 1931, p. 2.

helping individual groups, by showing the groups how to make themselves "weapons in the class struggle, tools for the liberation of the working class."[3]

This was indeed grandiose thinking for a group that was still doing its own clerical work. But the magazine grew and developed rapidly--first into New Theatre, and then into New Theatre and Film. In 1936, Clifford Odets--the major social playwright of the decade--wrote glowingly about the publication which had first drawn attention to his work as a playwright, New Theatre magazine:

> This New Theatre magazine, its very name is significant. Those pages are filled every month with a content plucked from the mouths of very good people, Americans, Europeans, first-rate artists of every theatre front. World-famous names. Men busy with the great stuff of modern life.
>
> And all their good ideas and works [sic] thrown back through the magazine into the new theatre movement. Where they are eagerly seized on, chewed up, rejected, accepted, worked--all for the continued growth of this new vital theatre which is as healthy as the fruit on Florida trees.[4]

In retrospect, it appears that Odets was mistaken as to the health of both New Theatre magazine and the left-wing theatre movement, of which the magazine was a projection, and to which it served as a stimulus. By mid-1937, New Theatre and Film had ceased publication; and, by the end of

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[3]Ibid., p. 3.

[4]Clifford Odets, review of The Awakening of the American Theatre, New Theatre, January 1936, p. 43.

the decade, the left-wing theatre movement had all but evaporated. But the effect of this movement and of the magazine which both served and guided it--on the evolution of the American theatre in the succeeding years--was quite considerable: more so, certainly, than the magazine and the movement's lack of longevity might indicate. Assessing the impact of this period in the history of the American theatre on its later development, Stanley Kauffmann has written that, ". . . the radical movement, political in origin, was a chief factor in cracking the artistic provincialism of the American theatre and seeding its future."[5]

Several books have been written on the subject of the American left-wing theatre movement of the nineteen-thirties. Among these are, Drama Was a Weapon: The Left-Wing Theatre in New York 1929-1941, by Morgan Himelstein (1963); Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties, by Gerald Rabkin (1964); Sam Smiley's The Drama of Attack: Didactic Plays of the American Depression (1972); and, most recently, in 1974, Stage Left, by Jay Williams and The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression, by Malcolm Goldstein. All of these studies have relied heavily on the magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film as primary

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[5]Stanley Kauffmann, review of Stage Left, "Book Reviews," New York Times, March 10, 1974, p. 6.

sources of information. However, with the exception of a short piece by Eleazer Lecky, entitled "New Theatre,"--in the Winter 1963 Modern Drama--no study has focused solely on this important magazine which, in Lecky's words, "during its lifetime . . . played a significant role as instigator, discoverer and critic of the theatre in America."[6]

Workers Theatre (April 1931 to July-August 1933) and its successor New Theatre (September-October 1933 to November 1936) were, from 1931 to 1935, the "official organ(s)" of the organization that was at the center of the left-wing theatre movement. And, throughout the entire period of their publication, Workers Theatre, New Theatre, and their successor New Theatre and Film (March and April 1937) were the only theatre magazines with a specifically left-wing orientation.

A thorough study of the magazines is justified because of their importance as a stimulus to the development of the left-wing theatre movement during the 'thirties, and as a reflection of the movement for the contemporary student of the theatre of that period. An investigation of the magazines' history and content is also valuable for the following more specific reasons:

1. The magazines' editorials expressed the political thinking that was substantially widespread among the left-

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[6]Eleazer Lecky, "New Theatre," Modern Drama, Winter 1963, p. 267.

wing theatre workers during the nineteen-thirties.

2. The contributors to the magazines included some of the most important theatre people of the day, and the magazines are a primary source in a study of their critical thinking at that time. Among the contributors, were John Gassner, Harold Clurman, John Howard Lawson, Mordecai Gorelik, Lee Strasberg and Hallie Flanagan.

3. The aesthetic debate, over finding a workable relationship between art and propaganda, which took place in the pages of the magazines and which was of implicit concern in the magazines' judgment of all theatrical productions, is an old debate and one which continues to hold interest for us today. Some of the essays on that subject which were written for the magazines--particularly those by Michael Blankfort, John Howard Lawson and John Gassner--are of fundamental interest and are entirely relevant in any discussion of art and politics.

4. The magazines provide a detailed contemporaneous history of the workers' theatre movement, from its birth through its decline.

5. The evolution of the magazines, from 1931 to 1941 (the final few years as a mimeographed newsletter), is an accurate reflection of the birth, growth and decline into relative obscurity of the left-wing theatre movement of the nineteen-thirties.

What follows is a brief outline of the material that

is covered in this dissertation--"The Magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film as Documents of the American Left-Wing Theatre Movement of the Nineteen-Thirties."[7]

Chapter I, "Background and History," traces the growth and development of the magazines. From the ultra-radical and crudely political as well as theatrically amateurish fifteen-page Workers Theatre, of April 1931, the still politically oriented, but considerably less doctrinaire and completely professional as well as theatrically sophisticated New Theatre and New Theatre and Film evolved. It should become apparent to the reader, in the course of this discussion, that the changes in the magazines' editorial policies and even in their format, took place in direct relation to the changes that were occurring in the more general "progressive" movement in this country. These latter changes were, in turn, influenced by policy decisions of the American Communist Party and of the Communist International, in the Soviet Union.

Chapters II, III and IV deal with "The Magazines' Crusades." and are a discussion of the several causes that were espoused by the magazines during the years of their publication. Among these causes were a strong workers' theatre movement, various union issues, a non-censored

---

[7]Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film covered events in the left-wing dance and film movements; but this study has focused entirely on the theatre aspect of the magazine and the period.

federally-funded national theatre, and the struggle for an equitable position for the Negro in the American theatre.

Chapters V, VI and VII are devoted to a study of the changing "Aesthetic and Critical Position" of the magazines--the debate that took place in the pages of the magazines over the question of art and propaganda: aesthetics for a social theatre. Central to this discussion, are the play reviews and critical judgments of individuals in the professional theatre, as well as the changing self-criticism of the left-wing theatre groups and their productions

Many important plays and parts of plays were published and/or promoted by Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film. Among these were Waiting for Lefty by Clifford Odets and Bury the Dead by Irwin Shaw. These plays and the significance of their promotion by the magazines are also considered in Chapters V, VI and VII.

My research for this dissertation has taken me from the magazines themselves, to the several books that have been written on the left-wing theatre movement of the 'thirties, to writings on the phenomenon of leftism in America--such as Irving Howe and Lewis Coser's The American Communist Party and Daniel Aaron's excellent Writers on the Left, to more general works about the Depression--i.e., Cabell Phillips' From the Crash to the Blitz and Edward Ellis' A Nation in Torment. I have also had written correspondence and some in-person interviews with individuals who were active in the

left-wing theatre movement during the nineteen-thirties.

It seems appropriate that I mention here the special relevance of this dissertation topic to me. For it is my personal connection to the topic that has made most of my research possible. Both of my parents were active in the workers' theatre movement: my mother as a member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre--later the Theatre of Action, and my father as an amateur worker-playwright and sometimes performer. All children want to hear stories about their parents' youth. Many of the stories told to me by my parents had to do with their adventures in the theatre during the nineteen-thirties. The names of many of the actors and directors who went on to successful careers in the professional theatre; tales about friends returning from visits to Russia, costumed like their Soviet comrades and bringing news of the wonders of the theatre there; explanations of "the Method," "Biomechanics"; even a fairy tale called "The Revolt of the Beavers"--these were among the stories from their youth that were told to me by my parents.

In January 1972, while rummaging through our family's very crowded garage, my mother came across an almost complete run (more complete than any public collection that I am aware of) of the magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film. She had, in effect, discovered my dissertation topic for me. The preparation for this study has taken me full circle, from the end of my formal education,

back to my very roots. My interest in and my love for the theatre, as well as my sometimes too idealistic expectations of it, have stemmed from these roots. It is my hope that my treatment of the material, in this dissertation, will convey to the reader the enthusiasm that I have felt while working on it.

At this point, I would like to acknowledge several of the people who have been helpful to me, in various ways, during the three years that I spent working on this study. First of all, thanks are due to Daniel C. Gerould, my Advisor, and to Stanley Waren and Marvin Seiger who served on the Supervisory Committee for this dissertation. I am also grateful to many individuals--Jay Williams and Will Lee come immediately to mind in this regard--who were participants in the workers' theatre/left-wing theatre movement of the 'thirties and who spent considerable time discussing their youthful experiences and their retrospective impressions of the period with me. Finally, I want to thank my family--my husband Barry, my daughter Amy, and my parents Leo and Roslyn Liss--for their encouragement and emotional support during a period of my life which I shall always remember as extremely intense, sometimes difficult and, for the most part, very stimulating.

CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

> "The clarity for which the historian wistfully yearns is not available in life."
>
> --Irving Howe and Lewis Coser,
>
> The American Communist Party, p. 152

The nineteen-thirties were highly political years because of the implicit economic connection between politics and day-to-day living. That the theatre should have responded to the political climate of the day was only natural. Art always reflects life, and in the 'thirties it was close to impossible for the artist to avoid taking a position on what he saw happening around him.

It is part of our common knowledge that much of the political thinking of the nineteen-thirties theatre people was left-wing. Jay Williams, in his book Stage Left, gives an indication of the diverse levels of political activism as well as the generally shared social goals that motivated the participants in the workers' theatre movement, seedbed of the larger left-wing theatre movement as a whole:

> The various amateur groups which made up the workers theatre movement arose largely as a political response to the economic troubles of the day. Some of their organizers were Communists, some Socialists, a great many had no official affiliation with any party, al-

> though they were all generally sympathetic to the Left, but all were united in seeing the threatre, like other arts, as an implement for spreading the message that the present-day society was decadent and only in some profound change could an answer be found.[1]

In 1930, a newly-formed troupe of amateur actors who had recently named themselves the Workers Laboratory Theatre was adopted by the Workers International Relief (WIR)--one of several organizations that had been set up by the Communist Party to build Communist-led unions.[2] This action by the WIR had been motivated by the militant and doctrinaire Third Period policy which had been formulated by the Comintern[3] the previous year and which lasted, officially, until 1935.

The Third Period got its name from a 1929 statement by the Comintern that, in 1927, the economy of capitalist nations had entered its third stage since the world war, "a period of decline after periods of growth and stabilization."[4] During the Third Period, socialists and fascists were regarded by the Communists as being equally dangerous. Even the many groups that were ideologically to the left of

---

[1]Jay Williams, Stage Left (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, Inc., 1974), p. 33.

[2]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 29.

[3]The Communist International.

[4]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 29.

the Socialists were treated as menaces and, according to Max Schactman, a Trotskyite until 1940, "the closer any of the groupings were to the Communist Party, the more ruthlessly they had to be opposed, denounced and destroyed."[5]

At the Second World Plenum of the International Bureau of Revolutionary Literature, held in Kharkov from November 6 to November 15, 1930, a ten-point "Program for Action" for the United States was drawn up. The proposal called upon the John Reed Club and the communist literary and socio-political magazine, The New Masses, to broaden their political base and "to enlist all friendly intellectuals in the ranks of the revolution."[6] The Plenum also suggested that the John Reed Club and The New Masses organize "national federations" of cultural groups of all backgrounds, thereby establishing closer contact among workers, as well as strengthening their ties with the revolutionary cultural organizations abroad.

The publication of mass pamphlets and the formation of "agit-prop" troupes of entertainers were further recommendations of the Kharkov Plenum. It seems likely that the resolutions formulated at the Plenum were an additional influence on the decision by the Workers International Relief

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[5]Max Schactman, essay, in Rita Simon, ed., How We Saw the Thirties: Essays of Social Movements of a Decade (Carbondale: University of Illinois Press, 1967), p. 13.

[6]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left (New York: Avon, 1965), p. 221.

to take on the sponsorship of the newly-organized Workers Laboratory Theatre. The WLT, as the group soon became called, began performing at the meetings and other functions of the WIR, in exchange for some financial support and the rehearsal use of a loft that was owned by the latter organization.[7]

Jay Williams writes that, by 1931, ". . .other workers' theatre companies were appearing not only in the New York area, but in other cities. . . . The W.L.T. decided that it was time to make contact with these groups not only to assist them but to encourage the formation of others. The best method that suggested itself was a magazine."[8] And, in April 1931, 200 copies of the first issue of Workers Theatre bearing the masthead "Published monthly by the Workers Laboratory Theatre," were sent out to various workers' theatre groups throughout the country.

The physical appearance of this first issue clearly suggests the Third Period policy of which it was a projection. Typewritten and mimeographed, the magazine's cover is a crude linoleum block print depicting a worker--arms extended upward, feet firmly planted--standing in the center of what appears to be a flash of light. Off to the sides, obviously making hasty exits, are two remnants of the bourgeois theatre: a ballerina in toe shoes and a male performer, wearing tails

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[7]Jay Williams, Stage Left, p. 41.

[8]Ibid., p. 44.

and leaving his cane and top hat behind him.

An unsigned essay explaining the present decline in the capitalist system and emphasizing the need for workers to unite and fight to reorganize society was the magazine's first article:

> The immediate task therfore [sic] is this--to plan the organization of class conscious theatres in every town and community in the country; to help these groups with advice and plays; and where possible with personal contacts and assistance; to show these dramatic groups and the workers organixing [sic] them how to utilize these groups so as to make them weapons in the class struggle, tools for the liberation of the working class. This is the job before the Workers Theatre magazine and towards its accomplishment the editors intend to dedicate themselves.[9]

The political theme set forth in the above-quoted essay was reiterated throughout the magazine. On page 8, there appears a line drawing of two muscular arms, labeled U.S. and U.S.S.R., stretched out and clasping hands across the hammer and sickle of the Soviet Union. A drawing of a worker's hand using a mallet labeled "workers theatre" to smash the top-hatted head of a capitalist, is found on page 11; on page 17, following an article calling for workers' theatre plays, is a sketch of a capitalist being impaled on a fountain pen.

The connection between this first issue of Workers Theatre and the Soviet Union is further made explicit with "A Letter from the Blue Blouses of Russia to the W.L.T."

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[9]Editorial, Workers Theatre, April 1931, p. 3.

which has the prominent first place in the "Correspondence Column." "You are perfectly right when you say that we should exchange experiences in the interest of the proletarian theatre movement," write the Blue Blouses.[10] The letter continues with an explanation of the work of the amateur Russian workers' theatre groups, their staging techniques as well as their "Living Newspaper" form. A final statement of purpose by the Blue Blouses is barely comprehensible, because of the poor quality of the letter's translation: "During the period of socialist reconstruction of our society our chief problem is to relate in an interesting theatrical manner or form, to aims of socialism, our shortcomings, and to draw the workers into the struggle, to carry out the tasks set by the C.P."[11]

At the end of the first issue of Workers Theatre was a list of recommended readings. The list included some theatre books--to be read as background, with the understanding that their authors, e.g., Sheldon Cheney, were not class conscious or politically educated. A list of plays, done by the W.L.T., and available to all other groups, was the final material in the April 1931 Workers Theatre:

> 'BUY NOW' In the first part of this satire we see the President's commission on unemployment, the experts sit around a conference table and squabble over trivialities.

---

[10]"A Letter from the Blue Blouses of Russia to the W.L.T.," Workers Theatre, April 1931, p. 6.

[11]Ibid., p. 7.

> At last they hit on the idea of a 'Buy Now' campaign. In the second part of the play a worker walks along the street past several store fronts. He is unemployed --broke, but from radios and open stores he is assailed with the command: 'Buy Now!' Angry, he breaks a window and is taken to court where he tells the judge what he thinks of the 'Buy Now' campaign. The action is fast, the play taking about 20 minutes. It can be put on with about eight or ten actors and a minimum of settings.
>
> 'IT'S FUNNY AS HELL' A meeting is held to appeal for funds for the 'poor unfortunate unemployed.' There are the typical speakers: the welfare worker, the politician, the Reverand, the manufacturer. They all tell the audience of their great concern over unemployment, but--when an unemployed worker from the audience tries to present a petition to them--their true nature is exposed. The accurate realism of the play is very powerful. To put on the play, which is about 20 minutes in length, eight actors are needed.
>
> 'THE BIG STIFF' This is a short, witty burlesque. Uncle Sam is in bed with a swollen stomach. Dr. Green, Dr. Wood and Dr. Hoover try their best to revive the patient, but without success. The action takes about twelve minutes. There are nine characters.[12]

In May 1931, The New Masses carried an enthusiastic article about the appearance of the magazine Workers Theatre:

> It is the first American publication of its kind intelligently edited, attractive and deserving of attention. Isn't there someone in the country able to supply the few needed American kopecks so that so necessary and so well edited a magazine can appear in printed form? It would speed the growth of an American Workers Theatre.[13]

This gesture of support notwithstanding, Workers Theatre did not appear in printed form until May, 1932.

The linoleum block print on the cover of the May 1931 Workers Theatre depicts, appropriately enough, a parade of

---

[12]Workers Theatre, April 1931, p. 18.

[13]The New Masses, May 1931, p. 23.

workers with one of their number carrying a flag bearing the hammer and sickle emblem. Under the magazine's masthead there is the following statement: "The Workers Theatre is published monthly by the W.L.T. section of the Workers International Relief Cultural Activities Department for the publishing of articles by all workers dramatic groups."

No doubt as a part of the communist practice of rigorous self-criticism, the "Correspondence Column" was an important part of the early issues of Workers Theatre--New Theatre. In the May 1931 edition, the following note was placed under the heading for the column:

> The WORKERS THEATRE is for the workers. That it may serve them well it must have their guidance and cooperation. Readers should send criticism of the magazine articles etc. to WORKERS THEATRE 131 West 28 St. New York City.[14]

The editors headed the June 1931 Workers Theatre Correspondence Column with the statement that, "the monthly magazine Workers Theatre should be built up to be the organ of all workers' theatre groups."[15] Following this introductory statement were letters--all complimentary--from various groups, including one from the Solidarity Players of Roxbury, Massachusetts, who wrote, "We thank you a hundred fold for your publication; it provided us with valuable information and

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[14]"Note," Workers Theatre, May 1931, p. 1-b.

[15]"Correspondence Column," Workers Theatre, June 1931, p. 3-a.

inspiration."[16] The magazine Workers Theatre, in just two short months, was already approaching the goals which it had initially set for itself.

A note at the end of the June 1931 Workers Theatre indicated that an understanding had been reached between the Workers Laboratory Theatre and the Prolet-Buehne--a German-speaking workers' theatre group that had been in existence for about the same length of time as the WLT. The groups had decided that they would collaborate as the United Workers Theatres of New York. And, at the bottom of the title page of the August 1931 issue of the magazine, there appeared the following:

> NOTICE--Beginning with this issue the WORKERS THEATRE magazine is published monthly by the United Workers Theatres of New York (Workers Laboratory Theatre of the W.I.R. at 798 Broadway, N.Y. and Proletbuehne). The United Workers Theatre is planned to include all workers theatre groups in the New York area.
>
> The aim of the magazine is to stimulate the growth of Workers Theatre in the United States.[17]

Workers Theatre, as sponsored by the United Workers Theatres, continued with the same basic format and editorial policy as had been established in the earliest issues, under the sole editorship of the Workers Laboratory Theatre. A new column, "In the Red Spotlight," was added to the magazine, in its first issue under the joint management:

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[16]Solidarity Players of Roxbury Massachusetts, "Correspondence Column," Workers Theatre, June 1931, p. 3-b.

[17]Workers Theatre, August 1931, p. 2.

> In principle against all technical apparatus' complicating and slowing down the work of the Agitprop Trous [sic] we could not but approve the installation of a RED SPOTLIGHT in this magazine. As an excellent device to search up the field (of our own activities as well as those of our opponents), we offer it to the disposal of all comrade players and groups to put shortcomings, achievements and important strategic points in the right light. . . . [18]

A Children's Theatre section was also added to the magazine with this issue.

The relationship of Workers Theatre to the Communist Party remained steadfast. The October 1931 cover is a linoleum block print of a worker standing on the backs of two capitalists--who are fat, and wear top hats--and shouting through his megaphone for the magazine's readership to "Vote Communist!"

The Table of Contents of the November 1931 Workers Theatre--the eighth issue of the publication--gives an accurate indication of the type of material that was included in the magazine during its first year as a mimeographed monthly.

CONTENTS:

The negro on Broadway ____ 1
Extracts from Minutes of Enlarged Plenum of IWDU ____ 2
Song in the Class Struggle ____ 6
PLAYS
"Step on it" ____ 8
"Mr. Box, Mr. Box, and Mr. Nox" ____ 14
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WORKERS CHILDREN'S THEATRE
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News from the Children's Front ____ 25

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[18]Editorial, Workers Theatre, August 1931, p. 24.

"The History Lesson," a play 26
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With the appearance of an article by Hallie Flanagan, "A Theatre is Born," in the Theatre Arts Monthly of November 1931, the workers' theatre movement formally made its debut into the consciousness of professional theatre people. Mrs. Flanagan had attended a conference of workers' cultural societies which had been co-sponsored by the John Reed Club and The New Masses magazine. The conference was attended by delegates representing 224 workers' groups, and her attitude towards these groups and the workers' theatre movement which they represented was one of respect and, in general, sympathy.[19]

Although the editors may have been unaware of it, an article in the December 1931 Workers Theatre ended the year with a hint of what was to be the future Cominterm policy. In an editorial page report of the First Enlarged Plenum of the International Workers Dramatic Union, that had been held in Moscow from June 25 to July 2, 1931, Heinrich Diament (head of the IWDU), was quoted as saying that, "sympathetic petty bourgeois artists and intellectuals, who are being shaken loose in large numbers by the crises [sic], should be

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

drawn into the workers' theatre."[20] Here was a whisper of the Popular Front philosophy which was not to be formally declared until August 1935, but which would soon slowly begin to become evident in the policies of the left-wing movement and in the pages of Workers Theatre.

Less than a year after the Moscow IWDU Plenum, at the 14th Central Committee Plenum of the American Communist Party, in 1932, it was declared that the keynote for party work was, " . . . to overcome the isolation of the party from the decisive masses of the American proletariat. . . . It must begin an essential change in the methods of mass work and above all root itself in the decisive industries."[21]

This slight shift of the party towards center, in order to accomodate a larger strata of the population was mirrored, in effect, by a move to the left, on the part of a number of well-known intellectuals. In September 1932, a group which called itself The League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, published a 30-page pamphlet entitled, Culture and Crisis, An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists, and Other Professional Workers of America.

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[20]Editorial, Workers Theatre, December 1931, p. 3.

[21]"Toward Rebolutionary Mass Work," Resolution CC of CPUSA, 1932, quoted in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party--A Critical History (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957; reprint ed., New York: Praeger Paperbacks, 1962), p. 218.

After outlining the background and history of the political, economic and social situation as they perceived it, the authors of Culture and Crisis came to the following conclusions:

> We, too, the intellectual workers, are of the oppressed, and until we shake off the servile habit of that oppression we shall build blindly and badly to the lunatic specifications of ignorance and greed. If we are capable of building a civilization, surely it is time for us to begin; time for us to assess our function or responsibility; time for us to renew the pact of comradeship with the struggling masses, trapped by the failure of leadership in the blind miseries of a crumbling madhouse. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The struggle for the emancipation of society from the blight of capitalism is not only an economic question, it is a cultural question as well. Both in theory and in practice, capitalism is hostile to the genuine culture of the past and bitterly opposed to the new cultural tendencies which have grown out of the epic working-class struggle for a new society. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> In the interests of a truly human society in which all forms of exploitation have been abolished; in behalf of a new cultural renaissance which will produce integrated, creative personalities, we call upon all men and women--especially workers in the professions and the arts--to join in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism under the leadership of the Communist Party.
>
> Vote Communist--For Foster and Ford--
> On November 8.[22]

Among the fifty-three signatories of Culture and Crisis were Edmund Wilson (one of its authors), Sherwood Anderson, Sidney Howard, Langston Hughes and John Dos Passos.

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[22]League of Professional Groups for Foster and Ford, Culture and Crisis, An Open Letter to the Writers, Artists, Teachers, Physicians, Engineers, Scientists and Other Professional Workers of America (pamphlet, 1932), pp. 29-30.

When the first anniversary issue of Workers Theatre was published, in April 1932, the circulation of the magazine had expanded to 1,000 copies per month. The growth of the magazine during its first year, and the anticipation of continued growth in the future, made possible the following exciting announcement:

> Comrade Readers and Comrade Players:
>
> Here is good news for you, for your group, for the Workers Theatre movement, and for the whole revolutionary movement: The May Issue of Workers Theatre will be Printed as a Special Conference and Spartakiade Edition.[23]

In the lead editorial of the April 1932 anniversary issue, "A Year of Workers Theatre Magazine," the editors reviewed the magazine's short history and assessed its accomplishments:

> In March 1931 the Workers Laboratory Theatre . . . appointed an editorial committee, advanced a loan of $5, $6 was collected among comrades and work was begun. The magazine was divided into four sections, a comrade was assigned to each section to edit, stencil and memiograph it, and a comrade was assigned to make the cut for the cover on linoleum. A bottle of printers' ink was bought, a typewriter roller was borrowed for spreading the ink and using a tailor's iron the cover was printed. The whole membership of the WLT was then drafted to assemble and clip it and thus the first 200 copies of the Workers Theatre magazine came out in April 1931, proving that, given collective cooperation and a united will it is possible to publish a magazine on an expenditure of $11. . . .
> . . . . . .

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[23] Workers Theatre, April 1932, p. 1.

> The achievements of the magazine should not be reckoned on the basis of publication and circulation figures, however. They should rather be reckoned on the basis of usefulness to the movement. Considered from that angle, the magazine has proven its usefulness. . . .[24]

Among the accomplishments which the editors attributed to Workers Theatre, were the following:

--the publication of plays which had been helpful to workers' theatre groups

--the criticism of plays that had helped the playwrights

--the magazine's having helped to raise relief money as well as mass sentiment

--the cooperation of Workers Theatre in the election campaign

--the fact that Workers Theatre was being read in New York, California, Texas, Canada, Tokyo, Moscow, Berlin, Amsterdam and London

--". . . as a result of its constructive policy the magazine is highly thought of even by many theatre workers not identified with our movement."[25]

The editorial concluded with a glance towards the future and a reaffirmation of the magazine's purpose.

> . . . On this first anniversary of the Workers' Theatre magazine we send revolutionary greetings to the first

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[24]"A Year of Workers Theatre Magazine," Workers Theatre, April 1932, p. 3.

[25]Ibid., p. 4.

> National Workers' Theatre Conference and to all our readers who made our contribution possible. We urge them to take pride in our common work for unlike the bourgeois theatre, we do not run away from life, we face life. Shoulder to shoulder with the workers we fight on all fronts, not as actors or writers, but as workers--first and last--workers helping to dramatize, organize, propagate the class struggle.[26]

The format of the first anniversary issue of Workers Theatre was essentially the same as it had been during its first year of publication. And foremost in the editors' minds, was the printed issue which had been promised for May. All through the magazine there were reminders such as, "The continuation of 'WORKERS THEATRE' in printed form must be garanteed [sic] by a RECORD CIRCULATION of the first printed issue,"[27] and, "The RATES FOR THE PRINTED 'WORKERS THEATRE' are not higher than they were for the mimeographed addition [sic] . . . ORDER YOUR ORGANIZATIONS BUNDLES NOW!!!"[28] and, finally, "APPOINT ONE COMRADE IN YOUR GROUP TO SEND REGULARLY REPORTS, NEWS, REVIEWS, CONTRIBUTIONS TO DISCUSSIONS TO 'WORKERS THEATRE'!!!!!!!!"[29]

The first National Workers' Theatre Spartakiade, or "revolutionary competiton," took place on April 16, 1932 at the Manhattan Lyceum in New York City. On the following

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[26]Ibid.

[27]Workers Theatre, April 1932, p. 2.

[28]Ibid., p. 12.

[29]Ibid., p. 31.

day, in the same location, the "First National Workers' Theatre Conference on the Development, Prospects and Tasks of the Workers' Theatre in the United States" was held.[30]

In celebration of this event, and as had been promised in the April issue, the May 1932 installment of Workers Theatre appeared in printed form. A turning-point had indeed been reached by the magazine. In recognition of the importance that this advance had for the workers' movement as a whole, a nmmber of organizations took out advertisements in the magazine, voicing their congratulations at its accomplishment. Prominent among the advertisements placed by such groups as the Trade Union Unity Council, Der Arbeiter, The League of Struggle for Negro Rights and The New Masses, was the following:

> Greetings to 'WORKERS THEATRE' from the Communist Party N.Y. District
>
> The Communist Party warmly greets the proletarian Theatre Groups: The Workers Theatre, the Agitprop Groups have already demonstrated that the workers theatre is a powerful weapon in the class struggle. The Communist Party is confident that the splendid work of the theatre groups will be especially evident in the election campaign struggle to win the masses for the program of uncompromising, militant class struggle against the capitalist hunger and war offensive.
>
> LONG LIFE TO THE PROLETARIAN THEATRE. District Committee, C.P.N.Y.[31]

The masthead for the May 1932 Workers Theatre reads:

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[30] Workers Theatre, May 1932, p. 3.

[31] Ibid., p. 2.

'WORKERS THEATRE'
Official Organ of the League of Workers Theatres
Section of the International of U.S.A.
Workers Dramatic Union

On the left side of the masthead, is the symbol of the IWDU--a globe with a worker standing on it: his right hand, fist clenched, is held high, and he holds a banner in his left hand. The symbol as a whole abstractly suggests the hammer and sickle emblem of the Soviet Union.

"This number of WORKERS THEATRE is of great significance of [sic] the workers' revolutionary threatre movement," reads the lead editorial. "It is at once a conclusion and a beginning. This first printed number marks the climax of forces that have been busy laying the groundwork throughout the United States for a proletarian theatre. . . ."[30] The May 1932 issue of Workers Theatre was devoted to a complete coverage of the first Workers Theatre Spartakiade and Conference. "We do not have to apologize for the detail in which we have reported the conference," wrote the editors. "It was a great historic event, and this number of WORKERS THEATRE is a [sic] historic number."[33]

The major accomplishment of the conference had been the formation of the "League of Workers Theatres of U.S.A.," (LOWT) as a section of the Interantional Workers Dramatic Union. LOWT's constitution was published in this first issue

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[32]Editorial, Workers Theatre, May 1932, p. 3.

[33]Ibid.

of Workers Theatre appearing under its auspices. Items 2, 3 and 4, under Section I, "Name and Tasks," are of particular interest.

> 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 and material, political information, training of the 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 the possibilities of the workers theatres
> -by exposing the class character of the bourgeois theatre
> d) To develop new groups where and when it is necessary
> e) To establish contacts with all sympathetic elements in the bourgeois theatre and to make it possible for them to participate in the workers theatre movement
> 4. The official organ of the organization is "Workers Theatre."[34]

The workers' theatre movement had grown to such an extent that a larger superstructure than the United Workers Theatres of New York was needed to coordinate it. LOWT had been set up to take on this work, which included the publication of Workers Theatre--work that the Workers Laboratory Theatre had originally intended to be done by the magazine

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

itself.

Item 18 in the constitution, under Section III, "Structure of the Organization," read, "The EDITORIAL COMMITTEE OF 'WORKERS THEATRE' consists of the Editor and two associate editors. The editorial board of nine (which includes the three editors) decides on the policy and the contents of the magazine."[35] The editorial board remained anonymous, however, until the April 1933 issue, by which time its number had been increased to sixteen.

In the main editorial of the May 1932 Workers Theatre, the aims of the magazine as well as the responsibilities of its readership were once again spelled out.

> WORKERS THEATRE is the national organ of the League of Workers Theatres of the United States. It must be the national organ in fact as well as in name. Cooperate with us. Give us a chance to cooperate with you. Make WORKERS THEATRE a national platform for your ideas and your criticism. Do your share to make WORKERS THEATRE a mass magazine, and you will be helping to build up the solid red front of a mass revolutionary workers' theatre.[36]

The "Dram Buro Report" by John Bonn, the Buro's chairman (and also the head of the German-speaking Proplet Buehne), and "The Judges Award, by Nathaniel Buchwald of the Yiddish Artef Theatre, were the two major articles in the special Spartakiade and Conference edition of Workers Theatre. Both pieces were taken from reports that had been delivered

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[35]Ibid.

[36]Editorial, Workers Theatre, May 1932, p. 3.

at the Conference on April 17.

In his report, Bonn summarized the history of the workers' theatre movement and reviewed the aesthetic debate which had been carried out in the pages of Workers Theatre, during the previous year. The debate had concerned the form and content, as well as the methods of work appropriate to the workers' theatre. Bonn's point of view was a reassertion of the Third Period policy that was still very much in force. But it also indicated the realization on the part of the communists that they could no longer work independently and expect the politically uncommitted to drift into their camp. Some adjustments in their position were necessary. Bonn stated that,

> Our attitude toward the bourgeois theatre was up to now incorrect. I in particular had taken a wrong leftist standpoint in my report at the Workers' Cultural Conference on June 14, 1931, when I stated that there is no relation between the bourgeois theatre and the workers' theatre, . . . This attitude led to a dangerous neglect of the bourgeois theatre. But after a closer study and wider experience I now fully agree with my critics who urged a more active attitude toward the bourgeois theatre. The bourgeois theatre as an instrument of our class enemy must be fought by exposing its class character to the workers, by replacing it with a qualified workers' theatre art [my emphasis]. As a victim of capitalist decay the bourgeois theatre must be attacked by approaching those who are affected by the crisis, in order to win them over into the ranks of the class conscious militant workers.[37]

Here, for the first time, was an official sign of a slight shifting of emphasis in the art versus propaganda

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[37]John Bonn, "The Dram Buro Report," Workers Theatre, May 1932, p. 8.

discussion. The days of the Popular Front and of being satisfied with plays that had vague messages of social import were far from imminent, however. Bonn declared that, "not before every group considers itself as a Shock Brigade and each group member feels as a soldier in the class struggle can we expect to fulfill the other prerequisite of our work: Proletarian discipline--voluntary discipline as a result of political training."[38] What the communists, Bonn and the workers' theatre movement as a whole had come to realize was the necessity for the workers' theatre to discover a method to propagandize while entertaining.

In his article, "The Judges Award," Nathaniel Buchwald considered the plays that had been presented at the Spartakiade, by the various workers' groups, and announced the winners of the competition:

> First Place--The German ProletBuehne for their "15 Minute Red Revue";
> Second Place--Jack London Group of Newark for their play called "Charity";
> Third Place--John Reed Group of Philadelphia for a play called "We Demand."
> The second and third winning plays were written by members of the Workers Laboratory Theatre.[39]

All of these plays were of the non-realistic and overtly didactic agit-prop (agitation and propaganda) variety which was still the primary style used at that time.

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[38]Ibid.

[39]Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Judges Award," Workers Theatre, May 1932, p. 13.

The June-July, August and September-October 1932 issues of Workers Theatre continued to appear in printed form. The magazine's length was increased from fifteen to twenty-four pages, and it seemed that it was wielding a greater influence than might have been expected for such a short period of time.

Each month, several agit-prop plays, such as "15 Minute Red Revue," "Vote Communist" and "Hands Off!" (in the June-July issue) were published as a standard part of the magazine's format. Beginning with the June-July edition, a list of plays available to the workers' theatre groups through LOWT appeared inside the front cover of Workers Theatre. The first list included thirty plays for adult groups and five for children's theatre groups.

Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film were in difficult financial straits during the entire six and one-half years of their publication. This was due, no doubt, to the refusal of the magazine's editorial board, until March 1937, to raise the price of a copy above the 15¢ which it had first charged when the magazine appeared in mimeographed form. Rather than increasing the price of the magazine, the management depended on the revenue raised through benefits and subscription drives to cover the expenses of publication.

Because the magazine was having money problems, a "Solidarity Competition," with a goal of 500 new subscribers

by December 15, was launched in the September-October 1932 Workers Theatre.

> This means: . . . that we cancel the financial difficulties which kept 'Workers Theatre' from appearing on time every month. 'Workers Theatre' must appear regularly. Because the workers' theatre groups need it regularly for plays, for technical advice, for exchange of experience, for theoretical clarification. Because everyone interested or busy in theatre needs it regularly for full information on the revolutionary theatre as well as on the economic, political, and artistic aspect of the bourgeois theatre.[40]

First prize, for the most subscriptions, was a typewriter or $25 worth of books; a Lenin Statue was offered for promptness in sending in new subscriptions.[41]

It is not clear as to how many new subscribers were brought in by the Solidarity Competition. Apparently there were not enough, however, because Workers Theatre was not published in November or in December, 1932.

When the January-February 1933 issue of the magazine appeared, it was, once again, in mimeographed form; this time, with a printed cover and photographs, as well as line drawings. Surprisingly, the management had lowered the price of the magazine to 10¢ a copy. The reasons for the magazine's not being in printed form were explained in the editorial:

> Our magazine, Workers Theatre, will from now on take on the responsibility of giving concrete guidance to the

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[40]Editorial, Workers Theatre, September-October 1933, p. 10.

[41]Ibid.

> development of the groups. For that reason we are forced to issue it in a new form. A regularly printed magazine at this time requires the energy of most of the groups in the capacity of money-raising agencies. This situation cannot continue. Groups must develop themselves organizationally, artistically and politically. . . .[42]

Workers Theatre continued as a mimeographed monthly, until the January 1934 number, the magazine's second issue as New Theatre.

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On March 25, 1933, in a rather delayed response to Hitler's rise to power three months earlier, The Daily Worker called for "A United Front to Fight Fascism."[43] Two articles in the April issue of The New Masses--one by Joseph Freeman; the other by Michael Gold--continued along the line indicated by The Daily Worker.

In a piece calling for writers to speak out against Nazi atrocities and fascism, Gold wrote, "Every anti-fascist is needed in this united front. There must be no factional quarrels."[44] Gold made it clear that he did not agree with the various political opinions of many of the working-class organizations whose cooperation he solicited. There was simply a practical need for unity in the fight against fascism.

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[42]Editorial, Workers Theatre, January-February 1933, p. 2.

[43]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 155.

[44]Michael Gold, "Noted American Writers Join United Front Protest Against Nazi Atrocities. Warn Against Fascist Danger in U.S.A. Urge Powerful United Movement Against Capitalist Terror," The New Masses, April 1933, p. 11.

The move towards the Popular Front declaration (still two years away)--which would stress the forgetting of political differences--had been, nonetheless, irrevocably initiated.

An editorial entitled, "On Every Important Sector of the Theatre Front--Workers Theatre Takes on New Tasks" and signed "B. B." (probably Ben Blake who was listed as the editor of Workers Theatre, in the next issue), appeared in the March 1933 number. In this article, Blake concerned himself only with Workers Theatre and its relationship to the growing workers' theatre movement, and made no reference either to the political situation abroad or to the Party Line as it was developing in this country. But the changing approach to the bourgeois theatre, as articulated by Blake, suggested the broadening outlook that the Party had begun to adopt:

> We shall center our publishing activities around the building up ofthe workers theatre groups. We shall do this directly with material of, by, and for the immediate use of the groups. But we shall also do it indirectly--by broadening the scope of the magazine to cover every important sector of the theatre, in line with the program of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatre (IURT). Thus we shall be able to win over the best workers, artists, and intellectuals now in the various sectors of the bourgeois theatre or under its influence [my emphasis].[45]

Blake proposed no backing down from the political tenor of the workers' theatre. By including articles on all aspects

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[45]B.B., "On Every Important Sector of the Theatre Front--Workers Theatre Takes on New Tasks," Workers Theatre, March 1933, p. 11.

of the bourgeois theatre, in the magazine, he hoped to draw those bourgeois theatre workers who were unemployed, disenfranchised and disillusioned, into the camp of the radical workers' theatre. The decision to change the methods of the workers' theatre and to tone down its political content was still a few months in the future.

An article entitled, "For the Theatre of Action," and signed by the "National Executive Committee, LOWT," appeared in the July-August 1933 Workers Theatre. The need for a new aspect for the workers' theatre movement, and the reasons for this need were clearly expressed by the authors of the piece:

> We are a consciously political theatre, as most of the bourgeois theatre is not. Yet it is important for us to avoid the unnecessary handicaps of prejudices and disinterest in our work which is created by an overabundant use of non-theatrical langauge. Visitors to a meeting of many of our workers' theatres would have difficulty in realizing that they were at a threatre group; what with most of the talking involving words like 'agitprop,' 'organizer,' 'cadres,' 'Spartakiad,' 'functionaries,' 'lines,' the visitors--and prospective members--are quite likely either not to know what it is all about or to conclude that it is exclusively politcs rather than theatre that concerns this particular group.[46]

It was in recognition of the above-stated situation, and in culmination of a series of changes that had begun to take shape at the First National Workers Theatre Conference a year earlier, that the editors of Workers Theatre announced that the magazine would next appear as New Theatre. The lead

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[46]National Executive Commitee LOWT, "For the Theatre of Action," Workers Theatre, July-August 1933, p. 15.

editorial of the July-August 1933 issue, "Workers Theatre to become New Theatre," explained that people active in the professional theatre were showing an increasing interest in the workers' theatre. New theatres which were dissatisfied with the bourgeois theatre, but which had no particular direction of their own, were springing up in increasing numbers. "In this situation," wrote the editors,

> . . . the National Executive Committee of the League of Workers Theatres deems it advisable to broaden the Magazine Workers Theatre to make it a mouthpiece also of these 'new Theatres,' in order that by mutual discussion and criticism we may arrive at a clearer conception of the function of the present day theatre as a force towards the better theatre and better world. Furthermore, Workers Theatre as at present titled does not convey the fact that it regularly contains articles and comment on significant events in the bourgeois theatre.[47]

Workers Theatre would become New Theatre in September. The editors wanted to assure their readers, however, that this change would not entail any political backsliding:

> Of course the basic element of the new theatre, both in world of the theatre and in our magazine, is and cannot but be the revolutionary workers theatre centering around the League of Workers Theatres of the U.S.A.
>
> Long life to the New Theatre![48]

A photograph of Ulan-Bator-Hote, "Actress of the Mongolian Theatre," appears on the cover of the September-October 1933 New Theatre. The title of the main article in the issue: "Prospects for the American Theatre . . . by Sidney

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[47]"Workers Theatre to Become New Theatre," Workers Theatre, July-August 1933, p. 2.

[48]Ibid.

Howard, Alfred Kreymborg, Barrett Clark, Anita Block, Rose McClendon, Albert Maltz, Frank Gilmore, Paul Peters," was printed on the bottom of the cover. New Theatre's editors were obviously out to impress their potential readers with the diversity of the remodeled magazine's contents. The price of the magazine was still ten cents a copy; it had remained in typewritten mimeographed form, although it had been increased in length to twenty-seven pages.

The masthead of this first number of New Theatre read, "Organ of the Workers Theatres of U.S.A. (Section of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres and American Dance League)."[49] To the left of the masthead, was the symbol of the IURT which was precisely the same as that of the International Workers Dramatic Union.[50]

With some very minor and, for our purposes, unimportant changes, the Editorial Board of this first New Theatre was practically identical to that which had been listed in Workers Theatre, beginning with the April 1933 issue:

> Ben Blake
> Mignon Verne, Albert Gilman, David Platt, Associate Eds.
> Jac, Chas. Dibner, Art Eds.
> V. Cutler, L. Glass, S. Pevzner
> A. Dour, A. Howe, A. Prentis
> A. Gilman, Bus Mgr.

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[49]The name of the parent Soviet organization had been changed, on the masthead, as of the March 1933 Workers Theatre--in response to the re-organization of the IWDU into the IURT that had recently taken place in the USSR.

[50]See above, p. 27.

Many of the people on this Board--Blake, Bonn, Elion, Howe, Prentis--had been contributors to Workers Theatre from its earliest days.

The lead editorial indicated the goals of the magazine's management and also their optimistic outlook, insofar as the accomplishment of these goals was concerned.

> With this issue, what has heretofore been WORKERS THEATRE now becomes NEW THEATRE. The change is more than a change in name. It signifies a broader conception of the revolutionary workers' theatre as the historical successor of the bourgeois theatre, the theatre that as an element of the system of capitalism has already made its contribution to the development of culture and now is in the period of decay.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The workers' theatre now understands that this [sic] professional theatre workers and artists who are being expelled by the thousands from the bourgeois theatre must now be attracted to the revolutionary theatre, where they can give training to the workers, farmers, and students, and where they can practice their art in a more socially useful way than they ever could before. This understanding must be reflected in NEW THEATRE.[51]

A questionnaire entitled "Prospects for the American Theatre," and the responses of the individuals who had been listed on the magazine's cover, comprised the feature article in the September-October 1933 New Theatre. In their introduction to the survey, the editors explained that it had been undertaken in the hope that "the replies to the questionnaire [would] result in a reconsideration of values throughout the American theatre."[52]

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[51]Editorial, New Theatre, September-October 1933, p. 3.

[52]"Prospects for the American Theatre," New Theatre, September-October 1933, p. 5.

The questionnaire, the editors explained, had been sent out to leading theatre artists who represented a wide spectrum of political thinking. The majority of the replies were from playwrights. Most of the respondents were not optimistic that the theatre as it stood would have a healthy future. All of those responding agreed that no subject should be excluded from the theatre. Most of the individuals who sent back answers to the questionnaire felt that revolutionary plays would be likely to fail on Broadway. The majority of those participating in the survey also believed that there was a need for an American workers' theatre; some believed it to be the only hope of the theatre.

The responses to the survey appeared in the September-October, 1933 and the January, February and March 1934 issues of NEW THEATRE. The questions were as follows:

1. Do you believe that the American Theatre will recover from its present decline? Why?

2. Should the theatre
   a. Serve as an escape from life
   b. Reflect contemporary social conflicts
   c. Should it exclude class struggle from its themes?

3. Which outlook upon life offers the greatest creative stimulation for the dramatist of today?
   a. Conservative
   b. Fascist
   c. Liberal
   d. Revolutionary

4. Do you believe that the trend indicated by such plays as Steel, 1931, and We, The People is a factor making for a better theatre or a worse one?
   b. Can revolutionary plays (of the type referred to above) succeed on Broadway?

5a. Is there a need for a workers' theatre in America--a theatre consciously reflecting the viewpoint of the workingclass?
b. Have you seen a performance by a workers' theatre group?
c. Do you believe that the workers' theatre holds any promise for the future of the theatre in America?

6a. To what do you attribute the tremendous vitality of the Soviet Theatre?
b. Do you believe that this theatre marks an advance of the theatrical art?
c. What, in general, can the American Theatre learn from the Soviet Theatre?

The questionnaire had clearly been designed with the intention of leading those polled towards certain--in the eyes of the editors--inescapable conclusions. The responses of the individuals who participated in the survey were entirely predictable and were in accordance with their generally known political positions. Of the twenty-seven theatre people who responded to the questionnaire, eighteen were known either as Party members or as left-wing sympathizers. Their answers were, for the most part, in line with what had been intended by the editors.

Among the nine non-leftists who replied to the questionnaire were Rose McClendon, a well-known Black actress--a liberal; Frank Gilmore, the rather conservative president of Actors' Equity who had frequently come under attack by Workers Theatre; Paul Green, a liberal and an optimist; Lee Simonson, who found the tact taken by the editors in the survey irritating; Alfred Harding, Barrett H. Clark, Glenn Hughes, Hiram Motherwell and Worthington Minor--all of whom

seemed to be only vaguely aware of the workers' theatre and of the developing left-wing theatre movement.[53]

Among the other articles in the September-October 1933 New Theatre, were the announcement of a playwriting contest sponsored by LOWT, a piece entitled "Creative Drama on the Relief March," and the first installment of a two-part article by Mordecai Gorelik--"Scenery--The Visual Machine."

Gorelik's article was indicative of the growing desire, on the part of the left-wing theatre workers for their theatre to be able to compete with the professional theatre. This desire was coupled with the fear that they would have to compromise themselves politically, in order to be able to compete artistically. Gorelik attempted to dispell this fear by the application of the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism, to what he saw as the predetermined history of the theatre arts in the United States.

> A correct revolutionary viewpoint leads to the following conclusions: The designer sees the necessity for a new technique of stage design; at the same time he does not turn his back on the achievements of the bourgeois stage. A critical appreciation of the past achievements of the theatre in necessary to the theatre worker, who otherwise becomes sectarian and ignorant of the craft. It is necessary for the designer to realize that the expression of revolutionary content will be hampered, perhaps seriously, by lack of revolutionary technique; at the same time the present bourgeois technique, critically handled, is the basis of proletarian technique; in fact the full flowering of technique can only take place under proletarian auspices, since this development

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[53]A thorough analysis of the "Prospects for the American Theatre" survey can be found in Appendix B.

> is arrested by the inevitable contraction of the bourgeois economy.[54]

A review of a satirical revue entitled World's Fair--which had been prepared for a Daily Worker picnic by the Workers Laboratory Theatre--as well as some excerpts from the production, were published in the September-October 1933 New Theatre. The inclusion of this material in this first issue of the magazine in its new form, provided additional support for the editors' contention that the publication was still dedicated to the revolutionary class struggle. The main sketch in World's Fair was entitled "House of Morgan"; and the following chorus from a song in this sketch, "The Banker's Song," is representative of the style and the content of the revue:

> Chorus:
> We'll solve this problem
> It's quite elementary
> You just burn half your crop
> The other half you bury
> And this will send the prices high
> The people all will start to cry.
>
> Roosevelt:
> I do not doubt it
> But business must meet its expense
> And if the workers have no pants
> They'll have to do without it.
> So,--
> Bosses, grafters have no fear
> Our capitalism is ruling here
> Land of gang and racketeer
> Capitalism's ruling here.[55]

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[54]Mordecai Gorelik, "Scenery--The Visual Machine," New Theatre, September-October 1933, p. 12.

[55]Excerpt from "The Banker's Song," World's Fair, New Theatre, September-October 1933, p. 16.

To the right of "The Banker's Song," was a cartoon showing Roosevelt manipulating two marionettes who, with their brains exposed, represented the Brain Trust, and were staring into a "magic NRA crystal."

A report on the International Workers Theatre Olympiad; a column headed "Theatre of Action--Coast to Coast"--which contained reports on the various workers' theatre groups, including a report on the Group Theatre; sections on Dance and Film; and the perennial "From Our Correspondence" column, comprised the remainder of the material in the first issue of New Theatre.

On the inside of the front cover of the September-October 1933 New Theatre, was the statement, "New Theatre needs 1000 new subscriptions by January 1, 1934." Subscriptions were one dollar a year. The proposed format for the October issue of the magazine appeared under the request for support. New Theatre was not issued again, however, until January 1934.

Between 1931, when Workers Theatre was first written, assembled and mailed out by the members of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, and 1934, the membership of the American Communist Party had increased from 9,257 to 23,467.[56] The tone taken in the lead editorial of the January 1934 New Theatre indicates the confidence on the part of its editors

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[56]Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 225.

that their potential audience had more than doubled. The magazine was back in printed form--this time, the editors hoped, for good.

> Credo
> . . . we take our prerogative, as the courts of last resort. Add we mean to use it, in these columns and in the theatre. Our seal of approval and our roar of censure shall mark the fate of the future American drama. Perhaps you will listen to us, brothers, Producer, Director, Actor, Playwright, Designer. We take our place as an integral part of the theatre. We are the Audience.[57]

There were some new names among those credited on the masthead of the January 1934 New Theatre. Ben Blake was still the editor, but several of the original members of the Editorial Board were, inexplicably, not listed. The most significant change in the masthead was the inclusion of an impressive group of thirty-one "Contributing Editors" which included John Howard Lawson, Lee Strasberg, Friedrich Wolf, Romain Rolland, Vsevelod Meyerhold, Sergei Tretyakov and Heinreich Diament. This list would change--quite often drastically--from month to month, as more "names" came into the movement, and as the evolving Popular Front demeanor of the magazine necessitated removing some of its more radical contributors from the masthead.

Although the appeal of the magazine was still for revolutionary change, its scope had broadened markedly from the September-October issue. The sections on film--actually

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[57]Editorial, New Theatre, January 1934, p. 2.

headed "Movies"--and dance were enlarged, and of the eight plays reviewed, seven were Broadway productions, although the reviewers of these latter productions, predictably, found little in them to admire.

The Left finally had a professional theatre company: the Theatre Union had been launched with a production of Peace on Earth, by George Sklar and Albert Maltz. The workers' theatre movement was growing in many parts of the world. Groups from England, Norway, Switzerland, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France and Czechoslovakia ahd atteneded the September 1933 Workers' Theatre Olympiad, in Moscow. LOWT had not had the funds to send a delegation to that conference. Nathaniel Buchwald who had recently returned from a year's visit to the U.S.S.R., wrote an article for New Theatre, in which he extolled the advances that had been made in the production techniques of several of the New York workers' theatre groups during the year of his absence. A second National Workers Theatre Festival was being scheduled to be held in Chicago in April. In the eyes of the New Theatre editors, the new year had started propitiously.

Although the content of the January 1934 New Theatre was still entirely radical, it now had a considerably more professional appearance. The magazine was attractively printed, and its layout made it easy and pleasant to read. And gone forever were the broad political cartoons which depicted fat, cigar-smoking capitalists being outwitted by

muscular, intelligent, and optimistically determined looking workers.

Two articles in the February 1934 New Theatre--"Community House Drama," by Leon Bloch and "Meet the Theatre Union," by Emery Northrup--are especially interesting in our consideration of the development of the magazine and of the left-wing theatre movement as well. Bloch's piece, "Community House Drama," is significant because it is illustrative of the broadening vistas of the left-wing theatre movement. The community theatres--or "new theatres," as they were called, in the final issue of Workers Theatre[58]--had suddenly taken on an interest for the Left. Here were theatres with personnel and, what was more important, with audiences who already had the theatregoing habit. The Left perceived the potential advantages that could be gained by assuming influential positions within these groups. Essentially, it was an attempted application of the "front" method, to the already established community theatres. If the members of the groups could be made more socially aware, they would be amenable to doing plays with broad social messages. Little by little, it was hoped, individuals in the groups would become more politically committed, and would spread their newly acquired consciousness, both to the rest of their group and to their audiences, through their increasingly political repertory.

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[58]See above, p. 36.

"Community House Drama" was addressed to workers or potential workers in community theatres. Bloch simply asked the groups to take their work more seriously. There wasn't, nor would there ever be, any mention of propaganda or revolutionary change, in his appeal, or in later appeals in New Theatre, aimed at the community theatres. "The function of the community house theatre," wrote Bloch, "is admittedly two horned. Primarily the aim of the group is, and should be, to provide a means of social and cultural development. Secondarily, it should aim at a maximum development of artistic skill, on the part of its members, in the various theatre arts."[59]

Emery Northrup's article about the Theatre Union is important, because of the nature of that organization. The two basic concepts on which the Theatre Union had been founded, according to Northrup, were:

1. That there was an immediate need for a workers' theatre to produce plays with workingclass propaganda content.

2. That such a theatre must compete in technical skill and artistic attraction with the Broadway theatre and the Hollywood movie; and yet be so cheap in price that the average workers, who [coud] not lay out $2.20 for a Broadway seat, could attend.[60]

Northrup wrote about the methods of the Theatre Union, their organizational set-up, the politics of their members and

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[59]Leon Bloch, "Community House Drama, New Theatre, February 1934, p. 5.

[60]Emery Northrup, "Meet theTheatre Union," New Theatre, February 1934, p. 8.

their anticipated repertory. What he did not spell out, and what was most significant about the group, in terms of the times, was that it was a truly Popular Front organization: its members and its management were committed to the class struggle, but the group did not require adherence to any particular party line. Until the Popular Front was formally adopted a year later, the Theatre Union would be criticized in New Theatre, from time to time, for not imparting the "correct" social messages in its productions.

On the inside of the back cover of the February 1934 New Theatre, is an advertisement by the Repertory Service of the League of Workers Theatres. Seventeen short plays--mostly of the agitprop type--and six full-length ("in book form") plays, including 1931, by Claire and Paul Sifton, Roar China, by Tretyakov, and Can You Hear Their Voices?, by Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Clifford, are listed.[61]

With the April 1934 issue, Herbert Kline replaced Leon Bloch as Managing Editor of New Theatre. On April 13-15, the Second National Workers Theatre Festival was held in Chicago. At the Festival, a commission on LOWT organizational matters recommended that a new editor be chosen for New Theatre. The delegates to the Festival passed this recommendation, and, as of the July-August 1934 issue, Kline became the editor of the magazine. The Workers Laboratory Theatre

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[61] New Theatre, February, 1934, p. 23.

was also going through some organizational changes. Shortly before the Second National Workers Theatre Festival, the group had severed its connection with the Workers International Relief. This new independence allowed the WLT greater freedom in its choice of material.[62]

The attempt that was being made by New Theatre to appeal to all strata of theatre workers was clearly demonstrated by the publication, in the April 1934 issue of the magazine, of an article on "How to make your own Lights" (using coffee cans and funnels)--obviously aimed at the amateur theatre worker--side by side with a lengthy analysis of a strike by the cast of the Broadway production of Sailor Beware.

Evidently the magazine's methods of reaching out to an increasingly diverse audience were not considered satisfactory by many of the activists in the workers' theatre movement. The following editorial appeared in the May 1934 New Theatre:

> Sharp criticism of the editorial policy of New Theatre was voiced by delegates from several workers theatre groups at the Chicago Festival. The main point of this criticism stated that New Theatre was not sufficiently reflecting the activities and experiences of the workers theatre movement but was giving too much attention to Broadway.
>
> The National Executive Committee of the League of Workers Theatres and the Editorial Board are taking steps to improve New Theatre along this line. . . . Theatre,

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[62]Jay Williams, Stage Left, p. 73.

> film and dance groups as well as individual readers are urged to send in letters of criticism and suggestions at once. . . .[63]

Although the magazine's editors earnestly wished to be responsive to all of the various groups, the necessity for the left-wing theatre movement to professionalize in order to grow, would continue to take New Theatre in the direction to which the delegates of the Workers Theatre Festival had raised objections.

New Theatre, in spite of its more prosperous appearance, was apparently still having money problems. A proposal had been passed at the Chicago Festival to hold a "New Theatre Week" during which the groups were to work to stimulate support for the magazine. "In view of the pressing situation, New Theatre Week that year [was] set from May 20 to 27. . . ."[64] The price of the magazine was, nevertheless, not increased.

As a part of the "New Theatre Week," the first of many "New Theatre Nights" was held on May 20, 1934, at the Civic Repertory Theatre--home of the Theatre Union. Tickets ranged in price from twenty-five to seventy-five cents. The program which was attended by 1,400 people, included a scene from Marion Models, Inc., performed by the Theatre Collective; a scene from In the Tradition, by Virgil Geddes and the dramatic poem, America, America, by Alfred Kreymborg--both

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[63]Editorial, New Theatre, May 1934, p. 2.

[64]Ibid.

presented by the Repertory Playhouse Associates; satirical songs and sketches by Bobby Lewis and Tony Kraber (of the Group Theatre); songs by Georgette Harvey and the Stevedore Singers (of the Theatre Union); and Newsboy, performed by the Shock Troupe of the Workers Laboratory Theatre.[65]

In reviewing the first "New Theatre Night," the editors of New Theatre--who had been able to announce that the magazine's circulation had doubled in the past six months--wrote, ". . . significant . . . was the tremendous turnout of playgoers--workers, artists, students, intellectuals and theatre people, including theatre workers from Broadway. The audience of the revolutionary theatre is there. The next step is the organization of this audience."[66]

A consideration of the potential use of New Theatre to influence bourgeois "little theatre" groups, was also included in the June 1934 editorial column. "New Theatre is the most effective medium in winning over the more thoughtful members in these groups, who can swing whole groups over to the revolutionary threatre."[67] Furthermore, in order to be able to compete with all other theatre publications of the day, " . . . steps [had] been taken to get articles on the theatre and film by outstanding writers, articles that

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[65]Editorial, New Theatre, June 1934, p. 4.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[would] raise the quality of New Theatre to a higher level than ever before."[68]

When Herbert Kline became the editor of New Theatre, as of the July-August 1934 issue, the magazine became even more professional and prosperous in appearance. The physical size of Workers Theatre, except for the first printed issue, in May 1932, was 8 by 10 1/2 inches. From its first appearance as New Theatre, the magazine was increased to 8 1/2 by 12 inches. With the July-August 1934 issue, and the change in editorial policy, the size of the magazine was again increased, this time to 9 1/4 by 12 1/4 inches. Several pages were also added to its length. The affiliation of the League of Workers Theatres with the IURT was not mentioned on the masthead, but New Theatre was still represented as being the "organ" of LOWT.

Kline and his Editorial Board which now included Ben Blake and Molly Day Thatcher--a former student of Hallie Flanagan and the future Mrs. Elia Kazan--pointed to the enlarged issue of New Theatre as concrete evidence of the growth of the revolutionary movement in drama, dance and film. It would now be the magazine's policy to publish a new play in every issue. Reports of the latest developments in the fields of drama, dance and film; feature articles by leading playwrights; and up-to-the-minute news of the

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[68]Ibid.

various workers' theatre groups would also regularly appear in New Theatre. The editors stressed the necessity for the support of all individuals who were interested in the revolutionary cultural movement.[69]

As further evidence of the popularization of the revolutionary movement, the editors reported that the Marx Brothers, having recently returned from Moscow, where they were much impressed with what they saw, were opening a playhouse in Hollywood. Young authors would be able to use the playhouse as a platform from which to speak their minds. The policy of the playhouse would be to charge low prices and to make its performances available to workers. "Goodluck--Harpo, Groucho, Chico, and Zeppo!"[70] Another announcement, and additional proof of the growth of the left-wing theatre movement was that a "New Theatre Lecture Tour," on the subject of "The American Theatre," would be given by Mordecai Gorelik.

The second "New Theatre Night" took place on June 3, 1934 and was highly successful. The editors of New Theatre were particularly pleased with the presentation by members of the Group Theatre of Dimitroff, by Art Smith and Elia Kazan. This was the first concerted and sustained effort of Group Theatre members at revolutionary production. A skit by the WLT entitled "Hollywood Goes Red," and a scene from the Artef

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[69]Editorial, New Theatre, July-August, 1934, p. 3.

[70]Ibid.

production of Gorky's Yegor Bulichev, were also presented at the second "New Theatre Night."

With the September 1934 New Theatre, the element of color was added to the cover of the magazine, further enhancing its appearance. The names of Joseph Freeman, Lee Strasberg, Robert Forsythe, King Vidor, Bela Balasz, Harry Elion, Virgil Geddes, Ralpy Steiner, George Sklar, Simon Breines and Philip Sterling were listed as contributors, on the cover of the issue.

In his September 1934 editorial, Herbert Kline addressed himself to the goals of the left-wing theatre movement. Once again, this time more explicitly, the new direction of the movement--the direction which had been tentatively adopted, over a year earlier--was formally stated. "It is our chief task to make our movement a mass movement," wrote Kline. "We must win over more and more competent artists. We must indeed professionalize the revolutionary theatre arts with their assistance and assist them in revolutionizing the professional theatre arts."[71]

Although the circulation of the magazine had more than doubled in the past four months--it had increased from 2,500 in May, to 6,500 in September--the drive for more subscriptions continued. An article by Anne Howe, "Five Month Plan--A Competition for the Groups," announced the

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[71]Herbert Kline, Editorial, New Theatre, September, 1934, p. 4.

following objectives:

1. to increase New Theatre's circulation to 10,000
2. to obtain 1,500 new subscriptions
3. to raise a one thousand dollar sustaining fund for the magazine
4. to increase the repertories of the individual groups by fifty percent or more
5. to increase the memberships of the individual groups by fifty percent or more.[72]

The continuing changes in the intended readership as well as the political approach of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, over the years, were reflected in the advertisements that appeared in the magazines. The first commercial advertisement to appear in Workers Theatre was in the May 1932 issue--the first issue of the magazine in printed form. Typical of the nature of the advertisements that were placed in the magazine in its earliest days, is the following from the September-October 1932 Workers Theatre:

Meet Me at the
RATIONAL VEGETARIAN
RESTAURANT
199 2nd Ave., near 13th St.
"The Home of Pure and Wholesome Food"[73]

The following advertisement, from the back page of the September 1934 New Theatre, was indicative of the magazine's recent move towards greater respectability:

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[72]Anne Howe, "Five Month Plan--A Competition for the Groups," New Theatre, September 1934, p. 29.

[73]Advertisement, Workers Theatre, September-October, 1932, p. 24.

AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF DRAMATIC ARTS
Founded 1884 by Franklin H. Sargent
THE FOREMOST INSTITUTION for Dramatic and Expressional training. The instruction of the Academy furnishes the essential preparation for Directing and Teaching as well as for Acting. The training is educative and practical, devloping Poise, Personality and Expressional Power, of value to those in professional life and to the layman. . . .[74]

Along with the ad for the AADA, however, were the more standard advertisements for periodicals such as The New Masses, travel to the USSR, and an ad for the Workers Bookshop.

An article by Michael Blankfort, in the October 2, 1934 issue of The New Masses--a journal which strictly adhered to and served as a platform for the Communist Party line--dealt with the new approach which he (and the Party, no doubt) felt should be taken by the League of Workers Theatres. The organization should, "widen its appeal," wrote Blankfort, "so that all who can understand can be agitated by it. The League has made an excellent start, but it must come out of the woods entirely."[75] By "broaden," Blankfort meant that LOWT should follow the trend of the times and become less politically sectarian. The time for dismissing all groups who did not adhere to Communist Party policy was past. The wave of the future was to throw open the movement to all who were interested in the revolutionary class struggle, whatever their particular political affiliations.

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[74]Advertisement, New Theatre, September, 1934, p. 31.

[75]Michael Blankfort, "Theatre," The New Masses, October 2, 1934, p. 46.

In their book, The American Communist Party, Irving Howe and Lewis Coser interpreted this apparent new open-mindedness, its underlying reasons, and its larger implications, insofar as the development of the left-wing movement of the nineteen-thirties was concerned. "Despite its previous theory of social fascism," they wrote, "the Communist Party began to make sustained and serious overtures to the Socialist Party in 1934, . . . partly because, as the Socialists moved leftward under the impact of the depression and the Communists moved rightward under the impact of Comintern there seemed to be a temporary convergence of outlook."[76]

Another new development was the communists' changed attitude towards Roosevelt and his national policies. The character of the New Deal was becoming more leftist. Roosevelt had initiated many new policies which employed methods that were acceptable to the Communists and, importantly, had enhanced his popularity with the masses of the American public whom the Communist Party hoped, somehow, to reach. "At this point, consequently, the Communists began to support the new New Deal."[77]

An article by Stanley Burnshaw, in The New Masses of November 27, 1934, entitled, "The First United Front," was yet another step towards the Popular Front announcement. Burnshaw began:

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[76]Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party, pp. 230-231.

[77]Ibid., p. 234.

> For the first time on any platform in America, Communists and Socialists worked hand in hand on a common project: for the Art Young benefit. . . . Over $4,000 was raised, but far more inspiring was the attitude of the audience in accepting the entire program for what it was: one wholehearted effort by workingclass groups to make a revolutionary weapon of the theatre. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . unless you were present at the Art Young evening; unless you observed with your own eyes the responsiveness of the audience without regard for political affiliations, you do not realize the importance of this event in the history of the Communist-Socialist united front.[78]

In December 1934, Herbert Kline was able to reflect upon the success of New Theatre in achieving its goal--set in June of the same year. The magazine had clearly become capable of competing successfully with other theatre periodicals. ". . . The printed New Theatre first appeared one year ago," wrote Kline. "In this year New Theatre has grown from an obscure inner organ of the workers' theatre movement into a broad magazine of the theatre arts with a firm base in the revolutionary theatre, film and dance movement. The magazine has won recognition from outstanding theatre artists and from bourgeois as well as revolutionary critics."[79]

Kline was also able to announce the attainment of the circulation goal--of 10,000--that had been set in the September issue. He warned, however, that, "the magazine has increased in size and improved in format despite financial handicaps that still threaten its future. New Theatre, un-

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[78]Stanley Burnshaw, "The First United Front," The New Masses, November 27, 1934, pp. 27-28.

[79]Herbert Kline, Editorial, New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 4.

fortunately, gets no support from 'Broadway angels,' 'Moscow gold,' or expensive advertisements. . . ."[80] Accordingly, Kline asked the magazine's readers to continue in their effort to enroll more subscribers and to attend fundraising events, such as the "New Theatre Nights" and the then-upcoming "New Year's Eve Frolic."

In his book Stage Left, Jay Williams observes that when New Theatre reached a circulation of 10,000, "coincidentally, that was the size of the subscription list of its only real rival, Theatre Arts Monthly."[81] There is a vast difference, surely--especially in terms of financial stability--between circulation and subscription figures, but New Theatre was, undeniably, making its voice heard.

"A Call for an American Writers Congress" was published in the January 22, 1935 issue of The New Masses. The American Communist Party had decided to sponsor the Congress, in imitation of the Congress of Soviet Writers which had been held, in Moscow, the previous autumn. The tone of the Soviet Congress had clearly foreshadowed the turn towards the Popular Front policy,[82] and the tone of the announcement of the American Congress in The New Masses was a further step in this direction. Invited to the Congress were, ". . . all

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[80]Ibid.

[81]Jay Williams, Stage Left, p. 119.

[82]Mathew Josepheson, Infidel in the Temple, A Memoir of the Nineteen-Thirties (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), pp. 363-364.

writers who [had] achieved some standing in their respective fields; who [had] clearly indicated their sympathy to the revolutionary cause; who [did] not need to be convinced of the decay of capitalism, of the inevitability of revolution."[83] Furthermore--and most significantly, ". . . the American Writers' Congress [would] not be a delegated body. Each writer [would] represent his own personal allegiance."[84] The main business of the Congress would be to form the League of American Writers as a branch of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers.

Another event of great importance that month, particularly in the development of the left-wing theatre movement, was the performance of Clifford Odets' Waiting for Lefty. The play was presented by some of the actors who belonged to the Group Theatre, at a "New Theatre Night," on January 6, 1935.[85] After four years of struggling along with a limited repertory, provided by determined but frequently ungifted amateurs, the movement finally had a playwright and a play. With Waiting for Lefty, the jump from amateur to professional status was instantly accomplished for the revolutionary theatre. The long debate over whether art or propaganda should be given more emphasis in the revolutionary theatre was, once and

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[83]"A Call for an American Writers Congress," The New Masses, January 22, 1935, p. 20.

[84]Ibid.

[85]Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 4.

for all, laid to rest. The talent of Odets made it indisputably apparent that the answer to the debate lay in quality and not in formulas.

In his book The Fervent Years, Harold Clurman, one the founders of the Group Theatre, describes the cry of "Strike!" by the actors and audience, at the conclusion of the first performance of Waiting for Lefty as, ". . . the birth cry of the thirties.

> Our youth had found its voice. It was a call to join the good fight for a greater measure of life in a world free of economic fear, falsehood, and craven servitude to stupidity and greed. 'Strike' was Lefty's lyric message, not alone for a few extra pennies of wages or for a few shorter hours of work, strike for a greater dignity, strike for a bolder humanity, strike for the full stature of man.[86]

The fact that the first performance of Waiting for Lefty coincided with the Comintern declaration that the CPUSA should strive to broaden its sphere of influence, and the decision of the leaders of the left-wing theatre movement to professionalize their movement in order to be more effective, contributed to the play's ecstatic reception from the Left. Odets' play was recognized as being potentially helpful in the accomplishment of these two goals. Waiting for Lefty could be used to spread the struggle for social justice and change; and the play set an artistic standard for other social playwrights.

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[86]Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1945; reprint ed., New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), p. 148.

The January 1935 New Theatre was designated as a "Soviet Issue," and was devoted to a study of the contemporary theatre, film and dance in the U.S.S.R. Harold Edgar, in his introductory editorial for the issue, explained the decision of the magazine's management to examine the Soviet theatre so extensively. "Though the Soviet Union still has its enemies," wrote Edgar, "all but the ignorant will grant that its theatre is the finest in the world. Every observer, whatever his politics, testifies to its high vitality. Prominent Broadway actors, playwrights, stage directors and producers return from a five day or a month's inspection of the Soviet Theatre to make the dramatic page of the New York Times ring with clamors of praise. . . ."[87]

After giving an overview of the variety within the Soviet theatre, Edgar explained the reasons for its vitality:

> The revolution has released the great masses of the Russian people so that it may profit from the cultural heritage of the past, and assist in the making of the cultural reality of the present. And the revolution has given the theater worker the most advantageous conditions--the greatest freedom--to develop and to really become an artist. . . .
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> . . . . . .
>
> Those of us who follow the theatre and make it our special concern can learn from the Soviet Theatre its twofold lesson: in order for the theatre to wholly flourish there must be study and work on the medium itself--technical training--and there it must form part of a healthy social organism which today can mean only one thing--the overthrow of capitalism and the building of socialism.[88]

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[87]Harold Edgar, Editorial, New Theatre, January, 1935, p. 3.

[88]Ibid.

Edgar's editorial and his use of language are significant for two reasons. This was the last New Theatre editorial in which there was talk of overthrowing the capitalist system, and it was the first editorial in which the writer had eschewed the use of the word "communism," in favor of "socialism." The use of the latter term to replace the former became the standard policy in the issues of New Theatre that followed.

The quality of the January 1935 Soviet Issue of New Theatre is of an indisputably high calibre. Soviet theatre had become highly regarded by critics representing many different political and experiential backgrounds. The magazine, with this installment, took its place as an important primary source of information for anyone who had an interest in the contemporary theatre. The January 1935 New Theatre remains an important source for the theatre scholar in search of material dealing with the Russian theatre of the nineteen-thirties. Among the articles in the Soviet issue are the following:

"Soviet Theatre Today," by Heinrich Diament, p. 6.

"The New Soviet Cinema," by Sergei Eisenstein, p. 9.

"Meyerhold's New Theatre," by H. W. L. Dana, p. 10.

"An Epic of Ether," by Sergei Tretiakov, p. 13.

"A Theatre Director in the Soviet Cinema," by Erwin Piscator, p. 14.

A radiogram which had been sent to New Theatre by a number of Russian film artists, including Eisenstein and

Pudovkin, in recognition of the special Soviet Issue, was the first official notice, to appear in the magazine, of the change in policy that would soon be announced in the Soviet Union. The final salutation of the telegram read, "FORWARD WITH A UNITED FRONT AGAINST FASCISM AND WAR FOR REVOLUTIONARY ART."[89]

The cover of the February 1935 New Theatre is a composite of photographs from the Group Theatre production of Waiting for Lefty. The play, in its entirety, was published in this issue of the magazine. It was Waiting for Lefty's first publication. Odets had submitted his play to the playwriting contest which had been sponsored by LOWT and New Theatre. It had, of course, won first prize, and the editors of New Theatre would always take some credit for having "discovered" the play and, to some extent, Odets as a playwright. Odets was the "golden boy" of the left-wing theatre movement; and a special relationship existed, henceforth, between him and New Theatre magazine.

The editorial in the February 1935 New Theatre was another landmark in the development both of the magazine and of the revolutionary theatre movement of the thirties. In this editorial, the editors spoke of the increasing dangers of fascism, war, and censorship in the arts which were making action more imperative than ever. Censorship which had already been felt in films would next come to the stage and

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[89]New Theatre, January, 1935, p. 6.

finally to literature, they wrote.

The editors pointed out that the workers' theatres and their audiences had long been cognizant of the need to combat war, fascism and censorship. The formation of the League of Workers Theatres in 1932; the appearance and success of socially conscious anti-fascist plays on Broadway; the success of the Theatre Union, as well as the continuing growth of the workers' theatres were all evidence of that concern and awareness. In addition, there had recently been a move on the part of many theatre professionals to affiliate with LOWT.

The editors claimed, however, that the original programs and organizational forces of LOWT were simply not broad enough to coalesce the forces of the professional and the amateur theatres. They saw the need for a new broader organization to coordinate all of the constructive, socially conscious elements in the theatre. For that purpose, the "New Theatre League" was in the process of being formed.

Many of the outstanding leaders in the American theatre would be included in the New Theatre League, the editors wrote. Their advice, talents and time would be channeled through the new organization. The New Theatre League was incorporating the old LOWT into its structure, and,

> . . . in addition, expands to include all members of theatre groups and audience who want to stand behind this simple program: For mass development of the American theatre to its highest artistic and social level. For a theatre dedicated to a struggle against war, fascism and censorship [editors' emphasis]. Actors, stage-hands,

> playwrights, directors regardless of other political or artistic differences [my emphasis] we say to you: You belong with us. Join the New Theatre League at once! . . . Come into the leadership. Come into the membership.
>
> Footlights across America for a united theatrical front against censorship, against fascism, against all imperialist drives for war![90]

Here, in effect, was a Popular Front declaration, close to half a year in advance of that which would come from the Comintern the following summer. Certainly, both the members of LOWT and the readers of New Theatre had been more than adequately prepared for such a radical change in policy.

The masthead of the February 1935 New Theatre read, "Organ of the New Theatre League, National Film and Photo and Workers Dance League." Listed on the Editorial Board were: Herbert Kline, Editor; Lionel Berman, Ben Blake, Charles Dibner, William Entin, Steve Foster, Leo T. Hurwitz, Jay Leyda, Edna Ocko, Molly Day Thatcher, David Crystal, Manfred Ettinger and R. Steck.[91] The practice of listing a large group of Contributing Editors had been suspended, as of the December 1934 issue of the magazine. Once again, the original contributors to the magazine--Bonn, Howe, Elion, Glass, etc.--were not listed on the masthead. It is unlikely that their names would have fit in with the new United Front image that the magazine was now projecting for itself.

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[90]Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 3.

[91]New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 4.

The New Theatre League filled one-half of the inside front cover of the March 1935 New Theatre with an announcement about the formation of its new Repertory Division ("Plays of our times, based on social realities of the day"), its Lecture Bureau (which offered the services of John Howard Lawson, Paul Peters, George Sklar, H. W. L. Dana, Mark Marvin and Herbert Kline), and its new Training School.

Although the masthead of the issue once again read, "Organ of the New Theatre League and Workers Dance League," the tone of the magazine was considerably less politically strident. The word "communism" had vanished from the magazine's editorials, and most of the articles in the issue were less specifically partisan than had previously been the case. Malcolm Goldstein explains this new tactic, in The Political Stage, when he writes that, ". . . Organized communism had . . . to work at the job of maintaining the appeal of the Popular Front. One necessary step was to guard against the use of the very term 'communism' in all but the most central party-sponsored or party-controlled enterprises."[92]

It took some time, however, for many of the contributors to New Theatre to incorporate the Popular Front policies into their aesthetic outlooks and to apply this new approach to their critical writing. In a letter to the editor which appeared in the March 1935 New Theatre, Nathaniel Buchwald criticized an article by Emanuel Eisenberg ("Ladies

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[92]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 151.

of the Revolutionary Dance") that had appeared in the previous issue of the magazine as, "an example of the kind of extreme 'leftism' that has long ago been discredited and discarded by most active workers and critics in all fields of revolutionary art."[93]

A drive for five thousand dollars, to put the New Theatre League and New Theatre on a self-supporting basis, was announced, in the March 1935 New Theatre. "During the fifteen months of the magazine's existence," the piece began, "it has been steadily approaching self-sufficiency on the basis of circulation and advertising. A vigorous push now will achieve that goal very quickly."[94] No matter how widely read New Theatre became, nor how well regarded it was by theatre professionals and critics, it could never quite manage to achieve the financial solvency which it sought so energetically, during the entire period of its publication.

The masthead of the April 1935 issue of New Theatre--a special Anti-War issue--is reproduced below, just as it appears in the magazine:

EDITORIAL BOARD
Herbert Kline, editor
Molly Day Thatcher, drama
Louis Norden, film.
Edna Ocko, dance.
William Entin, art.

ASSOCIATES
Lionel Berman, Ben Blake, S. Foster, Leo T. Hurwitz, Muriel Rukeyser, R. Ludlow, R. Steck, David Crystal, Manfred Ettinger

---

[93]Nathaniel Buchwald, New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 24.

[94]New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 25.

Published by the New Theatre League and New Dance League.[95] With the above change in its masthead, New Theatre had completed its metamorphosis from an organ of a communist-led organization to a Popular Front publication.

It is interesting to note that one of the contributors to the April 1935 Anti-War Issue of New Theatre was Worthington Minor. In his responses to the "Prospects for the American Theatre" survey, in January 1934, Minor had projected himself as being entirely aloof both from New Theatre and from the movement which it served.[96] Now, fifteen months later, he had become involved in the left-wing theatre movement--as a contributor to the magazine and as the director of the planned Broadway production of Let Freedom Ring--a socially-oriented play by Albert Bein.

The continuation of the Depression and of the downard trend of Broadway's fortunes, coupled with the improved artistic quality of the left-wing theatre's offerings, as well as the new United Front position of the American Left, had all contributed to bringing Minor and other "names" into the left-wing theatre movement. Just one month earlier, Archibald MacLeish (who had formerly attested to his faith in Wall Street, and who had been regarded as a fascist by many Marxist critics),[97] had submitted his play Panic for both

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[95] New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 3.

[96] See Appendix B, p. 487, passim.

[97] New Theatre, April 1935, p. 29.

a performance at a "New Theatre Night" and for publication in New Theatre.[98]

The left-wing theatre had recently received praise from several professional non-partisan Broadway critics. And it was obviously not without some pride that the following excerpt from an article by Brooks Atkinson was reproduced on the back cover of the April 1935 New Theatre:

Brooks Atkinson

Says

> 'If there is any trend in today's theatre it is the vigorous advancement of the drama of the Left. The revolutionary theatre is forging ahead. . . . In short the theatre 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 inflamed with a crusader's zeal. It knows where it intends to go; and it does not doubt its ability to get there. The Broadway theatre has no program and no convictions; and in the midst of a vast social upheaval it has no comment to make. . . . The Left Theatre is ably served by New Theatre magazine which is edited with professional skill, and publishes excellent dramatic material!
>
> --N.Y. Times, Sunday, Mar. 17, 1935[99]

A piece by Bosley Crowther, entitled "Theatre of the Left," appeared as the lead article in the Entertainment Section of the New York Times, on Sunday, April 14, 1935. Crowther wrote:

> . . . the commercial theatre's custodians have lifted their eyes from the ledgers and discovered pretty close to their doorstep a lusty kicking youngster well shed of its swaddling clothes. . . .
> . . . . . .

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[98]Archibald MacLeish, Panic, New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 10.

[99]New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 36.

> . . . the accelerating emergence of many workers' theatre groups throughout the country banded together in an organization now known as the National [sic] Theatre League and giving undeniable evidence of artistic quality and dramatic force, has caused some little stire in commercial citadels. . . .[100]

Crowther then traced, with general accuracy, the development of the New Theatre League and New Theatre magazine. He also treated the expansion of the workers' theatre movement, the politics and political affiliations of the New Theatre League, and the recent growth of the left-wing theatres. Rather than trying to assess the future of the left-wing theatre movement, Crowther asserted only that, "there can be no equivocation about one point. They've gotten off to a flying start."[101]

The left-wing theatre movement had certainly grown considerably, in a relatively short period of time. One person who recognized this was Hallie Flanagan, who had recently been named as the Director of the Federal Theatre Project. In a letter to New Theatre, "From an Old Friend," Flanagan wrote that, "your magazine grows better each time it appears. It is rather startling to remember that an article that I wrote for Theatre Arts in 1933 on 'Art is a Weapon,' in which I discussed the workers' theatre movement and the Workers Laboratory Theatre magazine (at that time mimeographed) was jumped on by all sorts of people who wrote in to say that

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[100]Bosley Crowther, "Theatre on the Left," New York Times, April 14, 1935, Section IV, pp. 1-2.

[101]Ibid.

I was drawing on my imagination, that no movement existed. . . ."[102]

In May 1935, the editors of New Theatre had reason to feel that their movement had reached its apogee. Apart from the recognition that the revolutionary theatre had finally achieved in the commercial press, the editors could also point to the fact that several social dramas would open soon, both on Broadway and in the professional theatres downtown. The Theatre of Action (the new name adopted by the Workers Laboratory Theatre), was preparing The Young Go First and My Dear Co-Workers for May openings. Recruits, Yegor Bulichev and Aristocrats were being played, in repertory, by the Yiddish-speaking Artef. Christopher Woods' new play, Too Late to Die, was being performed by the New Theatre Players, in Philadelphia, and the Theatre Guild production of Parade, by Sklar and Peters, which had opened in Boston, would soon come to Broadway, on May 20. Piscator's version of An American Tragedy had been presented in a suburb of Philadelphia, at the Hedgerow Theatre. In addition, productions of Marching Song Paradise Lost and Strike Song were projected for 1936.

But, this was no time for complacency, the New Theatre editors warned:

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[102]Hallie Flanagan, "From An Old Friend," New Theatre, June 1935, p. 21.

> The theatre is a weapon that we are learning to use more and more effectively. We are not satified, even with the remarkable accomplishments of the past season. Even our finest actors, directors, playwrights are constantly working, studying to raise the artistic and political level of their work. . . . The future of the new theatre rests with earnest and talented young people who are determined to bring the theatre back to its origin, in the life and hearts of the community.[103]

The New Theatre League announced the celebration of its National Theatre Week from May 12 to 19, 1935. Groups of all different political backgrounds and persuasions were writing to the NTL asking for repertory and guidance. There had been an increase in applications for membership in the NTL, spurred on by the notice that the League had received from the press. At this point, there were more than three hundred groups across the country which were affiliated with the New Theatre League.[104]

But financial problems still prevailed. The back cover of the April 1935 New Theatre, alongside the reprint of the Brooks Atkinson article, was devoted to an explanation of the magazine's management's decision to raise the price of New Theatre to fifteen cents: "Five cents more--but what a difference. . . . ! 15¢ means an enlarged, improved magazine. 15¢ means regular wages to its staff members. . . . Increased publication costs must be met now by new subscriptions! . . ."[105] The five cents more did not make the

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[103]Editorial, New Theatre, May, 1935, p. 3.

[104]John Gassner, "The One-Act Play in the Revolutionary Theatre," Dramatic Soundings, p. 435.

[105]New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 36.

crucial difference, however.

"An Appeal," from John Howard Lawson, to the readers of New Theatre, appeared in the May 1935 issue. After talking about the work of the New Theatre League and the devotion of its staff, Lawson explained that, "Right now, owing to some bad luck--two burglaries, three theatre nights which lost money--their work may be snowed under by a landlord's eviction and a printer's bill already 60 days old."[106] Five thousand dollars was needed for the New Theatre League to carry on its work. Although there was no mention of whether or not the money discussed by Lawson had been raised, in the issues following his "Appeal," New Theatre did continue to appear, uninterrupted, until November 1936. The editors did, however, persistently campaign for more subscribers to the magazine.

The first American Writers' Congress, held in New York City, on April 26, 27, and 28, 1935, was endorsed by the New Theatre League and by New Theatre.[107] Herbert Kline attended the Congress, and participated in the Playwrights' Commission. Earl Browder, the head of the American Communist Party, addressed the Congress on the topic of "Communism and Literature," and he came close to making official the Popular Front policy which had been taking shape over the previous year:

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[106]John Howard Lawson, "An Appeal," New Theatre, May, 1935, p. 15.

[107]New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 29.

> The great majority of the Congress, being unaffiliated to the Communist Party, are interested in what it has to say because all recognize the necessity of establishing cooperatively, a united front, of all enemies of reaction in the cultural field. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . the first demand of the Party upon its writer-members is that they shall be good writers, constantly better writers, for only so can they really serve the Party. We do not want to take good writers and make bad strike leaders of them.;[108]

The main point of Browder's speech to the Congress was to assure the attending writers that the Communist Party had no designs on their artistic freedom. "Within the camp of the working class, in the struggle against the camp of capitalism," he said, "we find our best atmosphere in the free give and take of a writers' and critics' democracy, which is controlled only by its audience, the mass of its readers, who constitute the final authority."[109]

The writers' organization being formed, Browder suggested, should first be concerned with establishing critical standards, and then with bringing other writers into the organization. But each writer could certainly retain his own political identity. "We are all soldiers, each in our own place, in a common cause. Let our efforts be united in fraternal solidarity."[110] In August 1935, at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International, the Popular

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[108]Earl Browder, "Communism and Literature," in Henry Holt, ed., American Writers Congress (New York: International Publishers, 1935), p. 68.

[109]Ibid., p. 69.

[110]Ibid., p. 70.

Front policy was finally formally inaugurated.[111]

Howe and Coser speak of the Popular Front period as having been, "the most prosperous that the Stalinist movement would ever enjoy in the intellectual world."[112] They explain that,

> The success of the Popular Front depended most of all on a wide diffusion of its political and cultural style: a few simple slogans, such as 'democratic unity' and 'anti-fascist struggle,' were to be spread across the consciousness of a large number of people who did not conceive of themselves as Communists or Communist sympathizers. This is why the Popular Front phase of American Communism thrived upon the 'front organization' and the 'front psychology': it required the creation of a mood of enforced fraternity mixed with fretful alarm, or perhaps more accurately, it exploited among liberals and 'men of good will' a mood of this kind that had arisen since the victories of fascism in Europe.[113]

The following excerpt, from an editorial in the October 1935 New Theatre, is a perfect illustration of the Popular Front 'style' and method, as it is described above by Howe and Coser.

> The working class is creating a culture which is joyous, militant, and full of zest. As it grows, many workers are beginning to ask, 'Why can't all these working class theatres combine their energies?'
>
> The need for unity becomes imperative. To meet it the New Theatre League and NEW THEATRE Magazine offer all their forces for the establishment of a genuine united theatre front. We appeal to all Socialist,

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[111] Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 356.

[112] Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 313.

[113] Ibid., p. 332.

> Communist, trade union, church, student, and little theatres to rally for common action and effectiveness behind a minimum program against war, fascism and censorship.[114]

An announcement appeared in the October 1935 New Theatre, that the magazine was expanding to include a Technical Department which would deal solely with practical questions--stage writing, production, organization and the like. Along that line, two articles--"The Art of Make-up," by Tamara Daykarhanova and "Building a Mobile Stage," by Edward Edman--appeared in the issue. The Technical Department section of New Theatre was the precursor of a quarterly--Theatre Work-Shop--which was brought out by the New Theatre League almost a year later. The level of the articles in the Technical Department, however, was clearly geared to fit the abilities of the amateur theatre workers, while the technical articles in Theatre Workshop were published with the professional artist in mind.

A short preview of a pamphlet by Ben Blake, entitled The Awakening of the American Theatre was included in the October 1935 New Theatre. Blake, the former editor of Workers Theatre-New Theatre, and still a member of the magazine's editorial board, had evidently felt that the growth which had taken place in the left-wing theatre movement made the recording of its history, in print, appropriate. The pamphlet, which was sixty-four pages long and sold for twenty-

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[114]Editorial, New Theatre, October, 1935, p. 4.

five cents, was published by "Tomorrow Publishers," and was sponsored and distributed by the New Theatre League.[115]

The following notice appeared in the "Backstage" column of the November 1935 New Theatre:

> As we go to press 600 guests are celebrating the remarkable growth of NEW THEATRE at a dinner at the Edison Hotel in New York City. Dr. John Haynes Holmes, Martha Graham, Hiram Motherwell, Archibald MacLeish and Clifford Odets are speaking on various aspects of the American Theatre Today, with Alfred Kreymborg as Chairman and the Theatre of Action supplying the entertainment. The guests include many of the most distinguished names in the American theatre today ranging from Daniel Frohman dean [sic] of American showmen, to creators of the new theatre like Benno Schneider and Alfred Saxe. Actors, directors, critics and producers from the commercial theatre world cooperated with a group of new theatre playwrights in tendering this dinner to NEW THEATRE.[116]

The magazine and the left-wing theatre movement flourished under the Popular Front policy. A large photograph of "Harold Clurman, Stella Adler and Clifford Odets working on 'Paradise Lost'" appears on the cover of the December 1935 New Theatre. The cover advertises articles in the issue, by such diverse fellow-travelers as Joel Faith, Archibald MacLeish, John W. Gassner and Duke Ellington.[117]

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[115]"The Awakening of the American Theatre," New Theatre, October, 1935, p. 29.

[116]"Backstage," New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 31.

[117]Years later, after the Popular Front bubble had burst, many old-timers in the left-wing movement who had managed to retain their faith in the Party, looked back on their former fellow-travellers with disdain. One such individual, Alice Evans, in a January 1940 article in the New Theatre League's mimeographed newsletter, New Theatre News, warned the NTL groups against doing "Liberal" plays such as Paradise Lost. (New Theatre News, January 1940, p. 8.)

With the 48-page "Second Anniversary Number," in January, 1936, New Theatre had grown, in the words of its editors, "to a professional magazine with an important following of 20,000."[118] But, since it had never had financial backing, the magazine was, as always, having financial difficulties. It was, therefore, again necessary for the management to appeal to its readers for additional financial support.

The themes of the editorials in New Theatre, during 1936, were entirely in keeping with the Popular Front policy that was then in effect. All of the editorials were based on the programs of the New Theatre League--"For mass development of the American threatre to its highest artistic and social level. For a theatre dedicated to the struggle against war, fascism and censorship."--which had been announced in the February 1935 New Theatre.[119] The struggle for Negro Rights, an improved and more representative Actors' Equity, the Federal Theatre Project, and the Spanish Civil War, were other areas that were dealt with, in the editorial column of the magazine, over the year. In keeping with the Popular Front approach, the tone of the editorials remained non-specifically "progressive."

The magazine was at its best during its final year.

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[118] New Theatre, January, 1936, p. 40.

[119] Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 3.

Articles by well-known and widely respected theatre and film professionals, including Harold Clurman, Clifford Odets, Norris Houghton, Lee Strasberg and Sergei Eisenstein were published throughout 1936, and contributed greatly to New Theatre's quality. Also adding distinction to the magazine, John Gassner, its drama critic, wrote a series of essays which, considered together, helped to formulate an aesthetic for the social theatre.[120] Two other essays which contributed to the discussion of an aesthetic for the social theatre were "The Law of Conflict" and "The Obligatory Scene"--in the June 1935 and March 1936 issues, respectively--by John Howard Lawson, from his critical treatise, Theory and Technique of Playwrighting.

Among the intentions that had been outlined by the editors of New Theatre, when the New Theatre League had taken over the sponsorship of the magazine, was the publication of scripts that were worthy of a professional theatre monthly. Accordingly, during 1936, Hymn to the Rising Sun, by Paul Green; I Can't Sleep, by Odets; Air Raid Over Harlem--a proposed film scenario, by Langston Hughes; Bury the Dead, by Irwin Shaw; and Kids Learn Fast, by A. S. Shiffrin, were

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[120]Among the essays by Gassner that appeared in New Theatre during 1936, were, "Paradise Lost and the Theatre of Frustration" (January); "The Person in the Play"(February); "Ehtan Frome and the Theatre of Fate" (March); "Drama vs. Melodrama" (April); "Perspectives--Past and Present" (May); "Towards a One-Act Theatre" (July); and Heroism in the Theatre" (November).

published in New Theatre.

New Theatre maintained its involvement with the community theatres and was also interested in the growing trade union movement and in the theatres which grew out of that movement. As an aid to these non-professional theatres, New Theatre continued to include a Technical Department, which featured pieces, such as a three-installment article on sense memory, by Robert Lewis of the Group Theatre, entitled, "Five Finger Exercises."

A general willingness to compromise and to be satisfied with the growing progressive movement in the country, was evident as the mood of New Theatre, during 1936. Although the magazine was still clearly oriented to the Left in all questions, its editors seemed amenable to making some fairly significant concessions, in order to accomodate individuals who might be hovering at the outskirts of the left-wing theatre movement.

"A New One Act Play Contest," co-sponsored by New Theatre and the New Theatre League, was announced in the June 1936 issue of the magazine. The editors explained that, ". . . with a view to encouraging the widest possible range in form and subject matter, prizes will be awarded for the best short play of social significance, . . . a broad category which should bring forth plays dealing with the struggle of progressive forces against reaction in the country, on the important new developments in the trade union movement, and

against war. . . ."[121] The prize offered for the best play was two hundred dollars and the Popular Front panel of Judges included Herman Shumlin, John W. Gassner, Robert Garland, Barrett H. Clark, Ben Irwin and George Sklar.

A note on the editorial page of the July 1936 issue was further evidence of the editors' growing willingness to accept and even applaud any sort of move towards social awareness, as a step in the right direction. "The summer theatres are growing up," the editors declared. "Having operated professionally and profitably for several seasons, a number of them are planning important classical and modern plays this summer, thereby attesting their belief that summer audiences do not consist exclusively of Tired Business Men in search of a bromide."[122] The editors of New Theatre were pleased to note that a number of summer theatres were doing Shakespearean dramas and some were even planning social plays, such as Awake and Sing!, Paradise Lost, Waiting for Lefty, Success Story, and Bury the Dead. In Seattle, three "Negro plays" were being presented by the local Federal Theatre Project, in cooperation with the Seattle Repertory Playhouse.

In August 1936, the editors of New Theatre reported that, "an important supplementary publication"--a quarterly magazine, Theatre Workshop, would appear by September 1.[123]

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[121]"A New One-Act Play Contest," New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 26.

[122]Editorial, New Theatre, July, 1936, p. 3.

[123]New Theatre, August, 1936, p. 27.

Theatre Workshop would have longer and more technical material on the practice, theory and history of the theatre. The projected magazine would be edited from the viewpoint of the practicing theatre worker. Each issue would be book-length and would be devoted to a single central topic. The first issue would focus on the art of acting.

Theatre Workshop was first issued in October 1936. Published by the New Theatre League, its Editor was Mark Marvin; Freda Cutler was the Business Manager of the quarterly. Listed as Contributing Editors were: Stanley Burnshaw, Barrett H. Clark, Harry Elion, Mordecai Gorelik, Lazar Galpern, Leo T. Hurwitz, Herbert Kline, John Howard Lawson, Joseph Losey and Lee Strasberg. Harold Clurman lauded the new magazine, in the November 1936 New Theatre. "The appearance of Theatre Workshop is a signal event in the development of a theatrical culture in America," wrote Clurman. "For it is to be devoted to a kind of criticism and discussion that issues from genuinely authoritative sources."[124]

A note in the October 1936 New Theatre mentioned that the Dramatists Guild was in the process of forming the Dramatists Play Service. The Service would handle the non-professional acting rights of its members. Barrett Clark would be the head of the Service. The New Theatre League's Repertory Department, it was hoped, would be able to work

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[124]Harold Clurman, "Theatre Workshop," New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 26.

cooperatively with the Dramatists' Play Service. Accomodation and cooperation was official policy, in 1936.

Although there was a Presidential Election in 1936, there was no campaigning, or even mention of the election in New Theatre. In its new capacity as a front publication, New Theatre played no direct role in the movement for political change. Besides, in 1936, the Communist Party tacitly supported the re-election of Roosevelt.

In late 1935, Earl Browder had headed a delegation to Moscow in order to consult with the Comintern about the 1936 election. The Comintern told Browder that the A.C.P. should back Roosevelt and put up no candidate of their own. Browder felt (and eventually the Comintern agreed) that he should run on the American Communist Party ticket, but that he should not stage a real election campaign. It would not be helpful to Roosevelt, the Party realized, for him to have the overt backing of the communists.[125]

The slogan of the 1936 Communist Party election campaign, "Communism is Twentieth Century Americanism," was used during the entire Popular Front era.[126] The slogan expressed the image of the pioneering liberal that the communists, using Jefferson and Lincoln as their new patron saints, were trying to project for themselves. The slogan

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[125]Earl Browder, "The American Communist Party," in Rita Simon, ed., As We Saw the Thirties, p. 222.

[126]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 153.

was also a reminder to Party members to tone down their politicizing and to attempt to become a part of the American scene. "In 1936," as Howe and Coser point out, "it was possible to read in a Communist organizational bulletin a warning to party members on W.P.A. projects that they should be careful not to sound like 'crazy Reds.'"[127]

There was nothing in the November 1936 New Theatre to indicate that the magazine was in danger of being discontinued. The issue was thirty-eight pages long and appeared to be every bit as stable as those which had preceded it. There were two subscription forms included in the magazine, and there were no appeals addressed to the readers asking for financial assistance. Indeed, in a short article announcing the winners of the "$200 Play Contest"--Marc Blitzstein's The Cradle Will Rock and What It Takes, by Philip Stevenson--the editors promised that, "a detailed analysis of the contest, and some twenty plays which stood out from the rest. . . , will appear in the December issue of NEW THEATRE."[128] The masthead of the November 1936 New Theatre listed the following staff members:

> HERBERT KLINE, Editor + GEORGE REDFIELD, Managing Editor + ELEANOR FLEXNER, Assistant Managing Editor + ROBERT STEBBINS, Film + EDNA OCKO, Dance + NORMAN STEVENS, Art +

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[127] Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 337.

[128] New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 26.

DAVID CRYSTAL, Business and Advertising Manager +
JIN STERN, Circulation Manager.

Associates: RAY LUDLOW, MARK MARVIN.[129]

There was no December 1936 New Theatre. ". . . In November," according to Jay Williams, "the managing board met to survey the past two years of the magazine's life. John Howard Lawson, then acting as consultant on the board, proposed that they close down for a month to recuperate. . . ."[130] Although Herbert Kline disagreed with Lawson's suggestion, his vote was overridden by the rest of the board. Kline therefore resigned and went to Spain, where he eventually made a film about the Spanish Civil War, Heart of Spain.[131]

No explanation or even mention of the cessation of New Theatre's publication appeared in any of the left-wing press until the February 9, 1937 New Masses. A short note, on the editorial page of that issue mentioned that Walt Carmon, once the managing editor of The New Masses, had become the new editor of the reorganized monthly, New Theatre and Film.[132] Next, a notice on the title page of the March 2, 1337 New Masses reported that,

> As we go to press, we receive news that the first issue of New Theatre and Film, the successor of New Theatre magazine, has gone to press and should be on sale by the end of the week. We relay the comments of Playwright

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[129] New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 3.

[130] Jay Williams, Stage Left, p. 221.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Editorial, The New Masses, February 9, 1937, p. 3.

> John Howard Lawson that this first issue under the new dispensation contains some important and lively material. It was prepared under the editorship of George Redfield. Herbert Kline, ex-editor, is in Spain.[133]

When New Theatre and Film appeared in March 1937, it had gone back to the original size of New Theatre--8 1/2 by 12 inches, but it ran sixty-seven pages in length and was printed on a better quality of glossy paper. The magazine, in short, appeared to be even more prosperous than before. It now sold for twenty-five cents. (This was still, however, only half the price that Theatre Arts Monthly had charged for an issue, from the earliest days of Workers Theatre magazine.) The masthead for this first New Theatre and Film read:

> EDITORIAL BOARD
>
> George Redfield
> Robert Stebbins
> Edna Ocko
> Eleanor Flexner
>
> BUSINESS MANAGER
>
> David Crystal
>
> CIRCULATION MANAGER
>
> Jin Stern
>
> Vol. IV. No. 1. Published monthly October to May inclusive, bimonthly June to September, by Social Theatre Publications, Inc.[my emphasis].[134]

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[133] Editor's Note, The New Masses, March 2, 1937, p. 2. It later turned out that Kline had become the correspondent for The New Masses, in Madrid.

[134] New Theatre and Film, March 1937, p. 2. An advertisement, in the magazine, for the New Theatre League School, however, referred to New Theatre and Film as the "official organ" of the League (p. 61).

A note in the "Backstage" column, on the inside front cover of this first issue of New Theatre and Film, discussed the changes in the magazine's management:

> Herbert Kline's name has been on the mast-head of New Theatre since April 1934, first as managing editor and then as editor-in-chief. More than any one person he was responsible for its survival against overwhelming odds and its emergence as a real force in the theatre and film world. Kline left the impress of his individuality and his tremendous devotion to the magazine on every issue which he edited. He resigned on January 1 . . . to take up correspondent work with the Loyalist forces in Spain, and the good wishes of the staff and of all the readers of the magazine, go with him.[135]

In explanation of the magazine's new name and enlarged scope, was an article simply headed, "A Statement." The magazine, the authors noted, had served as critic, organizer and champion to the new theatre movement. It now had to work for the continuance of the Federal Arts Projects, as the basis for a national art movement. The magazine, they wrote, also had to work for a complete unionization of the Hollywood studios and for the strengthening of anti-war and anti-fascist sentiments. New Theatre and Film would strive to help the dancer and also the workers in radio. It would also help to foster social and labor films.

New Theatre and Film, as newly constituted, would be aimed primarily at the workers in theatre, film and dance. It would "furnish them with vital information about their progress and about their craft which they would not find

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[135]"Backstage," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 2.

elsewhere. . . ."[136] The more intelligent members of the theatregoing public would still be reached, the editors maintained, because of the significance and authority of the material in the magazine. The editors saw the need for more direct contact with the magazine's readers. An enlarged Correspondence Department would become an important part of New Theatre and Film.

The table of contents for the March 1937 New Theatre and Film is as follows:

"The Silent Partner" 5
Clifford Odets
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Ralph Bates
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"An Open Letter to Darryl Zanuk" . . . 27
Ivor Montagu
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Claire and Paul Sifton
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Lewis Milestone
"Runs, Hits, Errors--1936 44
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"Artist and Audience" 48
Edna Ocko

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[136]"A Statement," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 3.

Editorials 50

"Shifting Scenes" 52

"Books in Review" . . . . . 53[137]

The advertisements in the March 1937 New Theatre and Film were in keeping with the policy of the Popular Front--an admixture representing many different orientations. Included were ads for left-wing organizations and publications, such as the Photo League, The New Masses and The Fight; ads for Labor Stage, Inc. and a number of WPA productions also appeared. Consumers Union Reports invested in a full page advertisement in the issue, and a full page advertisement--"Good Plays Make Good Reading. . ."--by Random House, was on the inside back cover.

The format, scope and editorial tone of the April 1937 New Theatre and Film were completely in keeping with what had been established in the March issue of the magazine. The editorial board, with the addition of Mark Marvin, also remained the same. Although its length had been cut back to fifty-one pages, there was, once again, nothing to indicate that the magazine's future was in jeopardy.

The back cover of the April 1937 New Theatre and Film was devoted to an ad--"Good only until April 30th"--for a free copy of A. B. Shiffrin's Return at Sunset, with a year's subscription to New Theatre and Film. Any new subscribers were to be disappointed, however, for the magazine was never

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[137]"Table of Contents," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 2.

issued again.

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There was no mention of the demise of New Theatre and Film in the April-July 1937 number of the New Theatre League's other publication--the quarterly, Theatre Workshop. The editorial foreword, however, had a slightly more militant tone than that in the later issues of New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, and it even went so far as to use the Marxist term, "dialectical materialism."

> The new theatre springs from a different philosophy of life and production. It believes in a philosophy of growth and change--dialectical materialism is its technical name. . . . It is a philosophy of hope and struggle and is as essential to the new theatre director as new lighting equipment. To neglect its existence is as fatal as it would have been to neglect naturalism when it first appeared. We shall present article after article explaining its nature and its expression in the theatre. . . .[138]

The editorial also mentioned the plan of the management to add a number of new departments--play reviews, production news, and the like--to the next issue of Theatre Workshop.

It is entirely possible that apart from its financial difficulties, some sort of ideological struggle had taken place within the New Theatre League which had brought about the suspension of first, New Theatre and then New Theatre and Film. My only concrete bases for venturing this theory are the more militant tone of the above-quoted editorial, in

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[138]"Editorial Foreword," Theatre Workshop, April-July 1937, p. 9.

comparison to that in New Theatre and Film, and a short article, "The Crisis in the Theatre," by John Howard Lawson which appeared in the December 15, 1936 New Masses--one month after the suspension of New Theatre's publication. In The New Masses piece, Lawson, who had been instrumental in terminating the publication of New Theatre, warned that, ". . . indeed there is a tendency to think that the broadening of the Left drama can best be accomplished by diluting or concealing the social content, and by an emphasis on craftsmanship as an end in itself. Those who assume that a middle-class audience can best be reached in this way," he continued, "are simply ignoring the present direction of middle-class thought and the forces which determine its direction."[139]

New Theatre and Film's demise was finally referred to in the editorial section of the September-October 1937 Theatre Workshop. The editors noted the loss of New Theatre and Film, acknowleding that a "great gap has been left in our movement." They emphasized that Theatre Workshop could not attempt to fill the gap left by the suspension of the earlier magazine, because its publication of essentially craft material was valuable in itself.[140] A letter to the editors, from John Howard Lawson, in which he criticized

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[139]John Howard Lawson, "The Crisis in the Theatre," The New Masses, December 15, 1936, p. 36.

[140]Editor's Notes, Theatre Workshop, September-October 1937, p. 2.

the "remoteness" of their editorial policy, was also published in the September-October 1937 Theatre Workshop.[141]

A mimeographed "house organ" published by the National Office of the New Theatre League--Curtain Call--was sent out to its members, in October, 1937. The National Executive Board of the N.T.L.--"your national functionaries"--was listed, and included some familiar names: John Bonn, Edmund Fuller, Ben Irwin, Victor and Freda Cutler and Harry Elion.[142]

The editors of Curtain Call, appealing for subscriptions and donations for Theatre Workshop, wrote that,

> We can indeed be proud that the only craft publication printed in the entire world is being published by the new theatre movement. We feel indeed that it is a sign of maturity in our movement when such a magazine as Theatre Workshop can be the product of our work. We trust that our membership will share this enthusiasm with us and aid us in building this magazine and spreading its prestige among other theatre workers.[143]

The last issue of Theatre Workshop was the April-June 1938 number.

In December 1938, a pocket-sized magazine, similar in format to New Theatre and New Theatre and Film was published by the New Theatre League. The editors of this latest magazine--New Theatre News--were John Bonn, Mark Marvin, Ben Irwin and Alice Evans. The stated aim of the magazine was to help build and stabilize the non-professional labor

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[141]John Howard Lawson, "Letter to the Editors," Theatre Workshop, September-October, 1937, p. 75.

[142]Curtain Call, October, 1937, p. 5.

[143]Ibid., p. 2.

and peoples' theatres, "anchored to their communities."[144]

An article in the first issue of New Theatre News suggested that the "old" progressive plays, such as Peace on Earth and Steel, could be adapted to fit the present day. Some scripts that were almost agitprop in nature were published in the magazine. The New Theatre League, it appears, was becoming an isolated and doctrinaire organization.

The Popular Front period was abruptly terminated with the August 22, 1939 signing of the German-Russian non-aggression pact. Membership in the American Communist Party as well as in the front organizations dropped off sharply. The New Theatre League, holding onto its communist faith, projected the American Communist Party's attempt to find a line that would be consistent with what had happened in the Soviet Union.

Although the August Pact was not mentioned in the November 1936 New Theatre News, a letter to the magazine from Lem Ward (a member of the National Executive Board of the NTL) was published in that issue and reflected the Party's new line. In his letter, Ward urged that anti-Nazi (which had the effect of being pro-war) plays should not be done. The groups should instead concentrate on doing anti-war plays.[145]

Throughout the November 1939 issue, and in later

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[144]Editorial, New Theatre News, December 1938, p. 6.

[145]Lem Ward, New Theatre News, November 1939, pp. 12-13.

editions of New Theatre News, constant requests for the members of the New Theatre League to pay off their old debts--in the way of royalties, membership dues, and subscriptions--were made. A warning appeared in the January 1940 New Theatre News that a Dishonor Roll of groups and individuals in debt to the New Theatre League would soon be published. In the February 1940 issue, the threatened Dishonor Roll was printed. In addition, the New Theatre League warned that they would take legal action against any group doing a NTL play, without paying royalties to the League.

A report on the fifth annual convention of the New Theatre League was written by Ben Irwin and appeared in the July 1940 New Theatre News. The convention had been a disappointment: only 100 delegates, representing 27 groups had attended.

In the same issue of New Theatre News, the New Theatre League's Executive Committee announced that the League needed money to get through the summer--it was operating in the red. Under the list of NTL expenses from September 1938 to June 1940, $140.12 was stipulated as the publishing costs for New Theatre News. The monthly newsletter was discontinued as of that issue.

The New Theatre League finally disbanded in 1942. In looking back at the history of the League, Malcolm Goldstein aptly writes, "It is a measure of the passion generated by the period's events that with virtually no

material gain so much talent should have been given over to the service of a single organization."[146]

A further, and even more telling measure of the passions generated by the times, is the fact that, in less than a decade, a movement such as the left-wing theatre movement--involving tens of thousands of intensely committed individuals--could have evolved through the birth-growth-decline cycle. Yet such was the case, in the nineteen-thirties, in America, and remaining as testimony of those tumultuous times and events are the magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film.

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[146]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 217.

CHAPTER II

THE MAGAZINES' CRUSADES

Election Campaigns and the Crusade for a Strong Workers Theatre

> The immediate task therfore [sic] is this--to plan the organization of class conscious workers theatres in every town and community in the country; to help these groups with advice and plays; and where possible with personal contacts and technical assistance; to show these dramatic groups and the workers organixing [sic] them how to utilize these groups so as to make them weapons in the class struggle, tools for the liberation of the working class. This is the job before the Workers Theatre magazine and towards its accomplishment the editors intend to dedicate themselves.
>
> --editorial, Workers Theatre, April 1931, p. 3.

Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, as we have just seen, changed in several respects during the six and one-half years of their publication. Among the areas in which the magazines changed were their publishing organizations, their editorial staffs, the political approach taken by the magazines' editors, as well as their intended readership. The ever-evolving aesthetic and critical position of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film was another aspect of the publications which reflected the frequent policy shifts of the Comintern and the American Communist Party. Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film

also changed considerably in several more superficial ways, such as in the physical appearance, format and length, as well as in the advertisements that appeared in the magazines.

In two respects, however, the magazines did not really change at all. These were in the closely related areas of their political orientation--which was always left-wing--and in their perception of the role, in regard to the left-wing theatre movement, that was the basis for the magazines' founding and continued publication. Over the years, the magazines' editors shifted their emphasis, to a great extent, away from the class conscious and politically committed workers' theatres, to the potentially more influential "progressive" professional theatres and theatre artists. Nonetheless, the editors continued to perceive the purpose of the magazine as being the organizer, clearing-house, and open forum for the left-wing theatre movement.

In conjunction with Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film's left-wing political orientation, and also with their editors' perception of the magazines' role--in relation to the left-wing theatre movement--the periodicals were involved in several specific struggles during the years of their publication. Among the issues pursued by the magazines, were the crusade for a strong workers' theatre movement, various union issues, and the fight for unemployment insurance. The struggle for Negro civil rights and for an equitable position for the Negro in the American theatre; the

fight for a censorship-free Federal Theatre Project and the eventual establishment of a permanent National Theatre; and, finally, the crusade against war fascism and censorship were other battles that were waged by the magazines. Workers Theatre was also involved--on a rather limited scale--in the election campaigns of 1931 and 1932.

As might be expected, the approach of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film to the several major issues with which they were involved, changed over the years, in a direct relation to the continual policy shifts of the Comintern in Moscow, and of the American Communist Party. For that reason, the magazines' ever-evolving approach to the crusades which it undertook serves today as an additional retrospective barometer of the American left-wing movement--particularly in the theatre, but also of "the movement" in general--of the nineteen-thirties.

Election Campaigns

It is interesting to note that, although Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film were implicitly political publications, the magazines' involvement in the political campaigns which took place during the period of their publication was actually minimal. In fact, the only campaigns that were discussed in the magazines at all, were the local campaigns of 1931, and the 1932 Presidential Election. In both of these campaigns, the Communist Party platforms and candidates were endorsed by Workers Theatre.

An article signed the "Dram [sic] Bureau of the Workers Cultural Federation," entitled, "The Election Campaign and the Tasks of the Workers Theatres," appeared in the October 1931 Workers Theatre and discussed the role that could be played by the amateur theatres in popularizing the issues of the campaign.

> The election campaign confronts the Workers Theatres of this country with an entirely new task: to approach the broad masses of workers who are not yet class conscious, who are still influenced by capitalist propaganda, and who are even opposed to the idea of class struggle. Up to now the American Workers Theatres played, with very few exceptions, only before audiences of sympathetic or revolutionary workers. If our work in the election campaign shall be of any value for the revolutionary movement, then we have to leave this method of least resistance. We cannot wait any longer until the workers come to us or call us, we have to go to the workers. That means: we have to play on streets, at open-air meetings, at demonstrations, at factory gates, before employment offices, and in the meetings of organizations which are not yet affiliated with the revolutionary movement.[1]

The authors of this article asserted that there were several difficulties which the workers' theatres had to overcome, if they were to succeed in reaching the masses. The first problem was that most of the workers' theatre groups were non-English-speaking. The article suggested therefore, that English-speaking and foreign language groups collaborate in order to present election plays for their new mass audiences. Since the groups also needed effective material for presentation to the workers, the article suggested that plays should

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[1]Dram Bureau of the WCF, "The Election Campaign and the Tasks of the Workers Theatre," Workers Theatre, October 1931, p. 2.

be written for all of the groups by the Workers Laboratory Theatre or other English-speaking groups. Finally, the authors of this piece pointed out that the groups would have to work out their own techniques for presenting the election plays effectively. "A new style has to be created on the foundation of the given tasks and the existing circumstances," they maintained.[2]

> We have to consider our election play as an attack, well planned and progressing from one strategic point to the next. We have to see a clear exposition of the following important points:
>
> 1. Today's miserable conditions of the working class as an inevitable consequence of the capitalist system.
> 2. Exposure of the bourgeois parties as representatives of the capitalist system.
> 3. Exposure of the socialist party as accomplice of the capitalists.
> 4. The only way out: mass action of the workers.
> 5. The communist party as the only workers party.[3]

The 1931 election campaign was actually an opportunity for the workers theatres to refine their work and make use of their developing abilities, the article concluded; and, "It is up to us to use this opportunity!"[4]

An excerpt from the "13th Plenum Resolution of the CPUSA" headed, "The Importance of the Coming Election Campaign," was also published in the October 1931 Workers Theatre: "The

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[2]Ibid., p. 3.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid., p. 3a.

election [sic] this fall, important in themselves are of even greater significance as being a test of our preparedness to exploit the tremendous possibilities before us in the general national elections of 1932."[5]

"An Invitation," from "The United Front Election Campaign Committee" was published in the June--July 1932 Workers Theatre. The Committee extended,

> . . . an invitation to all workers' theatre groups throughout the United States to take an active part in bringing the working class election program of the Communist Party to the workers of this country. . . . The committee is confident that the workers theatre groups, by going out on the streets with simple dramatizations of the issues involved in the campaign, will be able to bring the message of working class solidarity to the hundreds of thousands of workers that have up to now remained blinded to the bosses' theatre and newspaper propaganda. The committee is confident that the workers' theatre will spread the knowledge of the platform of the Communist Party and these main demands:
>
> 1. Unemployment and Social Insurance at the expense of the state and employers.
>
> 2. Against Hoover's wage-cutting policy.
>
> 3. Emergency relief for the poor farmers without restrictions by the government and banks; exemption of poor farmers from taxes, and no forced collection of rents or debts.
>
> 4. Equal rights for the Negroes and self-determination for the Black Belt.
>
> 5. Against capitalist terror; against all forms of suppression of the political rights of workers.

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[5]"The Importance of the Coming Election Campaign," Workers Theatre, October 1931, p. 3b.

6. Against imperialist war; for the defense of the Chinese people and for the Soviet Union.[6]

In "We Answer the Call," which appeared with the "Invitation," in the June-July 1932 Workers Theatre, the editors of the magazine wrote that the League of Workers Theatres was proud that the CPUSA recognized the value of agit-prop work. The groups, the editors reported, were busy preparing plays for the campaign; and two of these plays--Vote Communist and Hands Off--were published in the magazine that month. "If we participate in the election campaign," wrote the editors, "we can be a big factor in the creation of this mass basis [for the workers' fight].

"Workers Theatre groups of the United States, into the streets with your election plays and mass recitations. Against the call of the United Front Election Campaign Committee."[7]

No other political election campaign--and this included the 1936 Presidential election--was discussed or even mentioned, in Workers Theatre, New Theatre or New Theatre and Film, during the remaining five years of the magazines' publication. As the Popular Front policies took hold, the magazines assumed a less and less specifically political function. Also, in 1936, as I have explained in Chapter I, the Communist Party was tacitly

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[6]"An Invitation," Workers Theatre, June-July 1932, p. 3.

[7]"We Answer the Call," Workers Theatre, June-July 1932, p. 4.

supported the re-election of Roosevelt, although a direct statement of this support, in New Theatre, or in any Communist Party publication, would have been highly impractical.[8]

The Magazines' Crusade For a Strong Workers' Theatre Movement

(A) Third Period Years

"The Rise of the Workers Theatres," an article by F. Rauh and Lo. Hartman appeared in the April 1931 first issue of Workers Theatre and discussed the development of the workers' theatre movement from 1923, when the Workers Drama League was organized. "The Workers Theatre," wrote Rauh and Hartman, "realized that it was working in a new field and had to find more forms of the threatre by which it could best express the class struggle and make the greatest appeal to the masses."[9]

Although the workers had wanted to do all of their theatre work themselves, explained the authors, they were thankful for any help that they received from theatre professionals and semi-professionals. Rauh and Hartman expressed optimism about the future of the workers' theatre movement, and stated that, "This work which the Workers Theatre carried on through many years, is developing along with the whole

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[8]See Chapter I, p. 84.

[9]F. Rauh and Lo. Hartman, "The Rise of the Workers Theatre," Workers Theatre, April 1931, p. 4.

revolutionary movement and promises to become a strong instrument of propaganda and at the same time a means of recreation to [sic] the working class."[10]

Harry Ober wrote an article about the Workers Laboratory Theatre--the group that was initially responsible for the publication of Workers Theatre--for the same introductory issue of the magazine as contained the Rauh and Hartman piece. Outlining the development of the group, Ober wrote that the Workers Laboratory Theatre was, ". . . a cooperative venture on the part of the class conscious workers to use the theatre as an educational weapon in the class struggle."[11]

A more complete article about the development, membership, methodology and future plans of the WLT, "The Workers Laboratory Theatre of the WIR," by Bernard Reines, was included in the July 1931 Workers Theatre. Reines explained that when the WLT became affiliated with the Workers Inaternational Relief (WIR), the group took on a revolutionary function. The WLT's first task, in conjunction with this new purpose, was a pageant for the Lenin Memorial Meeting, on January 31, 1931. After the pageant, a routine of playwriting and producing was adopted by the group which, at the time of the article's preparation, had five short plays in its repertory: Unemployed, Buy Now, The Big Stiff, It's Funny as Hell, and Strike. Reines reported that on Saturday

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[10]Ibid., p. 5.

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

nights, symposiums which included a speaker and a play presentation, followed by a general discussion, were held at the WIR hall. The Workers Laboratory Theatre also presented plays at workers' meetings.

The WLT still needed much work, said Reines, particularly in the area of its performance technique. At the writing of his piece, there were only twenty-five to thirty members of the WLT, according to Reines; and he felt that the group should make an effort to enlist new "functionaries." This was crucial, if the WLT was to become a genuine agit-prop troupe--ready to do plays in the streets, at a moment's notice. Reines concluded his essay on the Workers Laboratory Theatre, by stating that the group had to work hard, in order to be ready in time for the upcoming November elections.[12]

In June 1931, the Workers Laboratory Theatre became affiliated with another workers' theatre group, whose development had taken place simultaneously to its own: the German-speaking Prolet-Buehne. The two groups named their cooperative the United Theatres of New York and, as of the August 1931 issue, the publication of Workers Theatre became the responsibility of that new organization.

An article about "The Organizational Structure of the Prolet Buehne," by Marg. Haller, appeared in the September 1931 issue of the magazine. Haller stated that the Prolet-

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[12]Bernard Reines, "The Workers Laboratory Theatre of the WIR," Workers Theatre, July,1931, pp. 8-10.

Buehne was started in 1926, as a section of the German Workers Club--although soon after its formation the theatre group separated from the Club. The decision of the group, in 1930, to turn to agit-prop work, had prompted changes in its artistic, technical, and organizational structure. This was because the Prolet-Buehne had found that, for agit-prop work, the collective method of work, with the use of committees, was most advantageous. The Prolet-Buehne was therefore composed of several committees, each with its own special function--the organizational committee, the artistic committee, the political committee and the repertory and propaganda committees. There was also an executive committee which oversaw all of the work, although the general membership had to approve the decisions of the Executive committee.

Haller declared that there was a particular need for strong discipline in an agit-prop group. For that reason, prospective new members of the Prolet-Buehne had to go through a six week probationary period before they were formally accepted into the group. The Prolet-Buehne was planning courses on Marxism and Leninism, said Haller, because the political clarity of an agit-prop group was essential to its work.[13]

According to M. Thon, in another September 1931 Workers Theatre piece, "The Artistic Life of the Prolet-

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[13]Marg. Haller, "The Organizational Structure of the Prolet-Buehne," Workers Theatre, September, 1931, pp. 5-7.

Buehne," the group had given thirty-one performances in 1930--including revues, mass recitations and proletarian songs; and, in 1931, up to the writing of this article, the Prolet-Buehne had performed on thirty occasions. Thon said that the mass recitation was one of the most effective forms for an agit-prop group, because it could be presented easily, it didn't take very much time to write and rehearse, and because it could be used to deal concretely with specific current events in the class struggle. Pantomimes had been used by the Prolet-Buehne, for performances before English-speaking and other foreign language audiences, said Thon, and that form had also been quite effective.

Thon pointed out that the work of the Prolet-Buehne had yet to reach the level of the work of the agit-prop groups in Germany. Thus far, for example, the group had not given any street performances at open-air meetings and demonstrations--the type of performance that was essential for any agit-prop group hoping to fulfill its purposes.[14]

During the first year of Workers Theatre's publication, many articles about the work of other workers' theatre groups in the United States--some of which were English-speaking; most of which were not--as well as reports on the workers' theatres in Germany, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and France, appeared in the magazine. In addition to this, much of the

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[14]M. Thon, "The Artistic Life of the Prolet-Buehne," Workers Theatre, September, 1931, pp. 8-9.

space in the early issues of Workers Theatre was devoted to correspondence with the representatives of various groups, and with other individuals who were interested in the developing workers' theatre movement.

Workers Theatre also attempted to foster the development of a children's workers' theatre movement. An article by Deutchman, entitled, "The Children on the Cultural Front," appeared in the July 1931 issue, and suggested the establishment of a Children's Section in the magazine. "The Children of the workers must be taught to be the leaders of their class the working class and must not be excluded from a single field, neither cultural nor political," he declared."[15] This suggestion was followed, and a Children's Section--which included reports on theatre work with the children of struggling workers, as well as plays which could be performed by the children's groups--was added to Workers Theatre.

By the third issue of the magazine, in July 1931, the editors had decided that there was a need for a central agency to bring together all of the workers' theatre groups that were being organized in different parts of the country. In a short piece entitled "Consolidation of the English-speaking Theatre Movement," S. Roberts of the Workers Laboratory Theatre wrote that his group would try to serve in that capacity, and he asked that the other workers' theatre troupes

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[15]Deutchman, "The Children on the Cultural Front," Workers Theatre, July, 1931, p. 19.

send plays to the WLT so that they could be distributed.[16]

A short note, in the July 1931 Workers Theatre reported that a conference of the Workers Cultural Federation had been held on June 14, and that 265 delegates representing 130 organizations--nineteen of which were workers' theatres--had attended. A more complete "Report on the Cultural Convention," by H. Shapiro of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, was included in the August 1931 issue of the magazine. Shapiro wrote that the convention had been sponsored by the John Reed Club of New York, for the purpose of coordinating the cultural forces of the American worker and helping to turn these forces into a weapon for the class struggle.[17]

The Workers Cultural Convention had been organized as a result of suggestions made at the Kharkov conference, that American workers' cultural groups should join together in politically active organizations.[18] Among the topics that were discussed at the convention, according to Shapiro, were the importance of cultural forces in the class struggle, the need for artists to be perfect workers as well as accomplished artists, the need for revolutionary plays, and the advantages of the German agit-prop play form. The Workers Laboratory Theatre and the Prolet-Buehne presented the mass

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[16]S. Roberts, "Consolidation of the English-speaking Theatre Movement," Workers Theatre, June, 1931, pp. 2-3.

[17]H. Shapiro, "Report of the Cultural Convention," Workers Theatre, August, 1931, p. 7.

[18]See Chapter I, p. 12.

recitation "Art is a Weapon," as entertainment for the conference.[19]

A notice, "To All Dramatic Groups," signed by the "Dram Bureau of the Workers Cultural Federation," was published in the September 1931 Workers Theatre. The Dram Bureau called upon all workers' theatres to organize and unite in order to work towards the formation of a Workers Dramatic Union of the USA.[20] An announcement, in the December 1931 Workers Theatre, stated that the first National Workers Theatre Conference had been scheduled for April 1932.

A two-installment article about the third major workers' theatre group of the period, the Yiddish-speaking Artef (the name was an abbreviation of the Arbeiter Theatre Verband, or Workers Theatrical Alliance), by Nathaniel Buchwald--a member of the group--appeared in the February and April 1932 issues of Workers Theatre. The Artef, Buchwald explained, was a federation of over 100 Jewish left-wing organizations.

Buchwald said that, because the Jewish workers had traditionally had a high regard for artistic productions, the Artef had been founded with the ideal of its becoming a proletarian art theatre that could compete with the "bourgeois" Yiddish Art Theatre. In 1930, the group had rented a small Broadway theatre and had attempted to become a full-time

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[19]An excerpt from "Art is a Weapon" is included at the beginning of this dissertation, pp. v-vi.

[20]Dram Bureau of the Workers Cultural Federation, "To All Dramatic Groups," Workers Theatre, September, 1931, pp. 1-2.

professional organization. It had proven impossible, however, for the group to succeed financially and, at the same time, meet its responsibility to the labor movement. The Artef had therefore gone back to operating on a non-professional basis, with its worker-actors contributing their time to weekend performances and evening rehearsals.[21]

Buchwald said that although the Artef had been criticized by other groups in the workers' theatre movement for concentrating too much of its energies on artistic productions, a complete move in the direction of utilitarian agit-prop plays was out of the question for his group. The Jewish workers who attended Artef plays expected artistic productions, and the Artef players felt that agit-prop plays were on a lower level and would have less revolutionary impact than the full-length productions which, at the time, constituted the group's repertory.

The leaders of the Artef, according to Buchwald, realized that their group should do some agit-prop work; and slowly, some of the players were beginning to recognize the validity of this position. Hopefully, he wrote, the Artef would eventually be able to present both agit-prop and artistic full-length productions. For, ". . . ideologically there is no essential quarrel between these two manners of presenting a revolutionary play."[22] Agit-prop groups and

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[21]Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Artef," Workers Theatre, February, 1932, p. 5.

[22]Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Artef," Workers Theatre, April, 1932, p. 7.

revolutionary artistic groups were both needed in the Jewish field, declared Buchwald, and he believed that the Artef should try to extend its work in both directions, and that there should be more cooperation between the Artef and the dram-sections of the other Jewish workers' clubs.

The "call" for the "General Mobilization of all Workers Theatre Groups in the Country for the First National Theatre Conference and Spartiakiade" (which had been announced, several months earlier, for April 1932) was published in the March 1932 Workers Theatre. The magazine's editors recommended the following topics for discussion at the conference:

> Tasks of the workers' theatres (especially in the US)
>
> Methods of work
>
> Shortcomings and difficulties
>
> Means of improving the existing groups and building up different cadres
>
> Better national and international contact
>
> Tasks and Constitution of the Workers Theatre Union to be organized at the Conference.[23]

The May 1932 issue of Workers Theatre--the first issue of the magazine to appear in printed form--was completely devoted to a report of the "First National Workers Theatre Conference on the Development, Prospects and Tasks of the Workers Theatre in the United States." The Conference had opened with a

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[23]"General Mobilization of All Workers Theatre Groups in the Country for the First National Workers Theatre Conference and Spartakiade," Workers Theatre, March, 1932, pp. 1-2.

discussion of the political, economic, and cultural background of the workers' theatre movement. And, to those in attendance, the recent growth of the movement seemed to have been a natural outcome of the Depression, the subsequent decline of the bourgeois theatre, and the increasing radicalization of the "petty-bourgeois" theatre artists.

The Conference noted the recent abrupt turn to agit-prop work as the basic form of the workers' theatre; but the need for agit-prop work to be entertaining, in order to be successful as propaganda, was also emphasized. The participants at the Conference stipulated that the basic task of the workers' theatre was to spread the idea of class struggle as well as to participate in it. Among the more general tasks of the workers' theatre that were outlined at the conference were the following:

--to see to the systematic political and artistic training of workers' theatre members

--to increase and improve the quality of agit-prop work

--to bring the work directly to the masses

--to develop and make use of stationary workers' theatres

--to experiment with other forms--using music and dance--that would compliment the topical subject matter of the workers' theatres

--to take over any technique from the bourgeois theatre that could be used to accomplish the aims of the workers' theatre

--to draw in sympathetic artists and intellectuals

--to popularize the achievements of the USSR

--to help to make it widely understood that the vitality of the Soviet Theatre was due to the Revolution

--to, "win workers and farmers, including those in the armed forces, for the tactic of turning the coming imperialist war against the Soviet Union into a civil war against the imperialists."[24]

The League of Workers Theatres of the USA (LOWT)--with Workers Theatre magazine designated as its "official organ"--was founded at the Conference. Following the discussion part of the Conference, a Spartakiade, or "Revolutionary competition," was held, at which the groups attending the Conference presented short plays which represented the best of their work.[25]

The effects of the resolutions which had been endorsed at the Conference were soon evident in several developments within the workers' theatre movement that were, in turn, reported in Workers Theatre. It was mentioned in the editorial section of the August 1932 issue of the magazine, for example, that a permanent stationary workers' theatre was in the process of being organized by the Workers Laboratory Theatre. This new group--which soon became known as the Theatre Collective--planned to produce full-length plays, the first of which, "Halleluyah I'm a Bum!" by Paul Peters, was scheduled for September 1932. Mordecai Gorelik, who was a

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[24]"First National Workers Theatre Conference on the Development, Prospects and Tasks of the Workers Theatres in the United States," Workers Theatre, May, 1932, p. 6.

[25]See Chapter I, p. 31.

member of the Group Theatre as well, was one of the group's directors.[26]

Rose Beigel wrote a short piece about the Theatre Collective entitled, "Well Here They Are," for the January-February 1933 Workers Theatre, and pointed out that, "it is important to note that a number of people functioning in the Broadway Theatre and skilled in various phases, are willing and anxious to work with the Theatre Collective."[27] This development pleased many of the leaders of the workers' theatre movement. Bernard Reines of the WLT was undoubtedly one such individual. For in a September-October 1932 Workers Theatre article, "Our Widening Front," he had written that there were still many weaknesses that were hindering the growth of the movement and that, "we must widen our front, in order to reach more workers, farmers and artists."[28]

(B) Period of Transition

A major event of 1933--insofar as Workers Theatre and the American workers' theatre movement were concerned--was the First International Workers Theatre Olympiad which was held, in Moscow, on May 24-30, 1933. An announcement about the upcoming Olympiad appeared in the March 1933 Workers

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[26]Editorial Column, Workers Theatre, August, 1932, p. 18.

[27]Rose Beigel, "Well Here They Are," Workers Theatre, January-February, 1933, p. 4.

[28]Bernard Reines, "Our Widening Front," Workers Theatre, September-October, 1932, p. 4.

Theatre, accompanied by the editors' statement that,

> Unfortunately, the League of Workers Theatres of the U.S.A. is unlikely to send a group. Here in the U.S.A we have only recently overcome difficulties that arose from a wrong form of national organization. We expect to make a financial contribution to the Olympiad Committee. And in the future, we expect to be in a position to really take an important part in the work of IURT [International Union of Revolutionary Theatres].
>
> The Olympiad will be a mass review of the creative achievements of the revolutionary working-class. It will be a demonstration of solidarity on the part of the workers and farmers of capitalist countries with the workers and farmers of the USSR. It will be a mass mobilization of the theatrical weapons of the toilers in defense of the new life being created in the Soviet Union, and against the approaching imperialist war.[29]

John Bonn, who was sent by the LOWT, as a delegate to the Moscow Olympiad, wrote a short piece for the July-August 1933 Workers Theatre, entitled, "The International Workers Theatre Olympiad--a Pre-review," in which he declared that, "The Olympiad--and here lies its tremendous value--gave an accurate and complete picture of the International Workers Theatre of today.

"It revealed all of its shortcomings and dangers, and all its possibilities and splendid achievements. . . . An abundance of valuable material which--after an exact and scientific analysis--will remold the structure and the fact of the revolutionary theatre movement."[30]

Bonn wrote another, more complete article about the

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[29]Editorial, Workers Theatre, March, 1933, p. 2.

[30]John Bonn, "The International Workers Theatre Olympiad--a Pre-Review," Workers Theatre, July-August, 1933, p. 3.

Olympiad, which was published in the September 1933 issue of the magazine--the first issue to appear as New Theatre. In this account, he spoke of the current period of transition in the workers' theatre movement which had been reflected at the Moscow conference:

> The Olympiad took place at a significant moment in the history of the revolutionary theatre: at the comp etion of the first period--the period of struggle for its establishment, for clarification, an d for recognition. The task of this period, to pose against the old bourgeois "art for art's sake" conception of theatre the idea and reality of a new conscious, political, dynamic theatre, has been fulfilled. The revolutionary theatre of the world has become a fact that cannot be denied or ignored any more.[31]

Referring to, but without directly quoting the resolution that had been formulated at the Olympiad that, "lofty ideological content must be presented in fine artistic form,"[32] as well as to the impact that the recently adopted method of socialist realism was beginning to have on the workers' theatre movement, Bonn wrote:

> The first, the militant period of the revolutionary theatre is completed, but the old organizational structure, the political outlook, the method of work, and the artistic form of the past period survived. There is a discrepancy between means and tasks, which has to be balanced by means of a thorough reorientation.
>
> The revolutionary theatre is going through a period of transition from which we cannot expect creative achievement as much as theoretical endeavours [sic], self-criticism, technical and artistic experiments.

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[31]John Bonn, "The International Workers Theatre Olympiad," New Theatre, September-October, 1933, p. 18.

[32]Introduction to V. Meyerhold, "On Ideology and Technology in the Theatre," International Theatre, no. 2 (Moscow, USSR, 1934), p. 6.

> The Olympiad necessarily had to reflect this state of transition. . . . It therefore could not be an exhibition of mature and outstanding works of the new theatre arts. It rather was a preview of the forms in the new theatre, showing how far it understood the new problems and what methods it found toward their solution.[33]

This "period of transition" which Bonn discussed in his report on the Olympiad, was also being experienced by Workers Theatre magazine. An announcement by the editors, in the July-August 1933 issue, had stated that, as of the following month, Workers Theatre would adopt a broader and less schematic approach and that, in accordance with this new policy, the name of the periodical was being changed to New Theatre. At the same time, the editors announced a play-writing contest and a "New Theatre Award" for the best revolutionary plays--one short play and one long play. The award committee, the editors wrote, would be comprised of members of the various branches of "the theatre profession." And so, with these new developments, the revolutionary workers' theatre movement was well on its way to becoming the "progressive" new theatre movement.

The year 1934 was transitional: for the entire left-wing movement in the United States, and therefore for New Theatre. For, by 1934, the Third Period dogmatism had been almost completely eclipsed by the emerging Popular Front policies of the Comintern and, in turn, of the American Communist Party. When the first issue of New Theatre appeared,

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[33]John Bonn, "The International Workers Theatre Olympiad," New Theatre, September-October, 1933, p. 18.

in September 1933, the lead editorial had explained that the magazine's change from Workers Theatre to New Theatre signified, ". . . a broader conception of the revolutionary workers theatre as the historical successor of the bourgeois theatre, the theatre that as an element of the system of capitalism has already made its contribution to the development of culture and now is in the period of decay. . . ."[34]

New Theatre's reappraisal of the role of the workers' theatre was evident in three major respects, during 1934: in the growing interest expressed by the editors in the work of the apolitical regional theatres; in the intensified attention being devoted by the magazine to groups--such as the Theatre Collective and the Artef--which had started as amateur workers' theatres and were, by then, developing into full-time professional organizations; and--most of all--in the magazine's increasingly less tolerant attitude towards amateurish and overtly propagandistic work by the non-professional workers' theatre groups.

The Second National Workers Theatre Festival of the League of Workers Theatres was scheduled to be held, in Chicago, on August 13, 14 and 15, 1934. The Festival presented an opportunity for the organizers and participants in the workers' theatre movement to gain an overview of what had been accomplished by the individual groups and by the

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[34]Editorial, New Theatre, September-October, 1933, p. 3.

movement as a whole, during the two years which had followed the first Conference and Spartakiade. Ann Howe, in a January 1934 New Theatre article announcing the Festival, reported that, in preparation for the Festival, regional conferences and contests had been held or were being planned, "thus doing away with the feeling of the groups that all initiative and leadership has to come from New York."[35] Indicative of the financial difficulties that were continuing to plague the LOWT, was Howe's warning that, "All groups must pay their dues, or they will not be permitted to compete in Chicago, even if they should win their local competiton."[36]

In an article previewing the Festival--in the April 1934 New Theatre--Oscar Saul declared that the extensive preparations for the event had already proven two points. The first was the "growing demand of workers for a revolutionary theatre which takes its inspiration from workers' struggles."[37] This point had been demonstrated by the huge audience attendance at the various regional preliminary competitions. The second point proven was that, ". . . the workers theatre is not yet ready to answer that demand adequately. Artistically and politically, most of the groups have not realized their potential strength. The slogan 'Theatre is a Weapon' still

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[35]Anne Howe, "National Theatre Festival," New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 19.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Oscar Saul, "National Theatre Festival, New Theatre April, 1934, p. 10.

awaits its fullest realization," wrote Saul. "At the Second National Festival . . . the problems will be crystallized. Here, through the exchange of experiences, theories and opinions, a broad plan of action for the next two years will be laid down."[38]

Ben Blake, the editor of New Theatre, reviewed the Chicago Festival, in a feature article for the May 1934 issue of the magazine entitled, "From Atlantic to Pacific--The Revolutionary Theatre Holds Its Second National Festival." Blake reported that, apart from the numerous delegations of workers' theatres from cities in all parts of the United States, representatives from several workers' theatre groups in Canada, and also some delegates from stationary theatres--professional and semi-professional--had attended the Festival. Among the groups in this last category which had been represented, were, The Workers Theatre of Chicago, the New Theatre of Hollywood, and the Theatre Collective of New York City--in addition to some members of the Theatre Union and the Group Theatre. Blake repretted the absence of representatives to the Festival from farmers' theatres, student theatres, and all-Negro theatres.

The Conference part of the Festival began with a number of reports on various aspects of the developing revolutionary theatre movement--e.g., "From a Mass Movement to a Mass

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[38]Ibid.

Organization," by Harry Elion; "Creative Problems of the Revolutionary Theatre," by John Bonn; and "The Theatre and the Press," by Ben Blake. Following the reports, the delegates were divided into "commissions" which were charged with discussing and formulating resolutions on various issues affecting the workers' theatre movement. Among the several questions considered were, "Repertory," "Production and Training," "Children's Theatre," and "Organizational Matters of the LOWT." The commissions met simultaneously, and then the delegates reassembled to review and vote on the resolutions which had been prepared. Blake noted that, among its several recommendations, the commission on the "Organizational Matters of the LOWT," chaired by Ann Howe, had proposed that a new editor for New Theatre be chosen. This proposal, along with all of the other suggestions by the Ann Howe commission, was approved by the delegates. Blake did not comment on his displacement as editor.

Dramatic competitions were held during the three evenings of the festival. In his report for New Theatre, Blake gave a brief description of the more outstanding entries, and noted that the winners of the competition were as follows:

1st place--to the Workers Laboratory Theatre, for their production, "Newsboy"

2nd place--to the Ukranian Dramatic Circle of New York, for a play entitled, "Oh Yeah"

> 3rd place--awarded jointly to the Workers Dramatic club of Gary, Indiana, for "Courtroom Scene," and to the Blue Blouses of Los Angeles, for "A-Shopping We Will Go."[39]

Not everybody in attendance was pleased with the Festival. In a short piece which appeared in the June 1934 New Theatre entitled, "The Stage Was Not Set--The Inside Story of the National Theatre Festival," Ann Howe expressed her disappointment with the Chicago conference, and attributed what she saw as its failures, to both shortcomings in the preparatory work for the Festival and organizational weaknesses within the LOWT.[40]

Howe's misgivings about the Festival notwithstanding, the workers' theatre movement, in 1934, was still gaining strength. In the "Backstage" column of the October 1934 New Theatre (Herbert Kline had been the editor of the magazine since the previous July), it was noted that the magazine's circulation had increased from 2500 in May, to 8500 in October. The workers' theatres, the editors stated, were, "the largest medium of revolutionary influence in American outside of our press."

> Figuring on a low average of one performance per week per group, and the average audience a conservative 200, this means that the workers theatres play to 75,000 workers each week! And 3,900,000 spectators (participants in our theatre) each year. Add to that the 125,000 people who saw Peace on Earth, and the 100,000 who saw Stevedore

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[39]Ben Blake, "From Atlantic to Pacific--The Revolutionary Theatre Holds Its Second National Festival," New Theatre, May, 1934, pp. 5-8.

[40]Ann Howe, "The Stage Was Not Set--The Inside Story of the National Theatre Festival," New Theatre, June, 1934, pp. 14-15.

and the figures mount to over 4,000,000 total audience![41]

One group in particular was adding to the audience figures of the workers' theatres. According to Richard Pack, in a November 1934 New Theatre article, "Shock Troupe in Action," this newest offshoot unit of the Workers Laboratory Theatre had played to 60,000 New York City workers during the past year. The Shock Troupe was a full-time production unit that was supported--room and board--by the WLT, and presented a variety of plays, on very short notice, in the streets of the city.[42] Although the agit-prop play was already losing much of its popularity among the theorists of the revolutionary theatre, the Shock Troupe--which was the purest American example of an agit-prop theatre--continued to play an important role in the workers' theatre movement.

(C) Popular Front Years

During 1935, 1936, and in the two issues of the magazine that appeared as New Theatre and Film, in March and April 1937, the editors of the publication maintained the same policies in regard to the workers' theatre movement that had been established during the previous transitional year. Herbert Kline's statement, in the September 1934 New Theatre that, "it is our chief task to make our movement a mass movement. . . . We must . . . professionalize the revolutionary

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[41]"Backstage," New Theatre, October, 1934, p. 30.

[42]Richard Pack, "Shock Troupe in Action," New Theatre, November, 1934, pp. 13; 33.

theatre arts . . . ,"[43] continued to be the guiding principle of the magazines and represented the line of development that had been adopted for the left-wing theatre movement as a whole.

In conjunction with the recently articulated desire to popularize the revolutionary theatre movement, New Theatre continued to devote considerable discussion to the work that was being done by the non-political regional theatres in various parts of the country. And, in addition, the editors of the magazine finally began to recommend that the radical workers' theatre groups support and even collaborate with the theatre groups that had been formed by several of the organized labor unions of the AFL and the newly organized CIO--a tactic that, two years earlier, would have been unthinkable.

When the editors announced--in the February 1935 New Theatre--that the New Theatre League was in the process of being organized to incorporate and thus replace the league of Workers Theatres,[44] they explained that the purpose of the new organization was, ". . . to include all members of the theatre groups and audience who want to stand behind this simple program: For mass development of the American theatre to its highest artistic and social level. For a theatre dedicated to a struggle against war, fascism and censorship."[45]

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[43]Herbert Kline, Editorial, New Theatre, September, 1934, p. 4.

[44]See Chapter I, pp. 65-66.

[45]Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 3.

National Theatre Week was celebrated by all of the affiliates of the New Theatre League on May 12-19, 1935. Recent publicity for the League, in addition to several favorable articles which had appeared in the press about the "Theatre of the Left," had brought many new members into the organization. Commenting on this recent upsurge in NTL membership, in the "Shifting Scenes" column of the May 1935 New Theatre, Alice Evans wrote: "There is no doubt that the growing danger of imperialist war, the increase in anti-working class terror, the wave of censorship have begun to shake some of the most conservative theatres out of their 'art-for-art's sake' attitude and bring the problems of a living theatre to their active attention. National Theatre Week will involve the participation of these new elements for the first time in our programs and competitions."[46]

There was no evidence, however, in the National Theatre Week competitions, that the recent involvement of "new elements" in the New Theatre League had had any positive effect on the work of the participating amateur groups. According to an unsigned report--in the July 1935 New Theatre--eleven groups had competed in National Theatre Week contests and, although progress was noticeable in many instances, there were no productions, "with the freshness and integrity of last year's prize winning Newsboy. . . ." The report stated

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[46]Alice Evans, "Shifting Scenes," New Theatre, May, 1935, p. 28.

that, "The general level of the performances was disappointing, and revealed the need of most of the competing groups for professional artistic aid and guidance that must be supplied from the more advanced groups."[47]

It seems that, by mid-1935 the amateur radical workers' theatre movement had reached a plateau--both artistically, and in terms of its influence. The reorganization of the LOWT into the New Theatre League represented a turning away from the radical workers' theatre groups to a broader constituency--in which the NTL hoped to include the regional theatres, union members, and "progressive" theatre professionals.

Then, on June 12, 1935 the creation of the Federal Theatre Project was announced. And, in August 1935, the Comintern finally made a formal announcement of its policy of collaboration with all enemies of fascism: the Popular Front era was officially inaugurated. These two important--unrelated--events, ironically, had the coincidentally joint effect of strengthening the left-wing theatre movement's commitment to the concept of a united front National Theatre.

Although the Federal Theatre was officially created in the spring of 1935, it almost immediately became bogged down in bureaucratic red tape. And it was not until the middle of the following winter, that the Project finally

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[47]"National Theatre Week," New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 30.

began to present plays. Meanwhile, the New Theatre League continued to attempt to organize a national theatre, or "People's Theatre" of its own.

In a December 1935 New Theatre article, Mark Marvin reported that two regional new theatre conferences--one in New York City and one in Chicago--had recently been held and had demonstrated that a widespread, diverse People's Theatre movement was developing. Marvin spoke of the drive that was presently underway to enroll NTL members from among the 3200 amateur theatres throughout the United States. Once this enrollment was accomplished, Marvin said that the New Theatre League would have to supply its new members with advice, leadership, and, of great importance, new plays--"rich, mature and indigenous plays of American life."[48]

Marvin declared that the attempt to organize a People's Theatre along strictly geographical lines had been unsuccessful. He suggested that, "only a regionalism based on a dialectical approach to the events and forces and folklore of a given area can succeed."[49] He recommended that the workers in the new theatre movement should therefore do research into the historic regional struggles; this would be the basis for an American People's Theatre.

Marvin discussed the movement towards People's

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[48]Mark Marvin, "An American's People's Theatre," New Theatre, December, 1935, p. 25.

[49]Ibid.

Theatres again, in an April 1936 New Theatre piece, "The New Theatre Conference." After detailing the plans for the 1936--third--National Theatre Conference, Marving stated that the program for the new theatre movement over the next two years would include dividing the movement into two major categories: People's Theatres and Labor Theatres. The People's Theatres, wrote Marvin, would be aimed at an audience of workers, middle class people, and intellectuals; they would become the most progressive voice of every community. The People's Theatres would rally farmers and workers in the struggle for a better social system; for peace and against fascism. They would also provide a creative outlet for sincere artists. Marvin hoped that, eventually, these theatres would be helped financially by municipal and state governments. The concept of Labor Theatres had already been endorsed by the AFL, Marvin reported. Labor Stage, Inc., of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union was the first of these theatres.[50]

Although the ideal of the People's Theatres which was espoused by the leaders of the New Theatre League was by no means ideologically the same as the regional Theatre Projects that were being set up under the WPA Federal Theatre Project, the functions fulfilled by the latter groups could be interpreted by the NTL leadership as being complimentary to the aims of their movement. This was particularly so,

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[50]Mark Marvin, "The New Theatre Conference," New Theatre, April, 1936, p. 11.

in light of the Popular Front policy which was directed at opening up "the Movement" to all enemies of fascism, and which suggested to the left-wing theatre workers that they should modify their schematic approach and join the mainstream--in an attempt to have an influence on a broader audience. Thus--and for economic (and, perhaps career interest) reasons as well--many individuals who had been participants in the workers' theatre movement, now became workers in the various Theatre Projects all over the country.

There is practically no mention of the work of the amateur workers' theatre groups, in the last issues of New Theatre and New Theatre and Film. By mid-1936, the magazine was focusing all of its attention on the continually growing list of professional theatre productions with social themes, the work of groups within the Federal Theatre Project, and on the work of the various theatre groups which had been formed by some of the unions of the AFL and the CIO. The workers' theatre movement, as it had originally been conceived, had virtually ceased to exist.

On June 30, 1939, the Federal Theatre Project was terminated by Congressional action. Charges of Communist activities within the Projects had played a significant part in bringing about its curtailment. By that time, there was no workers' theatre or People's Theatre movement to fill the role that the various regional Theatre Projects had played throughout the country. In retrospect, it appears that the

action by Roosevelt, in establishing the Federal Theatre Project, and by the Comintern, in suggesting to its partisans that they should collaborate with all enemies of fascism--regardless of party affiliation--had, ironically, had the cooperative effect of defusing the radical workers' theatre movement.

CHAPTER III

CRUSADES: UNION ISSUES AND NEGRO CIVIL RIGHTS; THE NEGRO IN THE AMERICAN THEATRE

Union Issues

(A) Changing Approaches Towards Organized Labor (AF of L and CIO)

In early 1928, a policy of dual-unionism was declared by the Red International of Labor Unions. This policy charged the American communists with organizing their own unions in all of the major industries, rather than continuing to try to work within the organized unions of the AF of L, as had formerly been their policy--passed down to them, of course, by the Comintern. The resolution endorsing the policy of dual unionism stated that: "Further appeals of the [AF of L] bureaucracy and dependence upon so-called progressive in the reactionary unions is useless and wrong. The TUEL [Trade Union Educational League] must itself become the basis of organization for the . . . unorganized."[1]

Although the Central Committee of the American Communist Party felt that this newly prescribed method was hardly practical, and that it would only serve to further isolate

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[1]Report of the Fourth Congress of the Red International of Trade Unions (London, 1928), pp. 136-137, quoted in Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 253.

the ACP from the then-growing American labor movement, the leadership in Moscow was inflexible. The new approach to the American labor movement was, after all, a logical outgrowth of the Third Period which had recently been initiated by the Comintern. Therefore, in the fall of 1929, "as a public display of 'strength,'"[2] the TUEL called its fourth convention. Those assembled at the convention voted to change the name of the dual-union movement to the Trade Union Unity League (TUUL), and to adopt as the League's slogan, "Class Against Class."[3]

The close relationship between the communist Workers International Relief (WIR) and the Workers Laboratory Theatre,[4] at the time of the founding of Workers Theatre magazine, in April 1931, made it essential for the magazine to project the Party attitude towards the organized labor unions that were affiliated with the AF of L. Unemployed, written by an anonymous playwright, was the first play to be published in Workers Theatre, and reflected the Party policy of dual-unions. In this short play, the labor leader, named Green--after William Green, who was then the head of the AF of L--is depicted as collaborating with the capitalists. The

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[2]Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 255.

[3]Ibid.

[4]See Chapter I, p. 11.

Communist in the play, a character named TUUL, accuses Green of working against the best interests of the workers:

> Communist (to Green): You are a misleader of the workers.
>
> 1 Worker: You are a tool of the bosses.
>
> 2 Worker: Down with the servants of the bosses.
>
> 3 Worker: Down with the AF of L.[5]

Another example of the magazine's earliest position in regard to the organized labor unions is available in an article that appeared in the June 1931 issue, by Deutchman, a member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre. Entitling his piece, "Fight the Socialist Fascists," Deutchman attacked the AF of L for doing nothing to help the unemployment situation, aside from suggesting immigration quotas to prevent workers who might serve as cheap labor from entering the country. He concluded the article with a call for the workers' theatre groups to dramatize the class struggle.[6]

Two plays about the struggle to organize a communist National Miners Union, as an alternative to John L. Lewis' United Mine Workers, were published in the August 1931 Workers Theatre. In both of these plays (Fighting Against Starvation by H. Ober and Help the Miners by A. Prentis), the union leaders are portrayed as being traitors to the workers' cause.

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[5]"Unemployed," Workers Theatre, April, 1931, p. 10. The reader is advised to turn to Chapter V, pp. 262-63.

[6]Deutchman, "Fight the Social Fascists," Workers Theatre, June, 1931, p. 6.

In the Prentis play, the union leader offers to make a deal with the bosses: he will convince the workers to go back to work, if the boss will help him to get the "damned Reds" out of the union. Just as this bargain is being concluded, the workers arrive. They tell of the spreading struggle and of how they will refuse to be sold out by the union. They will survive, they say, because of the support that they are receiving from the rest of the working class. The play ends with the "miners' wives" coming in and passing a hat around, in the audience, for money to help the iners who were then on strike in Kentucky.[7]

By 1933, as we have already seen,[8] the Communist leadership in Moscow was beginning to move away from its doctrinaire Third Period policies. Analyzing this shifting approach and its effect upon the dual union program, in The American Communist Party, Howe and Coser write: "Had the dual union policy been continued the Communists would have ended in complete isolation from the burgeoning new unions, but what saved them and gave them an opportunity to plunge back into the organizing work of the mid-thirties was that Moscow was slowly wheeling into position for a change of line."[9]

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[7]A. Prentis, "Help the Miners," Workers Theatre, August, 1931, pp. 7-15.

[8]The reader is asked to turn back to Chapter I, pp. 33-34.

[9]Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 269.

In August 1934, O. Piatnitsky, a major Comintern spokesman, wrote that, "In the United States there can be no question of the Communists building up a revolutionary trade union opposition . . . parallel to the existing unions of the AF of L. . . . It was a complete mistake to try to build up a revolutionary trade union opposition in all countries."[10]

Responding to this new approach being endorsed by Moscow, the American Communist Party trade union specialist Jack Stachel, declared, in November 1934, that, "Now we are face to face with a new turn. The whole objective situation demands that the party establish its main policy as one of work inside and building the opposition within the AF of L unions."[11] Finally, and not at all unexpectedly, in March 1935--five months before the Popular Front announcement--the TUUL was officially dissolved.[12]

No plays or articles about organized labor were published in Workers Theatre and New Theatre during 1933 and 1934. The first article about unions, after the two year transitional period of silence on that subject, appeared in the August 1935 New Theatre and was titled "Theatre and the Trade Unions,"

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[10]O. Piatnitsky, "Problems of the International Trade Union Movement," Communist International, November 20, 1934, quoted in Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 269.

[11]Jack Stachel, "Our Trade Union Policy," The Communist, November, 1934, quoted in Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 270.

[12]Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 271.

by Alice Evans. Evans' main point, in this piece, was that there was significant value in a close relationship, to both the New Theatre League and the AF of L trade unions. She stated that there was a need for good plays about trade unions and suggested that this subject offered a challenge to expert social playwrights.[13]

It was noted, in the November 1935 New Theatre editorial section, that Labor Stage, Inc. had recently been formed by the Ladies Garment Workers Union of the AF of L. Labor Stage, the editors reported, would do plays on subjects relating to labor's social, economic and cultural life. The editors said that New Theatre and the new Theatre League were extending offers of support to help Labor Stage, Inc.[14]

By February 1936, the New Theatre editors were able to report that Labor Stage, Inc. had rented a Broadway theatre--the Princess Theatre--and was at work on a satirical musical revue, Pins and Needles, for which a spring opening was anticipated. According to the editors, the ILGWU hoped to use the Princess Theatre to house other trade union performances as well as its own productions.[15] Some studio performances of Pins and Needles were presented in June 1936, but the production did not open at the Princess Theatre until

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[13]Alice Evans, "Theatre and the Trade Unions," New Theatre, August, 1935, p. 23.

[14]Editorials, New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 4.

[15]Editorials, New Theatre, February, 1936, p. 5.

November 27, 1937. Pins and Needles was a great critical and popular success: it ran for 1108 performances, until June 22, 1940.[16]

A company of professional actors who were first known as the Let Freedom Ring Company (after the name of the play by Albert Bein which they presented), and later as the Actors Repertory Company, toured a number of New England textile towns, with the aforementioned play, during the summer of 1936. The group's tour was sponsored by the United Textile Workers Union. Writing about this tour, in their August 1936 editorial, the New Theatre editors urged all of their readers to support "this first New Theatre stock company."[17]

Lawrence Spitz wrote an article about the "'Let Freedom Ring' Tour," for the November 1936 issue of New Theatre. He reported that the play had been presented thirty-three times and had reached an audience of approximately 20,000 people. Spitz said that this tour represented "the first time a professional company had recognized the need of the workingclass audience for theatre and their own need as actors, given the right kind of play, for workers' audience support."[18] The type of exchange which had taken place on the Let Freedom Ring tour was a genuine step forward, towards the formation of a strong social theatre, commented Spitz. "A

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[16]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression, p. 205.

[17]Editorial, New Theatre, August, 1936, p. 5.

[18]Lawrence Spitz, "Let Freedom Ring Tour," New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 24.

strong social theatre," he wrote, "can only become a reality when the theatre recognizes the need of cooperation with organized labor and achieves that cooperation, and when labor realizes the powerful ally it has in the theatre and utilizes it effectively."[19]

An article by Morris Watson--the director of the Living Newspaper unit of the Federal Theatre Project--entitled, "Sitdown Strike," appeared in the March 1937 New Theatre and Film. Watson reported that he had been working on a Living Newspaper, Strike Marches On, with a group of automobile workers in Flint, Michigan. He called the play by the automobile workers a "folk play," because it consisted of dialogue that they improvised from their own experience. The benefit of this project, both to the workers themselves and to the trade union movement, had been significant, Watson explained:

> To most of the workers in and out of the cast the meaning of the struggle was vague. Unionization was new to them. The play served to clarify their minds, to reduce to simple and understandable terms the purpose of the struggle of which they were a part. It stimulated them to inquire and it fired them with a new enthusiasm. I am convinced that a workers' theatre of and by the workers, must become an important department of the trade union movement.[20]

In an article written for the April 1937 New Theatre and Film, entitled "Road Show--CIO Style," Richard Pack

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[19]Ibid., p. 25.

[20]Morris Watson, "Sitdown Theatre," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 6.

also wrote about the mutual benefit being derived from cooperation between organized labor and the participants in the new theatre movement. Discussing an anticipated tour of John Wexley's Steel, by Labor Stage, Inc., Pack wrote that, "For the first time, workers in the mass production industries will see their own struggles mirrored on the stage--and for the first time the theatre will be used as an integral part of a drive for union organization."[21]

Pack explained that the plans for the Steel tour had been formulated at a conference of unionists and theatre workers which had been held, the previous month, with the joint sponsorship of Labor Stage and the New Theatre League. Wexley had revised his 1931 play for this production, with the help of steel workers and, after spending time doing on-the-site research. Steel, Pack said, would prove to be a powerful ally of the CIO. "Labor--which in recent months has adopted such modern devices as the sound truck--has found another new technique," he wrote. "And the social theatre has found another audience, new meaning and new strength. It has achieved that clear cooperation with the labor movement which it has so long sought."[22]

As Pack indicated in his article, there was substantial benefit to the new theatre movement inherent in its cooperation

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[21]Richard Pack, "Road Show--CIO Style," New Theatre and Film, April, 1937, 31

[22]Ibid., p. 46.

with organized labor. And, at this point in its development, the new theatre movement surely needed the support of the unions as much, if not more than labor needed its advice and skill. A note in the "Sifting Scenes" column of the March 1937 New Theatre and Film--stating that there had been substantial cooperation by the Trade Unions with the New Theatre groups, in terms of audience support and financing, and announcing a $300 play contest, sponsored by the ILGWU, for the best full-length play on "social conflicts in contemporary society,"--was evidence of this new situation.[23]

The policies of the left-wing theatre movement changed considerably, in regard to organized labor, during the six and one-half years of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film's publication. In 1931, when Workers Theatre was first produced, the Left felt that their theatre movement, with the help of its magazine, could be effective in drawing workers away from the AF of L unions. By 1937, the activists in the New Theatre League were concerned about the survival of the new theatre movement and the strength which it might derive from the support of organized labor.

(B) Actors' Equity and The Fight For Unemployment Insurance

The relationship between Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film and Actors' Equity remained essentially

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[23]"Shifting Scenes," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 52.

the same, during the six and one half years of the magazines' publication. Although the magazines never endorsed a policy of a dual actors' union, their editors were consistently critical of Equity's policies, and were persistent in their support of the more militant faction that developed within the union, during the latter period when New Theatre and New Theatre and Film appeared. The fight for unemployment insurance--a cause which was not embraced by Actors' Equity--was pursued by the magazines' editors, in conjunction with their attempt to push the union into adopting a more radical approach.

The first mention of Actors' Equity in Workers Theatre, was in an article that appeared in the February 1932 issue, entitled "The Breadline Comes to Broadway." The piece was written by Bernard Reines of the WLT, and discussed the fact that the "Actors Diners' Club"--a euphemism for a free soup kitchen--had been organized for the unemployed actors. Reines said that the actor had to come to realize that he was a worker, and he must recognize that his union, Equity, was too weak. All actors, declared Reines, should join in the fight for unemployment insurance, and he also suggested that actors should be aware of the growth of the theatre in the Soviet Union.[24]

Ben Blake discussed the importance of unemployment

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[24]B. Reines, "The Breadline Comes to Broadway," Workers Theatre, February, 1932, pp. 10-12.

insurance to the actor, in an April 1933 Workers Theatre article entitled "Prospects for the Broadway Actor." Blake urged the professional actors to force their union to become more militantly involved in this struggle. He predicted that the left-wing theatre movement would soon experience a period of rapid expansion because, "for their artistic opportunities--for the opportunity to practice their craft in a socially useful way--the theatre workers will have to turn more and more to the workers' theatre and the working class."[25]

More than a full year later, a section of the September 1934 New Theatre editorial headed "$6-a-Week Actors" considered the unemployment situation and the poor earnings that were the lot of the average professional actor. The magazine's editors stated that all actors should support the "progressive" movement in Equity, as well as the more militant Actors' Emergency Association.[26] That the Equity leadership was not unconcerned about the criticisms of its policies--both from outside and from within the union--is evident from the November 1934 New Theatre editorial column. According to the editors, the leadership of Equity had recently warned its members against becoming involved in politics, and had suggested that practical matters--such as salaries and working

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[25]Ben Blake, "Prospects for the Broadway Actor," Workers Theatre, April, 1933, p. 5.

[26]"$6-a-week-Actors," New Theatre, September, 1934, p. 5.

conditions, should be left to them. The union leadership, wrote the editors, was afraid that a "Red Menace" was developing among the "revolting group" in Equity.[27]

An article entitled "The Awakening of the Actors," by an individual who signed the piece with the intials J.L.S., appeared in the April 1934 New Theatre, and discussed, "The real story of the opposition movement in Equity, what brought it about, how it developed, its aims, and what it signifies for the welfare of the actors."[28] According to J.L.S., "the first mass revolt of actors since the actors' strike of 1919,"[29] had taken place on the previous March 5, when the entire cast of the Broadway show Sailor Beware had handed in their notices of resignation to the management. The events leading to the action had taken place as follows: the Sailor Beware company had been notified that their salaries were being reduced by thirty per cent. The cast had decided, unanimously, that they would refuse to accept the cut. On the day following this declaration, three members of the cast were given dismissal notices. It was in response to these firings--about which Equity had done nothing--that the entire company had resigned. Letters of support for their action had come in from various other companies.

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[27]Editorial, New Theatre, November, 1934, p. 4.

[28]J.L.S., "The Awakening of the Actors," New Theatre, April, 1934, p. 3.

[29]Ibid.

The mass action of the Sailor Beware cast had proven successful: the three fired actors were rehired; and there was no salary cut. The lesson to be learned from this episode was clear to J.L.S.: "Actors are not exactly notorious for being class conscious. It is indeed too rarely that they have been awakened to the realization that their relations with the producer are identical with the relation of any other group of workers to their employer."[30]

J.L.S. reported that, as a result of the success of this mass action by the Sailor Beware cast, many Equity members had been organizing into an opposition movement which was struggling to make the union work harder, and working to elect more militant members to the Equity Council. The next step would be to work out a program that would be more protective of the actors--for presentation at the general membership meeting of Equity, in May. Among the points which J.L.S. and New Theatre recommended for inclusion in the new Equity program, were the following:

--no arbitration of claims due an actor, by the terms of his Equity contract

--managers should not be permitted to produce new plays while still owing actors salaries

--the unionization of film and radio actors

--support for the concept of unemployment insurance for actors

--more democratic procedures within Equity

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[30]Ibid.

--support for the concept of closer coorination of all theatrical unions

In addition to the above-proposed program, two additional issues should be considered, said J.L.S. The first was the elimination of the Equity practice of dropping members who were unable to pay their dues; as well as keeping the union closed to new members. The second issue had to do with lifting the restrictions against foreign actors and acting companies. The article ended with the following statement: "New Theatre will deal regularly in its pages with future developments of the actors movement. It welcomes all communications and expressions of opinion on any point of interest to the actors. Its pages are always open to material that will help actors as well as all other theatre workers."[31]

A section of the June 1934 New Theatre editorial column discussed the progress of the opposition movement within Actors' Equity. The editors reported that the adopted opposition platform for the upcoming Equity elections--which they endorsed--contained the following planks:

--to put an end to the practice of granting cuts and concessions to managers

--to create greater democracy within Equity--more control to be given to the general membership

--to organize more actors into Equity

--to support the concept of cooperation of all theatre unions, in defense of the interests of all theatre workers

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[31]Ibid., p. 5.

--to fight for unemployment insurance for all[32]

No detailed discussion of Equity matters appeared in New Theatre for more than a year. Then, in August 1935, an article by Arthur Hackett, entitled "Revolt of the Actor--1935," was published in the magazine. Hackett titled his piece after a book, Revolt of the Actor, which had been written about the formation of Actors' Equity, in 1919. Hackett compared the current revolt of an opposition group of Equity members--which was by then calling itself the Actors' Forum--with the original revolt, the actors' strike of 1919, "in which the actors wrested from the managers certain rights, and out of which came recognition of the first white-collar workers' union--Equity."[33]

The Actors' Forum which had been organized after the Sailor Beware confrontation the previous year, had been struggling, with some success, for several reforms--both in the organizational structure of Equity, and in the contract that the Equity administration had negotiated for its membership. Tactics such as "Red-Baiting" had been used by the Equity leadership, against the Forum, but Hackett still felt optimistic about the future of the insurgent group.

"The Actors' Forum will go on," he declared. "More and more actors are coming to realize the necessity for a

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[32]Editorials, New Theatre, June, 1934, p. 3.

[33]Arthur Hackett, "Revolt of the Actor--1935," New Theatre, August, 1935, p. 24.

re-vitalizing of their union; and NEW THEATRE will keep its readers posted on the new revolt of the actors as they struggle to make of Equity once more the real Labor organization it set out to be."[34]

Reform did not come to Equity as quickly or as easily as Hackett had hoped, however. The criticisms voiced in the editorial column of the following March (1936) New Theatre, were in essentially the same vein as the complaints against the union leadership which had been made earlier. According to the editors, Equity continued to be guilty of, "inaction, reaction, and sidestepping."[35]

Two of Equity's most glaringly objectionable policies, wrote the editors, were its prohibition of its members from joining other unions--including the City Projects Council, the union of the Federal Theatre Project workers--along with its refusal to consider actors as eligible for Equity membership unless they had been in a Broadway show. These two rulings made it impossible for Project actors to be represented as a single group and the New Theatre editors contended that they had been designed by the union leadership, in order to help them to maintain their own power. The editors urged all Equity members to object to the above rulings, at the upcoming March meeting, and to demand that Equity assume

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[34]Ibid.

[35]Editorial, New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 4.

the representation of Project actors. The membership should also consider a change in the leadership of their union, the editors concluded.[36]

An article on "The Equity Elections," by Richard Pack, appeared in the May 1936 New Theatre. Pack declared that the future of Equity hinged on the outcome of the elections to the Equity Council, the ruling body of the union--that were to take place in two weeks. There was, at present, a struggle underway to elect members of the militant Actors' Forum to the Council. And, in response to this drive, wrote Pack, "the Gillmore who in the strike of 1919 was called a 'radical agitator' [has] now raised the red scare."[37]

One of the union's major problems, said Pack, was that Gillmore had taken too much of the power in Equity to himself, and that many pressing issues--such as the need for organization in radio, the representation of the actors on the Federal Theatre Project, the need for closer cooperation among all theatrical unions, and the need for more economy in running Equity--had yet to be resolved. Pack urged the election of the following "Independent" candidates to the Equity Council: Allyn Joslyn, Ann Revere, John Litel, Paul McGrath, Edward McNamara, Burgess Meredith, John Brown, Mary Morris, Shepperd Strudwick, Edith Van Cleve, Edward Everett

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[36]Ibid.

[37]Richard Pack, "The Equity Elections," New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 5.

Hale, Alexander Kirkland, Richard Gordon and Eric Dressler.[38] The editorial, in the June 1936 New Theatre, also pressed for the support of this group.[39] No mention was made in the subsequent issues of New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, of the fact that the fourteen "Independents" who had been endorsed by the magazine, were defeated in the election of the Equity Council, by an almost two-to-one margin.[40]

A note appeared in the October 1936 New Theatre editorial column, stating that an amendment was up for a vote in Actors' Equity which would make it impossible for an actor to become a senior member of the union until he had fifty weeks paid experience. "Clearly the idea behind the amendment is to keep young--and presumably fresh, vital blood out of Equity, and leave it in the control of the established players. Vote 'No' on the amendment."[41] Although the referendum on this amendment was passed, by "an overwhelming majority,"[42] this defeat was also not reported in the few succeeding issues of the magazine.

The editorial of the last (April 1937) issue of New

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[38]Ibid.

[39]Editorial, New Theatre, June, 1936, pp. 3-4.

[40]Editorial, Equity Magazine, June, 1936, p. 5.

[41]Editorial, New Theatre, October, 1936, pp. 3-4.

[42]"Vote Result on Referendum is 'Yes,'" Equity Magazine, November, 1936, p. 5.

Theatre and Film contains a brief section about Actors' Equity. The editors note that, "a number of progressive steps have been taken by [the Council] only because of strong pressure from an increasingly progressive membership,"[43] but they declare that, "the Equity Council and Administration are still a long way from being revolutionary or even democratic!"[44] It appears that New Theatre and the workers in the left-wing theatre movement had had very limited impact, in their attempt to make Equity a more militant union.

Negro Civil Rights and the Negro in the American Theatre

It was entirely natural that the fight for Negro civil rights and for an equitable position for the Negro in the American theatre were among the crusades that were undertaken by Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film. For the unity of all workers--regardless of race or national origin--in the fight against capitalism, was a basic tenet of the Communist Party policy which, as we have seen, helped to mold the policies of the magazine. Moreover, it was tactically advantageous for the Party to attempt to enroll as many new members as possible, and the large masses of unemployed, and socially and politically disenfranchised Negroes were logical targets for such an effort.

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[43]Editorials, New Theatre and Film, April, 1937, p. 16.

[44]Ibid.

One specific issue relating to the crusade for Negro civil rights was the case, in 1931, of nine Negro youths from Scottsboro, Alabama who were falsely convicted of rape and sentenced to death in the electric chair. According to Howe and Coser, in The American Communist Party, " . . . when the Communist Party succeeded in appropriating the Scottsboro case through their legal agency, the International Labor Defense, they acquired an 'issue' that soon became an international cause célèbre only slightly less important than the cases of Tom Mooney and Sacco and Vanzetti."[45]

"The Workers Theatre and the Scottsboro Case," an article by Harry Ober, appeared in the third--June 1931--issue of Workers Theatre. Ober suggested that the story of the nine "Scottsboro boys" provided a perfect theme for workers' theatre plays. "In this case there is real drama," he wrote. "Not drama of the bourgeois theatre, but actual class drama where social forces play their part."[46] Ober concluded his article by calling for the workers' theatre groups to "put this case on the stage and SMASH THE SCOTTSBORO FRAME-UP!"[47]

An anonymous translation of Scottsboro, a mass recitation, written collectively by the German agit-prop group,

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[45]Howe and Coser, The American Communist Party, p. 212.

[46]Harry Ober, "The Workers Theatre and the Scottsboro Case," Workers Theatre, June, 1931, p. 1.

[47]Ibid.

the Prolet-Buehne, appeared in the April 1932 Workers Theatre, and reflected the contemporary Communist Party approach to rallying support for the defense of nine accused youths. The following stage directions precede the text of Scottsboro:

> This mass recitation has been arranged for 6 players. The players run from the back of the audience shouting 'Attention!' 'Attention!' until they are in their positions. The workers stand as follows: 1 and 2 on chairs or boxes, 3 on the ground before 1 and 2, 4, 5, 6 stand in one line before 3.[48]

After the actors have positioned themselves and the attention of the audience is secured, the ensemble begins to recit the story of the Scottsboro case;

All: In Scottsboro, in Scottsboro
Murder is going on.
In Scottsboro, in Scottsboro
Death is threatening.

1.: Joy in Scottsboro!

2.: Thousands of people

3.: shouting and singing and laughing and screaming

1.: in the streets of Scottsboro.

2.: And the sun shines

3.: upon the gay Sunday clothes

5.: of wives and children,

6.: of factory owners, store keepers, town officials and the bankers.

2.: Everybody is here

1.: in the streets of Scottsboro.

2.: The children with frogs,

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[48]"Scottsboro--A Mass Recitation by the Prolet-Buehne (translated from the German)," Workers Theatre, April 1932, p. 14.

1.: and the men with guns.

3.: And the badges of the sheriffs gleam in the sun

4.: And the brass band plays: Star Spangled Banner!

2.: And everyone is shouting

3.: And everyone is screaming

All: Lynch! Lynch! Lynch!

All: Joy in Scottsboro!

All In Scottsboro, in Scottsboro,
Murder is going on!
In Scottsboro, In Scottsboro
Death is threatening!

3.: Upon the market place of Scottsboro

1.: stands the courthouse

2.: In it are 9 Negro boys.

5.: Nine Negro boys have been caught

1.: For a deed they never committed

2.: Nine Negro boys stand before the court

1.: No proof of their innocence is wanted here.

3.: Nine Negro boys are accused

1.: And await a sentence long decided.[49]

The sentencing of the boys is portrayed, and the recitation then turns to an economic and political explanation of why the events have transpired as they have:

1.: In Scottsboro nine Negro boys were sentenced to death

2.: For a deed they never committed.

3.: Why?

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[49]Ibid., p. 15

All: Why?

1.: Because 12 million Negroes must be kept in slavery

3.: by fear, by lack of rights, by violence

2.: For the landlords, bosses and bankers

1.: squeeze profits from these 12 million Negroes

3.: by long hours, speed up, low wages.

4.: If twelve million Negroes are working long hours

1.: also white workers must work long hours.

5.: If twelve million Negroes are speeded up,

1.: also white workers are speeded up.

6.: If twelve million Negroes work for low wages

1.: Also white workers must work for low wages.

3.: Negro workers

1.: White workers

4.: the same explotation

5.: the same fate

6.: the same class

3.: Negro workers

1.: White workers

2.: The same power

3.: The same might

1.: The same certainty of victory

4.,5.,6.: If you unite

1.,2.,3.: If your organize

All: IF YOU FIGHT

1.: In Scottsboro murder is going on

3.: In Scottsboro death is threatening

All: Your death.

4.: Will you let them murder the nine Negro boys in Scottsboro?

5.: Will you deliver your fellow workers to the capitalist murders?

6.: Will you deliver yourselves to the capitalist murders?

All: No! No! No!

1.: Organize!

2.: Demonstrate!

1.: Protest!

3.: Raise your voices!

1.: Raise your fists!

4.: Gather together your comrades from the factories

5.: Call the housewives out of their homes

6.: Get the children out of the schools

3.: Shout into the ears of your exploiters: 'Murders!'

1.: Scream into the face of the class judges: 'Stop!'

All: Stop! Stop! Stop!

1.: The fight for the liberation of the Nine Negro boys

2.: is a part of the class struggle,

5.: led by the workers of all countries,

3.: against the bosses of all countries.

All: WORKERS, UNITE AND FIGHT![50]

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[50]Ibid., pp. 16-17. I have reproduced approximately two thirds of the text of Scottsboro, as it appeared in the magazine.

The following editor's note appeared at the bottom of the final page of the "Scottsboro" script: "Here is a chance for the theatre groups to do their share to save the nine Scottsboro boys. The above mass recitation should be in the repertory of all theatre groups and be played on [sic] as many affairs as possible, in order to bring [sic] to the workers the necessity of freeing the Scottsboro boys from the clutches of the bosses' 'lynch law.'"[51]

Because of the importance of the Scottsboro case as a rallying point for the Communist Party and the workers' theatre movement as well, a resolution on the case was adopted at the First Workers Theatre Conference and Spartakiade, in April 1932. The text of the resolution was published in the May 1932 issue of Workers Theatre:

RESOLUTION

on

SCOTTBORO[sic]

> In the name of the workers' theatre movement, we, the delegates to the first National Theatre Conference, protest the lynch frame-up of the nine Negro-boys in Scottboro [sic] Alabama. We pledge that thru [sic] the medium of the workers theatre we will fight for the unconditioned [sic] release of the nine Negro-boys and we will work for the unity of all toilers, Negro and white, native and foreign born, in the common fight against their oppressors.[52]

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[51] Editor's Note to "Scottsboro," Workers Theatre, April, 1932, p. 17.

[52] "Resolution on Scottboro [sic]," Workers Theatre, May, 1932, p. 15.

"Scottsboro Boy," a "poem for recitation" by Madra Kay, was published in the May-June 1933 Workers Theatre. The poem seems, to me, to indicate an additional facet of the Communist Party's approach to issues relating to the Negro in America--the Party's attitude of protective paternalism. Written in a style which is supposed to represent the dialect of Negroes, "Scottsboro Boy" begins with one of the nine boys relating the sad story:

. . . . . .
We wuz clapped in jail;
We wuz banged and beat;
We wuz brought to court,
Befo' dere judgmen' seat.
. . . . . .

In the second half of the poem, the boy speaks of having learned that he and his friends have comrades who can really help him and he evidences a newly-found sense of social awareness:

But den I heard a different song
A song made wid a white man's words--
I tho't at firs' my ears heard wrong
'Cose I ain' never heard sech befo'--
Worker, brother comrade.
We've known and felt yo' pains--
De very same hated masters
Have loaded us wid chains.

So rise up and fight wid us,
So's we can crush dem down
And 'stablish our own way to
Make de wheels go roun'!
Words ain' allays clear to un'erstan'
But deeds, dey's clear when dey say:
"We're gonna save
De Scottsboro boys, 'cose dey's innocent.
From de waitin' gallows and de grave.[53]

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[53]Madra Kay, "Scottsboro Boy," Workers Theatre, May, 1933, p. 18.

They Shall not Die, by John Wexley, was produced, on Broadway, by the Theatre Guild, during its 1933-34 season. Wexley's play is based on the Scottsboro case and is constructed as a series of short realistic scenes which sketch the story of the boys' arrest, their trial and the struggle that was being waged on their behalf, by the Communist organization--the International Labor Defense.

Ben Blake reviewed the production of They Shall Not Die, for the April 1934 New Theatre and wrote that the play's one glaring weakness was that it failed to point out the great mass pressure that had been exerted in favor of the boys, by the masses--both Black and White--throughout the country. "The result," Blake felt, "is that what is probably the best revolutionary play to achieve professional production in this country just misses being a truly great drama."[54] Blake praised the Theatre Guild for its courageous decision to produce the Wexley play which, he said, had been given a fine production: faithful to the text, and with an excellent cast. He felt, however, that the realistic style of the production, with its "prettified" sets by Lee Simonson, had somewhat weakened the impact of the play. The Theatre Guild, wrote Blake, " . . . gave a revolutionary play the same type of treatment stylistically that it gives to a drawing room comedy or a 'Strange Interlude.'"[55]

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[54]Ben Blake, review of They Shall Not Die, New Theatre, April, 1934, p. 18.

[55]Ibid.

Blake declared that Phillip Moeller, the director of They Shall Not Die, had failed to see that the play demanded a special use of the masses on stage, that had been so active in the real-life struggle to save the "Scottsboro Boys":

> A Piscator would have done it. Any revolutionary director with a bit of imagination would have essayed it. And of course such a conception would have resulted in an entirely different type of production. The play would have abounded in dynamically staged clashes. The action would have shifted rapidly from locale to locale on sets with several playing levels, with mass actions on the upper ones alternating with the action below in the courtroom. . . . In short, this revolutionary play would have had a revolutionary production.[56]

The above-excerpted review of They Shall not Die was the last discussion of the Scottsboro case to appear in New Theatre; even the fact that four of the youths were released, in 1935--to a great extent because of the work of the ACP[57]--was, inexplicably, not reported in the magazine.

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The position of the Negro actor in the American theatre--including the theatres of the North--was far from equal to that of his White colleagues, during the nineteen-thirties. This situation, along with the left-wing theatre movement's attempt to enlist the participation of Negro actors in the workers' theatres, was discussed by the writers and editors of Workers Theatre and New Theatre.

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[56] Ibid., p. 19.

[57] Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, The American Communist Party, pp. 213-216.

"The Negro on Broadway," by Harry Elion of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, was published in the November 1931 Workers Theatre; this was the first article dealing with the subject of the Negro in the theatre, to appear in the magazine. At the start of this piece, Elion declared that there was overt racism in many Broadway plays. He cited a song in the current edition of George White's Scandals, entitled "That's why the Darkies Were Born"--which tells the Negro to "accept your destiny"--as an example of this racism.[58]

The bourgeois theatre tells all workers--Black and White--to accept conditions as they are, wrote Elion; but, he said, the workers were finally beginning to use the theatre as a weapon in the struggle against this type of negative thinking. The workers' theatre needs the Negro workers to join in this important fight. And the workers' theatres can assist the Negro by helping him to understand the forces behind his exploitation and the discrimination against him.

A short statement by Tom Truesdale of the League of Struggle for Negro rights appeared in the April 1932 Workers Theatre (the issue in which the Prolet-Buehne's Scottsboro was published), and affirmed that organization's support for the workers' theatre movement. Truesdale wrote: "The theatre under capitalism afford [sic] the most vicious agent of the bosses' propaganda and to offset the venom that this

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[58]Harry Elion, "The Negro on Broadway," Workers Theatre, November, 1931, p. 1.

injects we have to support the Workers Theatre that will wipe out race and class lines and pave the way for Negro and White workers for the overthrowing of capitalism."[59]

The leaders of the workers' theatre movement expressed a supportive, but at the same time paternalistic attitude towards the Negroes who were just beginning to participate in their movement. This type of approach is evident in the following passage from Nathaniel Buchwald's "Report of the First National Spartakiade," which was published in the May 1932 Workers Theatre:

> The Negro group was ruled out of competition because the play they gave had been given before and also because the group had been recently organized and could not be matched against the older groups. But the very fact of the appearance of a Negro group at the Spartakiade is considered by the judges, and I am sure all of you, the most welcome and hopeful feature of the contest. There was something wonderfully inspiring in the solidarity of white and Negro workers as exemplified by the participation of the group in the Spartakiade and by the enthusiastic response of the audience.[60]

This almost condescending approach notwithstanding, it is quite apparent that the editors and contributors to Workers Theatre were entirely genuine in their desire for Negro workers to become involved in the workers' theatres. The following exchange appeared in the "Questions and Answers" column of the June-July 1932 Workers Theatre:

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[59]Tom Truesdale, "The Importance of the Workers Theatre," Workers Theatre, April, 1932, p. 12.

[60]Nathaniel Buchwald, "Report on the First National Spartakiade," Workers Theatre, May, 1932, pp. 11; 13.

Q. Should a Negro character in a workers' play be represented by a black or white player?
--A.B., New York.

A. Each English speaking group should have Negro comrades in their membership. The Negro comrades should not only participate in plays where the list of characters call[s] explicitly for Negroes but it is necessary for Negroes to take part in all plays. The fact alone that in all our performances Negro and White appear side by side as 'workers' explains to our Negro and White fellow workers in the audience more impressively and more convincingly the fact that black and white are suppressed and must fight side by side, as the same class. However, a play requiring Negroes should not be omitted from the repertory of a group which has not succeeded as yet in winning Negro members. In this case white players should use make-up. But that ridiculing 'Negro slang' which the bourgeois theatre and the vaudeville uses for black face actors, has no place in the workers theatre.[61]

It is interesting to note that some of the same questions relating to the Negro in the American theatre which were debated in the pages of Workers Theatre and New Theatre, during the 'thirties, are still of concern and have not yet been laid to rest. H. A. Coombs wrote an article entitled, "We Need a Negro People's Theatre," for the July-August 1933 Workers Theatre, in which he dealt with the question of just what constitutes a valid drama about the black experience.

Coombs, "a young Negro writer,"[62] began his piece by complaining that, "no definite, concentrated effort has yet been made to use the drama, powerful weapon that it is, in the terrific struggle for the economic and social emancipation

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[61]"Questions and Answers," Workers Theatre, June-July, 1932, p. 21.

[62]H. A. Coombs, "We Need a Negro People's Theatre," Workers Theatre, p. 6.

of the Negro race."[63] It was only recently, said Coombs, that, "Negro workers are awakening to find how closely identified is their cause with that of the other workers of the world."[64]

Unfortunately, Coombs wrote, there were still very few good plays available which dealt with the subject of Negro life and the Negro's struggle for social justice. "Good and genuine Negro folk-drama is yet to be written," Coombs declared. "The struggle of the exploited groups and the lives of the black masses are fertile fields for the supply of drama that could be developed to very high standards. . . ."[65]

Coombs stated that there were several well-organized little theatre groups functioning in Harlem. Among these groups were the Harlem Experimental Theatre, the YMCA Players, and the New Negro Art Theatre. These groups, however, patterned themselves after the bourgeois professional theatre and played mostly to wealthy and middle-class audiences. And the plays produced by these groups which presented the "phases of Negro life lived by some of the poorer economically handicapped classes," too often dealt with "sensational sex, gambling, and other phases of life which are common to whites as well as to Negroes, and which are representative of only a very small part of the Negro people."[66] Coombs said that,

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[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid.

"The problem lays in creating folk-plays which will depict not only these shallow customs and attributes, but will rather portray the socially important phases of the lives of the industrious Negro working man and woman, farmer and share-cropper, who make up the great bulk of the Negro people. . . ."[67]

Coombs pointed out that the struggle for social change had recently begun to gain momentum among the Negroes in the South, and he felt that this struggle would soon be reflected in dramas about Negro subjects. "Class-consciousness and organized, active resistance to the forced and inhuman policies of the capitalistic group of the South," he wrote, "are embodied in the awakened spirit of the Negro in the Southland in particular, and throughout the country at large. This same spirit will be more forcefully reflected in Negro folk-drama, and may be a real incentive to racial progress and a mighty aid in the final contribution of the Negro to the ultimate victory of the workers' cause."[68]

The position of the Negro actor within the professional theatrical establishment was far from being secure or equitable. This problem was frequently discussed in the pages of Workers Theatre and New Theatre. Two articles in the June 1934 New Theatre dealt with instances of discrimination against Negro actors from within two separate organizations for theatre professionals. In "Stevedore Cast Votes No," Herbert Kline

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[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid.

reported that the cast--composed of Black and White actors--of the Theatre Union production, Stevedore had refused to do a benefit for the Stage Relief Fund, an organization which was known to discriminate against Negro actors.[69] And a short anonymous piece entitled "Jim Crow Oh No," in the same issue of the magazine, reported that the Actors Diners' Club--which provided free meals for unemployed actors--was known to have a policy of refusing entry to Negro actors.[70]

A short unsigned article, entitled, "The Negro Actor," was published in the August 1935 New Theatre and discussed the fact that there were very few Negro members of Actors Equity. The writer of the article maintained that this lack of organization among the Negro actors was not only damaging to them, because it contributed to their being forced to work under poor conditions, but it was also "dangerous to the white actors to have hundreds working in his profession under sub-union conditions. This can only benefit the managers."[71] The writer asserted that, "It becomes the business of the un-organized Negro actors to insist on participation in the unions in every instance, and of the members of Actors' and Chorus Equity to eradicate any tendency to chauvanism in their own dealings with Negro actors, and see that the Negro has equal working rights and conditions. In their own interest

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[69]Herbert Kline, "Stevedore Cast Votes 'No,'" New Theatre, June, 1934, p. 15.

[70]"Jim Crow Oh No," New Theatre, June, 1934, p. 10.

[71]"The Negro Actor," New Theatre, August, 1935, p. 24.

they must demand that their unions organize a solid front of Negro and White actors."[72]

The July 1935 New Theatre was devoted to the subject of the Negro in the theatre, and carried the heading "Negro Number." George Sklar, the co-author (with Paul Peters) of Stevedore--a play about a successful revolt by Black and White dock workers[73]--wrote the lead editorial which introduced this special issue. Sklar began his piece by proclaiming: "It's time we had a Negro Theatre in America. It's time we had a theatre with courage enough to present on the stage the life issues and realities which confront the twelve million Negroes in this country everywhere. We've never had such a theatre in America. Not until recently, when the working-class theatre emerged and shot up into full flower, was there even the faintest glimmer of it."[74]

Sklar said that the American theatre's conception of the Negro has been based on the Negro of the minstrel show. Even in the more serious plays about the Negro, the same basic image of "the lazy, good for nothing, crap shooting, razor toting, ghost ridden, sex hopped Negro"[75] still prevails. "Sensationalism is profitable," wrote Sklar, "and sensationalism has been provided."[76]

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[72] Ibid.

[73] Please see Chapter VI, pp. 361-63.

[74] George Sklar, Editorial, New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 3.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

In the working class theatre, the Negro had finally been truthfully and realistically portrayed, Sklar declared. And it was the working class theatre that had helped to foster the development of the Negro theatre movement. "Under the leadership of the New Theatre League," he maintained, "the Negro theatre movement has experienced a phenomenal growth within the past six months. Seven new Negro groups have become affiliated with the League and the Negro People's Theatre organized itself as a professional Negro social theatre."[77]

But the Negro theatre movement still needed more permanent groups, more participating professionals, more good plays. "It cannot be denied," said Sklar. "The need is there; the audience and the forces are there."[78] Sklar stated that the July 1935 issue of New Theatre had been devoted to the subject of the Negro in the theatre, because of the magazine's recognition of these great needs.

A separate section of the July 1935 editorial column was addressed to an additional area of the theatre in which the Negro was subjected to harassment and prejudice, during the nineteen thirties: as an audience member. According to the New Theatre editors, it was the unwritten policy of many theatres to segregate the Negro theatregoers from the white members of the audience. The editors suggested that actors should refuse to play in theatres which discriminated against

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[77]Ibid.

[78]Ibid.

Negroes in this way.[79]

The following articles on the subject of the Negro in the American theatre were listed in the Table of Contents of the July 1935 "Negro Number" of New Theatre:

--"I Breathe Freely," by Paul Robeson

--"Trouble With Angels," by Langston Hughes

--"On the White Man's Stage," by Augustus Smith

--"A Negro Community Theatre," by Rowena Woodham Jeliffe

--"Uncle Tom's Cabin to Stevedore," by Eugene Gordon

--"Negro Players in Southern Theatres," by J. O. Bailey

In "I Breathe Freely," subtitled "an Interview in Moscow with Paul Robeson," the famous Negro singer and actor discussed his first visit to the Soviet Union, in early 1935, with Julia Dorn. Commenting on his experience, Robeson declared: "In Soviet Russia I breathe freely for the first time in my life. It is clear, whether a Negro is politically a Communist or not, that of all the nations in the world, the modern Russians are our best friends."[80]

Robeson told Dorn that he had travelled to various parts of the Soviet Union in order to see how the minority groups of the country were making use of their cultural heritage. Robeson felt that this information could be applied to understanding the American Negro's attempt to develop his own culture. Robeson said that he was also

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[79]Editorial, New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 4.

[80]Paul Robeson, "I Breathe Freely," New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 5.

interested in Eastern and Russian music, because he believed that there was a strong resemblance between the music of these areas and the music of Africa. Robeson mentioned that he had learned Hebrew and Russian and that he had added songs in these two languages to his repertory. But he believed that there would be limited opportunities for him to sing songs in these two languages, in England and in America: "They want Negro religious songs from which they take, not the suffering, but the comfort of the resignation they express (not heeding that the song's cry for heaven is only a reflex for the Negro's having suffered hell on earth). . . ."[81]

Robeson told Dorn about his plans to return to Russia for a concert tour of folk songs, and he mentioned the possibility of his doing a film with Eisenstein. He discussed his visits to several theatres in Russia, and he said that he had seen a play entitled The Negro Boy and the Monkey, "a popular play about a little African who comes to the Soviet Union and is guided by his Pioneer friends."[82] Robeson also liked the work of the Realistic Theatre and he admired that theatre's auditorium, where the audience was seated surrounding the stage platform and was encouraged to particpate in the performances.

At the conclusion of the transcript of her interview with Robeson, Julia Dorn observed: "Paul Robeson's activities have been put, with the enlargement of his interests on the

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[81]Ibid. [82]Ibid.

international scale, including studies and experiments in Eastern cultures, along with his participation in African and American affairs. In correlating racial cultures, he sets a standard of awareness, saying, 'The Negro must be conscious of himself and yet international, linked with the nations which are culturally akin to him.'"[83]

"Trouble With Angels," was Langston Hughes' account of an abortive strike action that had been instigated by some of the actors in the all-Black cast of Marc Connelly's Green Pastures, when the tour of that production arrived in Washington, D.C. The strike effort had been prompted by the fact that the Negro citizens of Washington were not permitted to attend the play. The strike had failed because some of the cast members had been afraid to join the protesting group in their revolt.[84]

In "On the White Man's Stage," Augustus Smith sketched the history of the Negro in the American theatre and concluded that, "the new theatres of social protest, as many Negro actors are beginning to find, offer them the only stages on which they can play, without caricature, the real stories and characters of their race."[85]

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[83] Ibid.

[84] Langston Hughes, "Trouble With Angels," New Theatre, July, 1935, pp. 6-7.

[85] Augustus Smith, "On the White Man's Stage, New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 13.

Some positive developments in the area of Negro playwriting were discussed by J. O. Bailey, in his contribution to the July 1935 New Theatre, "Negro Players in Southern Theatres." Bailey explained that, until recently, few Negro plays were performed by Negro college and Community theatre groups. This was the case partially because there were few plays on Negro subjects available, and also because such plays that did exist were generally received with little enthusiasm. "The Negro has regarded the theatre as a means of escape," wrote Bailey. "He wanted romance, show, forgetfulness of his life on the stage rather than interpretation of it."[86]

Bailey credited Paul Green with having written the first Southern Negro folk dramas which, "treat the Negro realistically, not from a paternalistic point of view, looking down, but out of the oppressed Negro's tragic experienc. . . ."[87] Aside from his plays, Bailey said that Green's major contribution to the Southern Negro drama had been to encourage and stimulate Negroes to write authentic plays about Negro life. Professor Koch and the Carolina Playmakers of the University of North Carolina had also inspired both the writing and the performance of Negro plays, said Bailey.

Now that a good number of authentic Negro plays existed in manuscript form, Bailey stated that there were problems

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[86]J. O. Bailey, "Negro Players in Southern Theatres," New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 24.

[87]Ibid.

in regard to circulating the plays so that they could be performed. He listed a number of individuals who possessed manuscripts of Negro plays, and he added that, "it is hopefull to learn that the Repertory Department of the New Theatre League is making an effort to collect plays of Negro life and to serve as a distributing point for them."[88] "In the South," wrote Bailey, "few Negro plays are produced by Negroes outside the schools and colleges, and the drama of social protest is still vaguely heard of as a dubious form of art and considered with mistrust by most teachers. Yet there is growing in the Negro schools a knowledge that the stage is the Negro's medium, his weapon for protest--that he must build his own stage, set his actors on it, and write the message that they speak.[89]

"From 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' to 'Stevedore,'" by Eugene Gordon, is a history of the depiction of the Negro on the American stage. In this article, Gordon asserted that, until some recent plays, the Negro was consistently shown as being intrinsically inferior and psychologically doomed. Gordon maintained that even the plays by sympathetic liberals, such as Paul Green and Eugene O'Neill, portrayed the Negro as being incapable of becoming a part of the ruling class. <u>They Shall Not Die</u> and <u>Stevedore</u>, according to Gordon, represented the

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[88]Ibid., p. 25.

[89]Ibid.

first break with that tradition. Gordon wrote that John Wexley, the author of the former play, and Paul Peters and George Sklar, co-authors of the latter work, " . . . bring the Negro upon the stage as a genuine human being, showing him in his actual relation both to the productive forces and to the whites of his class. Their portrayals mark the difference between distortion gleaned from without and perception gained from within."[90]

Gordon reflected the Communist Party viewpoint when he wrote that Stevedore was a better play than They Shall Not Die, because it was, "dialectically better constructed."[91] He objected to Wexley's depiction of the ILD (International Labor Defense) Lawyer--rather than the Black and White masses--as the hero of the play; and he felt that Stevedore, " . . . is truer to the life of the workers today, when whites and blacks are coming to recognize their common interests, when they are seeing that they all are oppressed by the identical forces of capitalist society in decay and that the oppressors--the various agencies of decaying capitalism--are the common enemy of black and white workers."[92]

In summarizing his discussion, Gordon declared that, "The interval between Uncle Tom's Cabin and Stevedore marks the difference between a Negro who servilely bowed himself into his place beneath the whites and the one who militantly takes his place beside his fellow worker. Plays like They

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[90]Eugene Gordon, "From 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' to 'Stevedore,'" New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 23.

[91]Ibid.

[92]Ibid.

Shall Not Die and Stevedore are effective weapons against those innumerable economic and cultural differences which will persist for the black man until we destroy the last vestige of slavery.[93]

Changes were also taking place in the Negro middle-class Little Theatres. Rowena Woodham Jeliffe, a member of the all-Black Karamu Theatre, in Cleveland, Ohio, wrote about the evolution that had taken place in her group, in a piece entitled, "A Negro Community Theatre." Jeliffe explained that her theatre group had been formed in 1920, but that it was not until 1923, when the national tour of The Emperor Jones--with Charles Gilpin in the role of Brutus Jones--came to Cleveland, that the group, ". . . began to see the Negro play in a new light, as an artistic opportunity rather than a pleasant hobby, and as a means of making a definite contribution to the American Theatre."[94]

As a direct result of the impression made by the Eugene O'Neill play and of a visit by Gilpin to one of the group's rehearsals, the group named itself the Gilpin Players and began to do plays about Negro life. This change cost the group their middle-class Negro audience. In 1926, the Gilpin Players converted an abandoned pool hall into the Karamu Theatre. Jeliffe said that a highly play conscious

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[93]Ibid.

[94]Rowena Woodham Jeliffe, "A Negro Community Theatre," New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 13.

community had arisen around the Karamu Theatre which had become affiliated with a local Settlement House. "The neighborhood participates as an appreciative audience, as actors, and as members of various kinds of stage craft groups. . . . In a sense," she pointed out, "the Gilpin Players are a community school . . . because we have made 'learning by theatre' a very live issue in the community."[95]

Jeliffe wrote that, while in 1923 the Gilpin Players lost a part of their audience, when they decided to do Negro plays, the group was now struggling with prejudice against class plays. "Plays of social protest have met with deep approval from the majority of our audience," she declared, "but they have encountered violent opposition as well."[96] A considerable controversy surrounded the group's production of Stevedore, for example, but Jeliffe felt that this controversy had a positive effect because, "it made a great many people clear up their thinking and take sides."[97]

Jeliffe said that the Gilpin Players would continue to do socially significant plays and that, "increasingly, we see our theatre as a means to further the cause of the oppressed Negro people."[98]

The only script included in the July 1935 "Negro Number" of New Theatre was that of some "Scenes from 'John

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[95]Ibid.

[96]Ibid.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid.

Henry,'" by Herbert Kline, the editor of the magazine. In Kline's version of the legend about the powerful Black man who pits himself against a steam drill, John Henry wins the contest but does not die. In spite of this accomplishment, however, the Boss still decides to replace most of the workers with the machine, and offers to keep John Henry and one other worker to carry the rocks that the machine will split. John Henry declares that unless he can be taught to run the machine, he will quit; and that is what happens. At the end of the play, all of the workers exit, led by John Henry. As they exit, they sing:

> Goin' fin' me a place,
> It cuts no figger;
> You get yo' due,
> Don' let 'em call you nigger,
> Oh my kitty co co.
>
> Goin' fin' me a place,
> White folks ain' inchin'
> An' black man's belly,
> Ain' allus pinchin'
> Oh my kitty co co.[99]

It is interesting to note that, of all the scripts that might have been published in this special "Negro Number" of the magazine--including those to which J. O. Bailey alluded in his article for the issue--the script by Kline, the white editor of New Theatre was chosen. It is quite possible that this was the case simply because Kline's play represented the magazine's interpretation of the conditions

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[99]Herbert Kline, "Scenes from 'John Henry,'" New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 19.

affecting Negroes in this country, while the available plays on Negro life, by Negroes, may not have done so.

An announcement of "Two Prize Play Contests" appeared at the end of the July 1935 New Theatre. The announcement stated that the New Theatre League, in conjunction with the National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, was offering a prize of $50 for the best play based on the case of Angelo Herndon, a "black working-class hero,"[100] who had recently been arrested for leading a demonstration of black and white workers. A second $50 prize was being offered, by the same sponsors, for the best play dealing with "Negro life." This contest was being held at the same time as an "Anti-War and Anti-Fascist Play Contest" which had been announced in a previous issue of the magazine. The New Theatre editors explained the simultaneity of the contests, by stating that, "together it is hoped that they will bring forward several one-act plays of the high standand set by Waiting for Lefty, winner of the first contest sponsored by New Theatre in conjunction with The New Masses.[101]

Herbert Kline discussed the results of the Negro Prize Play Contest, in an article for the February 1936 New Theatre, entitled, "Drama of Negro Life." Kline reported that the entries to the contest calling for plays on Negro subjects

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[100]"Two Prize Play Contests," New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 32.

[101]Ibid.

had been extremely disapointing. The winning play had been submitted by Langston Hughes; but Kline felt that Hughes had done better with other forms--that this play had no spine, no essential line of conflict and development. The story of the play, Kline commented, was narrated, not dramatized.

Another play which had been submitted to the Contest was Trouble With Angels, a dramatization, by Bernard Shoenfeld, of the account by Langston Hughes of the abortive strike effort by the cast of Green Pastures--which had appeared in the July 1935 New Theatre. Kline felt that, although Hughes' rendition of the incident (in prose form) had been more powerful than Shoenfeld's version, the Schoenfeld piece was nonetheless worthy of production.

Kline wrote that, on the whole, the plays entered in the Contest had suffered from poor playwriting plus a tendency to present too generalized a picture of Negro life and types; all of the plays had lacked three-dimensional depictions of Negroes as human beings. Kline concluded his article by voicing his disappointment over the lack of plays submitted to the Contest by Negroes.[102]

New Theatre published two reviews, by Negroes, of productions with all-Negro casts. "Duke Ellington on Gershwin's 'Porgy,'" by Edward Morrow appeared in the December 1935 issue; and "the Negro Theatre's Macbeth," by Roi Ottley was included

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[102]Herbert Kline, "Drama of Negro Life," New Theatre February, 1936, pp. 26-27.

in the May 1936 issue of New Theatre. In the earlier article, which Morrow based on an interview that he had had with Duke Ellington, Ellington was quoted as saying that Gershwin's rendering of the Heywoods' play was completely inauthentic because the composer had failed to use the Negro musical idiom. Ellington had said that the crap game scene, for instance, was a perfect example of this weakness; it was more opera than crap game.

Ellington had also criticized Porgy and Bess for its lack of social criticism which he felt was essential to any honest Negro play. Morrow summarized his impressions of the Ellington interview as follows:

> The times are here to debunk such types as Gershwin's lamp-black Negroisms and the melodramatic trash of the script of Porgy. The Negro artists are becoming socially-conscious and more courageous. Broadway will find it harder to keep them on the chain-gang of the hot-cha merchants. The Ellingtons and the Hughes' will take their themes from their blood. There will be fewer generalized gin-guzzling homicidal maniacs, and more understanding of rotten socio-economic conditions which give rise to neurotic escapists compensating for overwrought nerves. There will be fewer wicked, hip-swinging 'Yellow-gal hustler' stereotypes, but more economically isolated girls forced into prostitution. These themes are universal. They will be particularlized and vivified in ringing language, and charged with the truth of realities. . . ."[103]

Roi Ottley reviewed the Federal Negro Theatre Project's production of Macbeth, at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem, for the May 1936 New Theatre. Ottley said that, in the eyes of the local audience, the production was a great success.

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[103]Edward Morrow, "Duke Ellington on Gershwin's 'Porgy,'" New Theatre, December, 1935, p. 6.

"After years of playing distasteful stereotype and idiomatic roles in the American theatre," he wrote, the Harlem theatregoers could see that, "the Negro at last was attaining the status of an actor. While the play was not strictly Shakespeare's Macbeth because of its Haitian background and other minor changes, this proved unimportant to the audience, because of its broader implications. The play was definitely a break from the dialect part assigned to the Negro in the present inhibited American theatre."[104]

Ottley declared that the Broadway reviewers, from the major newspapers had, " . . . journeyed to Harlem with the idea of seeing a mixture of Brutus Jones and Stepin Fechit, with burlesque thrown in to season a palatable opinion many of their readers have of the Negro."[105] And the critics, such as Brooks Atkinson, Burns Mantle, Arthur Pollock and Percy Hammond had seen in the procution those characteristics which they had anticipated seeing. Ottley quoted some of the critics to illustrate his point. He contended, however, that, "despite Arthur Pollock's implication that Macbeth was in the same class as a popular Harmlem night club show, for Negroes to play Macbeth is a significant departure from a long line of stereotype and idiomatic roles in the American

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[104]Roi Ottley, "The Negro Theatre's 'Macbeth,'" New Theatre, May, 1936, p. 24.

[105]Ibid.

theatre. The result was a magnificent and spectacular production of a Haitian Macbeth, competently acted by a cast of 175 beautifully costumed players."[106]

Discussing the "Voodoo" Macbeth--so called, because of its Haitian setting--in her book, Modern Shakespeare Offshoots, Ruby Cohn writes that, " . . . the Voodoo Macbeth ran for ten weeks without an empty seat. . . . The reviews were favorable, if somewhat condescending. Then the Voodoo Macbeth moved downtown to the Adelphi Theatre with continued acclaim, and the production toured WPA theatres throughout the country."[107]

John Houseman, the first head of the WPA Negro Theatre unit, and the co-producer of the "Voodoo" Macbeth, later wrote about the lack of real gains made by the Negro in the theatre--even after the success of the latter production:

> Negro playwrighting was not appreciably encouraged by our efforts, and negro actors (with a few notable exceptions) were held, for another twenty years, within the galling bounds of stereotyped roles. The theatre technicians . . . (being excluded from every professional union in America except as cleaners and janitors) went back into other trades. No Negro company came into existence for thirty years after the dissolution of the Federal Theatre. . . .[108]

The agitation by Workers Theatre and New Theatre for

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[106]Ibid.

[107]Ruby Cohn, Modern Shakespeare Offshoots (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 72.

[108]John Houseman, Run-Through (New York, 1972), p. 209, quoted by Ruby Cohn, in Modern Shakespeare Offshoots, p. 73.

the Negro artists to attain a more equitable position in the theatre did not achieve any specific reforms. And most of the questions relating to the Black in the theatre--e.g., what type of play adequately reflects the Black experience: what is exploitation, what is realism, in relating the harsh facts of that experience; what roles should be played by Black actors--questions which were considered in the magazines, are still discussed in the pages of our theatre journals and in the Drama Section of the Sunday Times.

The left-wing theatre movement, with Workers Theatre and New Theatre serving as its forum, did help to bring about reform, insofar as the issue of integrating the theatre audience was concerned. And the fact that the deplorable conditions facing the Negro in the American theatre were brought into the open and investigated by Workers Theatre and New Theatre was certainly a positive step in the direction of ameliorating some of these blatant inequities.

CHAPTER IV

CRUSADES

The Federal Theatre Project and the Fight Against War, Fascism and Censorship

The Federal Theatre Project

New Theatre did not originally support the concept of a government sponsored theatre project with its customary crusader's zeal. This was because the magazine's editors had several misgivings about what effect the federal financial support of such a project might have on the project's freedom of speech. At the outset of the federal government's assumption of the role of theatrical producer, therefore, New Theatre projected what could be characterized as a fairly skeptical wait-and-see attitude.

Kay Sharpe reported on the first instance of Federal government involvement in a theatre project, in a March 1934 New Theatre article, entitled "US Puts 150 Idle Actors to Work: The First CWA Project." According to Sharpe, the Civil Works Service had hired 150 actors, through the New York City Board of Education, for the purpose of preparing twelve plays for presentation to the city's school children.

Unfortunately, there were many flaws in the operating methods of the CWA. Sharpe charged that the agency was highly

paternalistic in its dealings with its actor-employees--who were treated like relief wards, rather than professionals. Furthermore, the hiring for this first government project had not been handled fairly: by the time that the availability of the 150 positions was made public, they had already been filled. And although Actors Equity had allowed its offices to be used for organizing the project, not all of the actors who had been hired were Equity members.

The Civil Works Administration was paying the project actors $25 a week--which was somewhat less than the Equity minimum wage. Sharpe criticized Equity for cooperating with this breach in its contract, and she said that many of the actors employed by the Civil Works Service had already had their salaries reduced. Sharpe summarized her views on the CWA theatre project as follows:

> Whatever the 'moral effects' and 'economic advantages' of the actors project will be, cannot be answered in this article. . . . It can be predicted, however, that the present tendency toward kickbacks and crooked handling of minimum wages in current productions . . . will be further stimulated by the government's example. . . . In the meantime there has been no provision made for the 5,000 and more needy actors who remain 'unrelieved.' Most important of all, the actors' union, Equity, has classified the government's wage-cutting system, under the 'Act of God' clause which brooks no interference.[1]

An "editor's note" which appeared beneath Kay Sharpe's article stated that New Theatre favored the concept of a government theatre project, but that such an undertaking

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[1]Kay Sharpe, "U.S. Puts 150 Idle Actors to Work; The First CWA Project," New Theatre, March 1934, p. 6.

should be supervised by theatre workers.

The situation of unemployed actors was not really improved by the establishment of theatre projects under the Civil Works Administration. A note in the July-August 1934 New Theatre editorial column stated that two representatives from the Actors' Forum (the militant group within Actors Equity) had been sent to Commissioner Hodson of the CWA to demand that amateur actors on the project be replaced by paid professionals, and that discrimination against Negro actors be discontinued. According to New Theatre, this delegation had barely escaped a beating by the police.[2]

No further discussion of the Civil Works Administration theatre projects appeared in New Theatre for almost a year. Then, in May 1935, the magazine published an anonymous article entitled, "I Work on the Drama Project." The description of conditions on the Project, by the author of this piece, was rather grim. Only four hundred actors (out of 3,000 applicants) had been fortunate enough to get jobs on the $24-a-week CWA project. Once employed, these actors had found their working conditions to be extremely poor. Furthermore, the productions which had come out of the Project were also disappointing: uninspired presentations of the classics and of some other mediocre plays. Although all of the actors on the Project were now Equity members, the leadership of the actors' union had

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[2]Editorial, New Theatre, July-August, 1934, p. 3.

refused to help in alleviating these unsatisfactory conditions. Only the Forum section of Equity had been helpful.[3]

By this time, however, a great change--one that would have a substantial effect on the situation of theatre workers and, especially on the left-wing workers' theatre movement--was about to take place. On June 12, 1935, a far-reaching and relatively well-funded Federal Theatre Project which would function under the auspices of the Works Projects Administration, was announced. The first New Theatre reaction to this announcement, however, was less than enthusiastic. A note in the editorial column of the July 1935 issue of the magazine stated that, after the news of the Project was made public, " . . . the first impulse was towards cheers; here might be the combination of jobs and culture! . . . However, the misgivings of all of us who have watched the theatre in the last several years, lie in the possibilities of a national theatre to subdue many actors into parrots of the eagle, to act as censor, angel, and cop on the beat."[4]

The magazine's pessimistic response to the plans for the Federal Theatre Project was soon tempered.by the appointment of Hallie Flanagan as the Project's National Director, in August 1935. For Flanagan, it may be remembered, had--from the outset of the workers' theatre movement--proven her-

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[3]Anonymous, "I Work on the Drama Project," New Theatre, May, 1935, pp. 14-15.

[4]Editorials, New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 4.

self to be a sympathetic friend to the movement and to its organ, Workers Theatre.[5]

The New Theatre staff indicated their increasingly less cautious approach to the Theatre Project, in their September 1935 editorial column. The editors explained that they had originally greeted the announcement of the $3,000,000 appropriation for the Drama Unit of the WPA with mixed feelings; primarily because of their experience with the New York City Drama Unit of the CWA. Under the leadership of Colonel Earle Booth, the Unit had been used for pro-war propaganda. The editors did see, of course, the positive potential in a Theatre Project, and they were particularly pleased with the appointment of Hallie Flanagan as Project Director. "Professor Flanagan," the editors declared, "is admirably qualified to guide the development of the drama projects so that they may become a genuine peoples' theatre honestly reflecting the real life and problems of the American people."[6]

By November 1935, New Theatre's hopes for the Project under the direction of Hallie Flanagan seemed to be in the process of being fulfilled. Such a situation was evident in the publication, in that month's issue, of "A Letter from Hallie Flanagan (Director, Federal Theatre Project) to Herbert Kline (Editor, New Theatre)." Flanagan began her "letter" by

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[5]See Chapter I, p. 20.

[6]Editorials, New Theatre, September, 1935, p. 3.

stating that, since New Theatre had proven itself to be a friend to both the theatre and the unemployed, she felt that the magazine's staff and its readers deserved a thorough explanation of the Project.

Flanagan said that $27,000,000 had been allocated, under Harry Hopkins' WPA, for putting unemployed musicians, writers, painters, sculptors and theatre people back to work. A Federal Director had been designated for each field; and thus Flanagan's appointment as Project Head for Theatre. Twelve Regional Directors were then chosen to serve under the Project Heads and administrative directors had been appointed for each of the individual units of the Theatre Project. Flanagan said that theatre professionals would serve in all of the positions of the Federal Theatre Project, and she disclosed that groups such as Actors Equity, the League of New York Theatres, the Dramatists' Guild and the National Theatre Conference were sponsoring various units, among which were planned:

--playwrights' theatres for testing new scripts

--Negro theatres in Harlem

--a unit with a repertory of American History plays as well as plays that were important in American theatrical history

--a Civilian Conservation Corps project to provide visiting entertainment to the 2,000 CCC camps throughout the US[7]

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[7]Hallie Flanagan, "A Letter from Hallie Flanagan (Director, Federal Theatre Project) to Herbert Kline (Editor, New Theatre)," New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 6.

Low admission prices would be charged to all Project performances, wrote Flanagan; and a wage scale of $30 to $94 per month--depending on the individual performer's skill and geographical locale--would prevail. According to Flanagan, 80% of the allotment for the Project was to be spent for Labor costs, 10% for administrative salaries, and 10% was anticipated for production costs.[8] After describing her plans for the Federal Theatre Project, and soliciting the help of all interested persons, Flanagan wrote: "It will be seen that while our immediate aim in all these projects is to put to work thousands of theatre people, our more far-reaching purpose is to organize and support theatrical enterprizes so excellent in nature, so low in cost, and so vital to the communities involved that they will be able to continue after Federal support is withdrawn."[9]

Herbert Kline's reply to the letter from Hallie Flanagan was also published in the November 1935 New Theatre. The New Theatre editor undoubtedly expressed the thinking of the entire magazine staff, as well as that of the activists in the left-wing theatre movement when he wrote that, "we see in the theatre project a welcome although shamefully belated effort to alleviate the distressing effects prevailing among unemployed theatre workers."[10] Kline said that he saw the

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[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Herbert Kline, "Herbert Kline's Reply to 'A Letter from Hallie Flanagan . . . ,'" New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 7.

Project as a means of having theatre reach all the various sectors of the population. And he was generally pleased with the Regional Project Directors whom Flanagan had appointed. He was, however, quite dissatisfied with the "sliding relief scales" that had been proposed, and he felt that they were "shamefully inadequate."[11] Kline said that he feared that the Project would prove to be a menace to the wage standards which the theatrical unions had fought hard to establish; and he reported that an emergency meeting of the Actors Forum group of Equity had passed several resolutions concerning the Project. The resolutions--many of which were to be sent to Washington--called for:

--Equity representation on all theatre projects;

--no supervision of theatre projects by private producers or by the League of New York Theatres;

--prevailing union rates ($5 a performance) to be paid on the projects;

--special classification to be made in Equity for all Theatre Project workers;

--joint action with the other theatrical unions on all problems relating to the WPA theatre projects;

--organization of a committee to study the projects sponsored by the Actors' Equity Association; and

--Equity members to get priority on the Projects.[12]

Kline concluded his reply to Hallie Flanagan by stating that, "as soon as these questions are settled, the stage unions and other labor forces in the theatre will be able to cooperate

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[11] Ibid. [12] Ibid.

to the fullest extent in carrying out the splendid plans you have outlined for the drama project."[13]

Once established, the Federal Theatre Project immediately ran into many difficulties. A short editorial note in the January 1936 New Theatre--seven months after the Project was been announced--explained that there had been several problems in the drama section of the WPA. In many instances, the editors stated, bureaucratic red tape had been responsible for holding things up. Furthermore, it was rumored that there were large lobbies being financed by the film industry against the Theatre Project.

Happily, the theatre unions--after much dispute--had finally cooperated and had worked out a special membership classification and the lowering of dues and initiation fees for all project workers. New Theatre continued to project an attitude of guarded optimism, insofar as the Theatre Project was concerned. "It is still our earnest hope," the editors noted, "that the project, in addition to serving as a stop gap for relief, will permit the talents which it has at its command to work for the rehabilitation of both theatre workers and the stage."[14]

By the end of January, however, another of the pitfalls which were to plague the Project throughout the few years of its operation had already become painfully evident:

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[13]Ibid.

[14]Editorial, New Theatre, January, 1936, p. 4.

the threat of government censorship. On January 24, 1936, at the press showing of Ethiopia--the first Living Newspaper, written by Arthur Arent--Elmer Rice announced that he had resigned his post as Regional Director of the Federal Theatre Project for the New York district. Rice stated that his resignation had been forced by some people, within the WPA and in various other governmental positions, who had wished to censor certain parts of Ethiopia--on the charge that they were dangerous to international relations--as well as some other productions which were still in the planning and rehearsal stage.[15]

In his statement to the Press (which was published in the February 1936 New Theatre), Rice explained that he had accepted the post of Regional Director only after he had been assured by Harry Hopkins that there would be no government censorship whatsoever on the Project. This promise had been violated, said Rice, and thus his resignation was necessitated. "For fifteen years and more," Rice declared, "I have been actively engaged in fighting censorhip in every form. The issue of free speech and the preservation of the bill of rights seems to me of greater moment today than they ever have been in the history of America. I cannot conscientiously remain the servant of a government which plays the shabby game of partisan politics at the expense of freedom and the principles

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[15]Dan Isaacs, Introduction to Arthur Arent, "Ethiopia: The First 'Living Newspaper,'" Educational Theatre Journal, March, 1968, pp. 15-31.

of democracy."[16]

John Howard Lawson discussed some of the far-reaching implications of the Ethiopia affair, in a piece that also appeared in the February 1936 New Theatre, "The WPA Theatres and Censorship." Lawson wrote that, "In preventing the performance of Ethiopia, the Roosevelt administration enters a field in which the mayors and police of a dozen cities have already distinguished themselves. The series of attacks on Waiting for Lefty, the most recent censorship of Tobacco Road and The Children's Hour, are part of the same drive for a tighter control on thought and culture."[17]

According to Lawson, the WPA had been consistently used as a "political football" by the administration. And he explained his belief that there was an economic basis for this situation: mainly, that the large manufacturers disliked having so much government money spent for things other than the items which they produced. Lawson reported that there had been a great storm of public protest over the censorship of Ethiopia and Elmer Rice's subsequent resignation. "It is to be hoped," he emphasized, "that this is only the beginning of a wider and stronger protest. Everyone who is interested in free speech and civil rights should join in the fight to

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[16]Elmer Rice, "A Statement by Elmer Rice, Given to the Press at the January 24th Showing of 'Ethiopia,'" New Theatre, February, 1936, p. 2.

[17]John Howard Lawson, "The WPA Theatres and Censorship," New Theatre, February, 1936, p. 3.

force a public showing of Ethiopia--and the return of Rice as Regional Director--on his own terms."[18]

A short section of the February 1936 editorial column was devoted to a critical analysis of the uncensored version of Ethiopia which had been shown to the Press on January 24. The editors--who compared the technique of the Living Newspaper to that used in the March of Time on radio and in films--wrote that,

> Here was a kind of experiment which no commercial producer would, and no amateur theatre could afford to undertake. Even this first, not wholly finished production, proved the possibilities that lie in a serious subsidized theatre equipped for experimentation and research and led by first class talents. And the killing of the experiment shows the artistic crippling which results from censorship just as inescapably as the more blatant violation of civil rights.[19]

It should be noted, of course that the New Theatre editors were in complete agreement with the interpretations of the Italo-Ethiopian conflict and the subsequent actions taken on this situation by the League of Nations, that was offered in Ethiopia. " . . . If 'propaganda' means agitation in the interests of the people," argued the editors, "then the plain truth is propaganda."[20] A very brief "Scene from the Censored Play," was published following the editorial comment on Ethiopia. In this scene, four speakers from representative

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[18]Ibid., p. 4.

[19]Editorials, New Theatre, February, 1936, p. 3.

[20]Ibid.

English cities (Sheffield, Liverpool, Manchester and London) are depicted protesting the Hoaré-Laval plan which had been endorsed by the League of Nations as a solution to the Italo-Ethiopian conflict. Each of the speakers ends his harangue with the outcry, "We've been betrayed!"[21]

By March 1936, the Federal Theatre Project had settled into its rather eclectic and often difficult production routine. An article in that month's New Theatre, "The Federal Theatre Presents," by Joseph Manning, described the Project as it was evolving in the New York area. Manning reported that, as of the writing of his piece, four Federal Theatre productions--excluding Ethiopia--had finally opened in New York City. Manning said that the most successful of these productions--both critically, and in terms of its popularity with its audiences--was Frank Wilson's Walk Together Children. The Wilson play which was presented by the Negro Theatre Unit, under the supervision of John Houseman and Orson Welles, had opened on February 4, at the Lafayette Theatre, in Harlem.

Philip Barber had succeeded Elmer Rice as the New York Regional Director and, according to Manning, there had been no further changes in the Project's production schedule since Rice's resignation. "Thirty-six plays, ranging from W. H. Auden to Shakespeare are in rehearsal," wrote Manning, "more than a dozen rehearsal halls, in addition to six theatres

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[21]Arthur Arent, "A Scene from the Censored Play," New Theatre, February, 1936, p. 4.

scattered throughout greater New York resound with activity."[22] Still, there were problems: several of the most important groups were still awaiting costumes, scenery, and the theatres in which to perform their often over-rehearsed productions; miscasting had held up other groups.

Manning's article provided the readers of New Theatre with a rough sketch of the work of several of the units of the Theatre Project. The most well-developed group, in his opinion, was the Negro Theatre. Another interesting unit was the Experimental Theatre, headed by Virgil Geddes, which had been rehearsing Chalk Dust ("a brittle comment upon modern educational methods")[23] under the direction of James Light. John Bonn--formerly the director of the German agit-prop group, the Prolet-Buehne--was the director of the German Theatre unit which was producing a modern experimental version of the Kleist play Der Zerbrochene Krug.

Among the other New York units of the Federal Theatre Project whose work was touched upon by Manning were the Poetic Theatre (headed by Alfred Kreymborg) and the Popular Price Theatre (under the direction of Edward Goodman). "The Federal Theatre," wrote Manning,

> . . . must not be regarded as one producing outfit dominated by a single dramatic theory. Rather it must be viewed as a small theatre world wherein there is a

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[22]Joseph Manning, "The Federal Theatre Presents," New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 10.

[23]Ibid.

> vast diversity in talent, attitude and in the scripts themselves. . . . A more polyglot institution can hardly be imagined. German, Yiddish, Russian, Hebrew, Polish, French, and at least one Nigerian dialect, are all in evidence, not only among the actors but in the scripts. . . . Courageous is the least that can be said of a program embracing such variety despite the non-theatrical limitations imposed upon it by the ever ingenious WPA.[24]

Manning said that although many "non-theatrical" problems continued to face the Theatre Project, the companies had developed a spirit of unity and that, to a great extent, the difficulties which they faced had served to weld them closer together. Of course the fine spirits of the companies could not be counted upon to sustain them indefinitely, Manning warned.

> The future of the Federal Theatre is the answer to this question: Will it be given a chance to live? The ideal of a vital American stage which was the hope of the original planners of the Federal Theatre will be fulfilled only if intelligent cooperation and interest are shown. If this drama organization is atrophied by curb and censorship, the result will be something less than a solution to the relief problem.
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> Up to the present moment some very able and conscientious people have tried to make this theatre succeed and still believe that it will. . . . But just what physical form this earnest effort will take will depend upon the aid received from sources outside the Federal Theatre--from those in the government responsible for its creation and responsible for the circumstances of its two sources of life: Money and Freedom.[25]

John Makepeace reviewed some "Federal Theatre Plays," for the April 1936 New Theatre, and wrote that, except for the Triple-A Plowed Under edition of the Living Newspaper unit, the early Federal Project plays seemed to be overly

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[24]Ibid., p. 11.

[25]Ibid., p. 26.

concerned with sets and lighting.[26] And when John Mullen went to see eight plays in one month--at the request of New Theatre--for the purpose of writing a piece for the magazine about a "worker's" view of the contemporary theatre (" . . . all I know about the theatre is what I see from the front row in the balcony"),[27] he was also most impressed by the Living Newspaper production.

In a May 1936 New Theatre article entitled, "A Worker Looks at Broadway," Mullen wrote that Triple-A Plowed Under, a play about the condition of agriculture in America during the Depression, was "so good it makes your hair tingle and sits you on the edge of your seat."[28] Mullen said that the show would not provide a short cut to revolution--as some feared it might--but that it might help to bring about a revolution in the theatre. He was also entirely in favor of the concept of the Federal Theatre Project, and he wrote, "I think that the whole idea of a government subsidized theatre, with low admission prices and with the staff and acting groups allowed complete freedom to choose their plays, and to select their own methods of presenting them, will pump rivers of fresh blood into the anemic theatre structure."[29]

Morris Watson, the Managing Producer of the Living

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[26]John Makepeace, "Federal Theatre Plays, New Theatre, April, 1936, p. 38.

[27]John Mullen, "A Worker Looks at Broadway," New Theatre, May, 1936, p. 25.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., p. 27.

Newspaper and the Vice-President of the Newspaper Guild of America, wrote an essay about his unit of the Federal Theatre Project, for the June 1936 New Theatre. 1935, the third Living Newspaper (but only the second to be presented to the public) had recently opened at the Biltmore Theatre, and Watson began his article with a discussion of that production which, he said, "represent[ed] a deliberate experiment in the matter of presenting the news visually."[30]

Rather than focusing on any individual theme, as Ethiopia and Triple-A Plowed Under had done, 1935 dealt with various unrelated news items and was contrived to convey "the temper of the year."[31] Watson described the construction of several of the scenes in 1935, and he noted that one scene in particular, had been criticized for not having any "punch." "The usual news story is written with the punch at the top," he explained. "We newspapermen are newly wedded to the theatre. . . . A dozen more editions may put us in step. . . ."[32]

After tracing the origins of the Living Newspaper unit and mentioning some of its possible stylistic roots--vaudeville, the Workers Laboratory Theatre, and, "I also have hearsay that Ben Hecht and Charles Mac Arthur once toyed with the idea and that similar enterprizes flourished for a time in Berlin and Moscow"[33]--Watson gave some of his insights on

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[30]Morris Watson, "The Living Newspaper," New Theatre, June, 1936, p. 6.

[31]Ibid. [32]Ibid. [33]Ibid., p. 8.

the banned Ethiopia. "If the facts had been such as to glorify Mussolini and to make a villain out of poorly represented Ethiopia," he argued, "the subsequent course of the Living Newspaper might have been different."[34]

Watson stated his belief in the potential of the Living Newspaper for satisfying a great need on the part of many Americans to understand the social conditions and economic changes that were so painfully evident to them. Examining the often-made comparison between the Living Newspaper and the March of Time, Watson wrote that, although there were many similarities in these two forms, "the difference between the two is essentially the point of view. The March of Time is put out by a rich magazine and a rich advertiser. The Living Newspaper is written, edited, staged and acted by people who struggle for their living. It is bound to catch the flavor of that struggle."[35]

In order to function successfully, Watson said that the Living Newspaper had to be completely free of censorship. He therefore suggested that the Federal Theatre Project should be completely divorced from the WPA: "So long as it is a part of the WPA," he wrote, "it will be subject to petty and unfair attacks from those reactionary forces which see red in every letter of relief.

"Is it too much to ask that the government grant a straight subsidy for something for which the community is

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[34]Ibid.

[35]Ibid., p. 33.

hungry?"[36]

John Gassner wrote a review of the first season's "Federal Theatre Plays," for the July 1936 New Theatre; and, in general, he was pleased with what he had seen. "In no sense were the plays masterpieces or the productions signal achievements," he commented, "but the major pieces were still superior to a great deal that is launched on Broadway in the name of art and private enterprize."[37]

Gassner felt that the Federal Theatre's most finished production thus far had been the Experimental Theatre's Battle Hymn by Michael Gold and Michael Blankfort--writers who were by no means unfamiliar to the readers of New Theatre. Battle Hymn, a chronological recounting of the career of the radical abolitionist John Brown, was an exciting drama that called attention to the heroic tradition in American life, said Gassner, as well as to the "still immediate problem of property versus man."[38] And, although he felt that the characterizations in the play were weak, he had been impressed by its strong spirit.

Another historical play that Gassner singled out for mention in this review, was the American Historical Theatre's production of The Ballad of Davy Crockett, by H. R. Hays.

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[36]Ibid.

[37]John W. Gassner, "Federal Theatre Plays," New Theatre, July, 1936, p. 6.

[38]Ibid.

This play, he wrote, helped make evident the value of resuscitating the personalities of the past and of taking a critical look at historical events. The possibilities in this area of the drama had been far from exhausted, he declared.

Gassner had found W. H. Auden's Dance of Death--adapted by Alfred Kreymborg, for the Poetic Theatre--less easy to praise. He felt that the content of this play--scenes about the imminent decline of capitalism--became tiresome, and he wrote that, "there [was] a certain strident dogmatism in tone which tend[ed] to alienate rather than to convince."[39] Gassner did, however, admire Auden's use of the musical revue technique for the purpose of satire. And he also thought that the Poetic Theatre was serving a very important function in experimenting with poetry in the theatre. Gassner wrote: " . . . Auden's piece suggests that dramatic poetry in order to be effective on the stage cannot do without developed drama, that mere exposition and explication are insufficient; otherwise this form can be endured only briefly. . . . Perhaps, too, poetry still requires little more than that it be spoken, and in its future in the theatre, apart from poetic diction, may reside largely in the mass recitation . . . or in modification of the form."[40]

The only other production which Gassner mentioned in this review was The Popular Price Theatre's presentation of Class of '29, by Orrie Lashin and Milo Hastings. Class of

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[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid., p. 27.

'29 was about the "stalemate" facing college graduates and, indeed, all young people during the Depression. And although Gassner felt that the play lacked the passion which was so appropriate to its theme, he said that, "in lieu of a stronger treatment this tale deserves a place on the contemporary stage."[41]

Turpentine, by J. K. Smith and Peter Morrell--the second production of the Negro Theatre unit--was reviewed by Phillip Stevenson for the August 1936 New Theatre. The play is about the fight of Black turpentine workers to gain better wages and working conditions from their white bosses. Stevenson was disturbed that the struggle depicted in Turpentine was a racial struggle--Black men versus White men--rather than an economic one: workers versus capitalists. But he wrote that, although he was not in basic agreement with this racial interpretation of the play's situation, "in preference to the phony arty approach that has characterized so many plays dealing with the Negro people, give me the honest crudities of a Turpentine any day."[42] Stevenson was also impressed with the audience reaction to the play, and he wrote that, "judging from the warm reception given Turpentine, plays of protest against exploitation and oppression are welcome to Harlem's exploited, oppressed and police-

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[41]Ibid.

[42]Phillip Stevenson, "Turpentine Workers," New Theatre, August, 1936, p. 18.

ridden people."[43]

Harry Elion--who had first contributed articles to Workers Theatre, as one of the original members of the Workers Laboratory Theatre--reviewed the third Living Newspaper presentation, Injunction Granted, for the September 1936 New Theatre. Injunction Granted--a play about organized labor's turbulent and painful history--was, undoubtedly the most controversial of the Living Newspapers. According to Malcolm Goldstein, even Hallie Flanagan objected to the treatment that was given to the subject matter in this play:

> At the opening . . . she was disturbed by the slanting of the script, in which she saw a resemblance to the agitprop appeals of old. . . . By letter she complained to Watson and Joseph Losey, the director, but to no avail, for Watson was unwilling to make changes. Four weeks later she wrote again in obvious anger, insisting that she would not have the Federal Theatre 'used to further the ends of the Democratic party, the Republican party, or the Communist party.'[44]

Although Elion felt that it would have been preferable if Injunction Granted had been more limited in scope and had only covered one phase in the development of the labor movement, he was generally in sympathy with the production. In Elion's opinion, Injunction Granted was, "a vital, instructive, and at times very entertaining show."[45] His review did not discuss any of the controversy which had attended this production.

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[43]Ibid.

[44]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 280.

[45]Harry Elion, "Injunction Granted!," New Theatre, September, 1936, p. 20

The only other mention of a Federal Theatre play, in New Theatre, was a note, in the editorial column of the November 1936 issue of the magazine (the final issue of New Theatre) that twenty-six productions of Sinclair Lewis' It Can't Happen Here were scheduled to open in various cities and towns all over the country. By the end of 1936 (less than a full year after the Federal Theatre Project had really begun producing plays) the problems facing the Project--at least in the eyes of New Theatre--seemed to be looming larger than any of its individual productions.

New Theatre's initial concern that a Federally subsidized theatre project might attempt "to subdue many actors into parrots of the eagle, to act as censor, angel, and cop on the beat,"[46] had, unfortunately, proven to be completely accurate. From the first incident of censorship--the aborted production of Ethiopia--the government had made its presence strongly felt by workers on all levels of the Project.

In an article for the April 1936 New Theatre entitled "Patriots on the Project," Richard Pack discussed the practice of red-baiting, in the form of a campaign that was being led by several military men, against some of the leaders of the Federal Theatre Project. Pack said that the Federal Theatre Veterans League--the organization which supported the red-baiting campaign--was becoming a real threat to the project

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[46]See above, p. 188.

and that 40,000 project workers were now faced with dismissals.[47]

A note in the May 1936 New Theatre editorial section stated that the Federal Theatre Project was in real danger of being eliminated because of red-baiting and political in-fighting. Although the magazine had originally voiced its reservations about the possibility of a government Project at its inception, it now embraced the cause of continuing the Federal Theatre as completely and as emphatically as it had any other cause for which it had hitherto campaigned: "Since the fascist-minded gentry of the right are so eager to kill the arts projects," wrote the editors, "every progressive organization and every person who believes in the right of the unemployed for work relief and who loves good theatre should wire or write immediately to his representative demanding that the Federal Theatre Project and other arts projects be continued."[48]

By June 1936, the editors of New Theatre were writing about the possibility of converting the Federal Theatre Project into a permanent, federally funded national people's theatre. In that month's editorials, the New Theatre staff declared that the success of several of the early Federal Theatre Project productions--Murder in the Cathedral, Macbeth, and Triple-A Plowed Under were mentioned in this regard--had

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[47]Richard Pack, "Patriots on the Project," New Theatre, April, 1936, pp. 5-6.

[48]Editorials, New Theatre, May 1936, p. 4.

shown that there was great national interest in the theatre. It could not be ignored, however, that even while at the height of its artistic success, the Project was faced with severe opposition from reactionary sources.[49]

Mark Marvin renewed his "Call for a National Theatre" in the July 1936 New Theatre. "Confusion is rife among the twelve thousand Federal Theatre workers," Marvin began.[50] There was, he said, constant fear that the project would be closed down. "Unwittingly," he continued, "an emergency relief measure has made dramatically apparent the need and usefulness for a permanent national government-subsidized theatre not part of the relief system."[51]

Marvin contended that it was amazing that, even with the insecurity surrounding the Project, plays of value had been presented. A new theatre audience had been created, he wrote; one composed of people who had never been able to go to the theatre before because they couldn't afford the price of the tickets. This new audience had the potential for re-shaping the American drama, he said.

Claiming that the establishment of the Federal Theatre Project as a permanent government-subsidized theatre would not injure the commercial theatre, Marvin said that each

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[49]Editorials, New Theatre, June, 1936, p. 3.

[50]Mark Marvin, "A Call for a National Theatre," New Theatre, July, 1936, p. 7.

[51]Ibid.

theatre--the commercial and the national--would simply appeal and cater to its own audience. Marvin declared that it was up to the actors, directors, supervisors as well as to the theatregoers to force the government to consider establishing a permanent national theatre. And he warned that the deadline for such an action was fast approaching: "[T]he original appropriation was intended to carry the Art Projects from November 1935 until June 30, 1936. The dreaded June 30 approaches without any tangible and authoritative statement as to the future of the Projects being issued."[52] Marvin declared that, "Certainly while Congress votes billions of dollars for wars, both past and present, while huge corporations such as the shipping interests come to Congress for lavish subsidies the American people have the right (and the obligation) to demand adequate funds for public drama education and recreation."[53]

Pointing out that the ideal of a democratic national theatre had been pursued at various times in American history, Marvin discussed several specific periods when this idea had been actively examined. It was only logical, argued Marvin, that the Federal Theatre Project should be the basis for a permanent National Theatre. And he called upon certain well-

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[52]Ibid., p. 8. It should be noted that the deadline, June 30, to which Marvin referred, had passed and the Project had been renewed, by the time his article appeared in New Theatre.

[53]Ibid., p. 9.

known individuals who were active in the theatre--commercial and non-commercial[54]--to volunteer to form a committee for the purpose of making the Project permanent.

> If they will come forward to initiate the movement it will meet with mass response and enthusiasm and support at once.
>
> [Here Marvin quoted from a written appeal by Boissy d'Anglas, on February 13, 1794, to the Committee of Instruction of the First French Republic. d'Anglas had written of theatre as, 'one of the properest instruments for furthering the development of society and rendering men more virtuous and enlightened. . . .']
>
> Those who now have the opportunity to assume leadership in the proposed movement for an American national theatre might well take these words to heart.
>
> Action is necessary, and action must mark the next step forward![55]

An article by Morris Watson entitled "The Project Workers Serve Notice," appeared in the October 1936 issue of New Theatre and attested to the worsening situation within the Federal Theatre Project. Watson reported that the quota of non-relief workers on the Project had been reduced from twenty-five to ten percent. This would mean the loss of fifteen hundred jobs. A work stoppage had therefore been

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[54]The individuals named by Marvin in this context were: Hallie Flanagan, Phillip Barber, Rosamund Gilder, Walter Pritchard Eaton, Frederic McConnel, Barret H. Clark, Lee Simonson, H. K. Motherwell, Mrs. Edith J. R. Isaacs, Sidney Howard, Elmer Rice, Lee Strasberg, John Howard Lawson, Garret H. Leverton, Gilmore Brown, Jasper Deeter, Frederic B. Koch, Thomas Wood Stevens, Robert Garland, Brooks Atkinson and Sheldon Cheney.

[55]Mark Marvin, "A Call for a National Theatre," New Theatre, July, 1936, p. 28.

threatened by all Project workers to protest this situation. Watson said that a Committee of Action was being formed for the purpose of going to Washington to demonstrate against the cuts. The only union that had refused to join this committee--which so far had been successful in staving off the mass firings--was Actors Equity.[56]

A note in the "Sifting Scenes" column of the November 1936 New Theatre mentioned that representatives from the magazine and from the New Theatre League had gone to Washington the previous month, as members of the Four Arts Committee of the Federal Theatre Project, in order to protest the anticipated layoffs on the Project. The editors reported that the Federal Theatre Project had been endorsed by the Central Trades Council of Greater New York, and that the drive for a national theatre was continuing.

The script of "WPA Plowed Under?"--a "living newspaper" history of the Federal Theatre Project--the collective work of the staff of the recently re-organized New Theatre and Film was published in the March 1937 issue of the magazine. "WPA Plowed Under?" which bears a close resemblance to the early agit-prop plays that appeared in Workers Theatre, treats the conditions surrounding the birth, growth, and the difficulties being faced by the Project--which, by that time, had been reduced significantly.

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[56]Morris Watson, "The Project Workers Serve Notice," New Theatre, October, 1936, pp. 15; 29.

A long essay about the future of the Federal Theatre Project--"Which Way the Federal Theatre?" by Walter Pell--was published in what turned out to be the final issue of New Theatre and Film, in April 1937. Pell reported that on March 1, the Project had gone through another reorganization, and that Hallie Flanagan had assumed a more direct role in the supervision of the New York Project. Pell saw this change as a positive step, but he said that the fundamental problem of the Project still remained the same: basically that the policy of the Federal government continued to point to the curtailment or elimination of the Project.

Pell wrote that, even while the project was in danger of being suspended, there was a widespread popular movement for establishing a permanent national program covering all of the arts. There should, however, be a thorough understanding of all of the difficulties attending the governmental operation of such a system, Pell cautioned: "The history of the WPA theatre is a record of unbelievable executive errors, political influence, bureaucratic red tape and even militaristic control. The skill, integrity and endurance of the workers have been pitted against a system which has tended to penalize every evidence of skill or integrity or endurance."[57]

Pell maintained that it was miraculous that, in the face of so many difficulties, the Project had managed to

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[57]Walter Pell, "Which Way the Federal Theatre?" New Theatre and Film, April, 1937, p. 7.

accomplish so much in the previous fifteen months; and he gave some statistics about the Project to substantiate his contention:

> --11,704 theatre people had been employed in 150 dramatic companies operating in twenty-nine states
>
> --a weekly audience of more than 400,000 had attended Project performances and had paid an average admission price of only fifteen cents
>
> --119 new plays had been produced; including seventy-one dramatic and musical shows and forty-eight marionette shows
>
> --drama coaches for amateur groups had been employed through the Project
>
> --the WPA had cultivated a new nationwide theatre audience, said Pell, which was developing "a critical taste based on a consciousness of the social function of the theatre. . . .[58]

Pell declared that, at the present time, the gravest danger to the Project came from within its organization, in the policy of "centralization" that was favored by Hallie Flanagan and Phillip Barber. In centralization, all aspects of all productions were to come from a central pool of personnel. Under such a system, argued Pell, more money would be spent on the administration than on the production of plays. Administrative heads would have control over the productions of the individual producing units, but would often be unfamiliar with the work being done by these groups.

Pell asserted that the privacy and civil rights of many Project workers had frequently been violated. Individuals

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[58] Ibid.

had been investigated by the Department of Investigation and also by private detective agencies. Project workers had been denied paid sick leave and vacations. Pell said that the Project workers were looking to Hallie Flanagan to remedy many of these conditions. The workers, he maintained, wanted only to work and to rehearse plays (for limited rehearsal periods) for performance. The basic principle, declared Pell, should be "centralization of services, no centralization of control."[59] Finally, Pell said that the practice of having armed guards at the WPA headquarters and the WPA theatres should be abolished. This would be the first step towards a new kind of Federal Theatre. "Let us hope that Mrs. Flanagan will have the courage to take this step," Pell concluded,"and that she will take advantage of the opportunity to make the dream of a People's Theatre a living reality."[60]

Pell's dream, the dream of a National People's Theatre which he shared with so many other Americans--both in the left-wing theatre movement and outside of the movement--was ended on June 30, 1939, when the United States Congress voted to end the Federal Theatre Project. New Theatre and New Theatre and Film's agitation in support of the Project had not had any of the desired effect. In this particular crusade, in fact, the involvement of the magazines and of the left-wing theatre movement had probably been counter-productive to

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[59]Ibid., p. 43. [60]Ibid.

the achievement of their goal. Indeed it was the association of the Left with the Federal Theatre Project which had made the Project seem so threatening to the Congressmen who voted for its abolition.

The Fight Against War, Fascism and Censorship

To the staff and contributors to Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, the evils of war, fascism and censorship were totally interrelated: censorship was both a symptom and a product of fascism; and fascism would lead to imperialistic war. Therefore, the fight against these there interconnected horrors was waged by the magazine as a single battle. And this struggle--unlike several of the other crusades that were undertaken by the magazine--was interpreted in essentially the same way and pursued with uniform vigor throughout the six and one-half years during which Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film appeared.

"We Need Anti-War Plays," by George Lewis, a member of the Red Players of New Jersey, appeared in the August 1932 Workers Theatre and was the first discussion of the war question to be published in the magazine. Lewis wrote that the workers' theatres needed plays which showed that, although the capitalistic countries were preaching pacifism, they were actually preparing for war against the Soviet Union. The plays, said Lewis, should illustrate what could be done to block such a war and also how to turn an imperialist war into a civil war.[61]

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[61]George Lewis, "We Need Anti-War Plays," Workers Theatre, August, 1932, p. 6.

The following bulletin appeared in the April 1933 Workers Theatre:

Germany

> The events since the March elections speak for themselves. . . . The outlawed Communist Party of Germany remains the only active leader of the German workers within the country, against the fascist barbarians. The Communist International has proposed a definite united front of action to the Labor and Socialist International on concrete lines of struggle against fascism and against all attacks on the workingclass. The Communist Party in this country has made similar proposals to the American Socialist Party. At this writing, the Socialist Executive has not yet replied. Meanwhile the attacks on the workers grow sharper. The workers theatre must play its share in uniting the ranks of labor for militant action. As for Germany, read the resolution of the LOWT and act accordingly--at once!![62]

The "Resolution on German Fascism . . . (Copies sent to the Germany Embassy)," signed by the "League of Workers Theatres of the USA; National Executive Committee," read as follows:

> The League of Workers Theatres of the USA protests the barbarous acts of terror being committed by German fascism against the duly elected political, cultural, and trade union leaders of the German working class, Communist, Socialist and Republican. We protest the attacks against the Jews and Catholic workers. We demand an end to the torture of Thaelman, Torgler, and other Communist deputies, and the release of all Jewish and anti-fascist prisoners. We demand an end to the persecution of German theatre-workers, writers and artists.
>
> We shall do everything in our power to arouse the American people, and especially the working people, against this fascist terror dictatorship, thru [sic] our plays and thru public action.

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[62] "Germany," Workers Theatre, April, 1933, p. 2.

> We call upon all theatre artists and cultural workers to make public protests, individually and thru their organizations, against the fascist regime.
>
> We appeal to all those interested in cultural progress to unite with the working masses in protest meetings, parades and demonstrations against the bloody Hitler rule. Only the most vigorous and unequivocal actions will have real effect.[63]

The editors of Workers Theatre explained the relationship between censorship and fascism and the effect, therefore, of fascism on the theatre, in a short essay which was also published in the April 1933 issue of the magazine. It was important to understand, wrote the editors, " . . . that fascism strangles culture, that fascism is not a sudden thing, but grows in any capitalistic country in special forms arising out of particular conditions. . . ."[64]

After pointing out that the German theatre had suffered at the hands of the fascists for several years before the Nazis formally gained power, the editors reminded their readers that the only country in which theatre really flourished--with the support of the government--was the country whose economic system was diametrically the opposite of fascism: the USSR.

The editors insisted that there were signs of fascism developing in America as, "the workers and farmers [were]

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[63]"Resolution on German Fascism . . . ," Workers Theatre, April, 1933, p. 2.

[64]"Fascism and the Theatre," Workers Theatre, April, 1933, p. 7.

beginning more and more to resist wage-cuts and struggle for unemployment relief and insurance."[65] Some of the signs of the growing threat of fascism, wrote the editors, were the "jingoistic 'Buy America' campaign"; movies such as Gabriel Over the White House--a film which "present[ed] a President-Dictator who by fascist decrees restores everybody to work and prosperity just-like-that"[66]; the assumption of greater powers by Roosevelt; and the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps ("the forced labor camps for the fascization of the homeless youth").[67] The editors warned that, before long, plays with propaganda for fascism would also be produced.

"We of the theatre, together with the workers and farmers and all foes of fascism, should join in vigorous protest against the fascist reign of terror in Germany," declared the editors. "Dramatize the struggle against fascism through your repertory. Down with fascism--the hangman of culture!!!"[68]

Bulletins about events in Nazi Germany and warnings about the growing danger of fascism in America and the inevitability of another war continued to appear in Workers Theatre. By July 1933, the concern about the possibility of another war had begun to be more widespread. Liberals and

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[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid.

radicals now started to see the importance of cooperation in an anti-war effort. And, an indication of the development towards the adoption of a Popular Front policy by the Communist Party, was a notice stating that the, "LOWT Endorses Anti-War Congress"--called by Sherwood Anderson, Upton Sinclair, and Theodore Dreiser--which appeared in the July-August 1933 Workers Theatre.[69]

A report about the Second US Congress Against War and Fascism, was published in the November 1934 New Theatre.[70] According to Alice Evans, the LOWT delegate to the Congress, support for that organization had grown considerably in the past year, and there were even delegates to the meeting from the National Guard and the armed forces. "As delegate from the League of Workers' Theatres to this Congress, there are many things I would like to write about," Evans declared:

> Of the magnificent united front and the vote of the 49 Socialist delegates present to continue this in United Action; of the steel workers, stock yards workers, marine workers who threw their organizations into the fight against war and fascism; of the fine seriousness of the Youth Congress, dedicating Young America to a better future than bosses' cannon fodder; of the moment when 1,000 young people stood for five minutes and cheered Mother Ella Reeve Bloor. But the incident which remains eaten into the consciousness of every delegate, was that 'demonstration of solidarity from the armed forces of the United States,' which became a symbol for the entire Congress.[71]

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[69]"LOWT Endorses Anti-War Congress," Workers Theatre, July-August, 1933, p. 2.

[70]The reader is reminded that, as of September 1933, the magazine was published as New Theatre.

[71]Alice Evans, in Editorials, New Theatre, November, 1934, pp. 3-4.

Evans concluded her report for New Theatre by quoting from the statement which she had made to the Congress, in which she had affirmed that, "we of the Workers' Theatres of America pledge our services to fight against war and fascism."[72]

Evidence of growing popular support for the anti-fascism/anti-war movement notwithstanding, the situation in this country still seemed, to the editors of New Theatre, to be constantly worsening. A note in the editorial column of the December 1934 issue of the magazine provided some evidence for their contention. Under the heading, "Hearst and Mussolini and Hitler," the editors stated that Hearst so admired the two dictators that he was sponsoring a showing of a film about Mussolini, "Man of Courage" (originally entitled "Blackshirts") for his Christmas Fund Drive. The editors called upon the New Theatre readers to picket this film.[73]

The February 1935 New Theatre editorial, as I have noted earlier in this study,[74] was an important turning point in the development of both the magazine and the left-wing movement of the nineteen-thirties. It was in this editorial that the editors announced the formation of the New Theatre League to replace the LOWT, and formally called for "actors,

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[72]Ibid.

[73]Editorials, New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 3.

[74]See above, Chapter I, pp. 64-66.

stage-hands, playwrights, directors, regardless of other political or artistic differences,"[75] to join the New Theatre League. The program of this new organization was stated simply as standing, "for mass development of the American theatre to its highest artistic and social level. For a theatre dedicated to a struggle against war, fascism and censorship."[76] This long anticipated policy shift had obviously been inspired by the Comintern's recognition of the worsening danger of war against the USSR by the fascist countries, and of the need to consolidate all anti-fascist forces against such a threat.

The cover of the special April 1935 "Anti-War Issue" of New Theatre was designed for the magazine by the famous Communist cartoonist William Gropper. In devising this cover, Gropper superimposed a black and white cartoon of a grinning skeleton--dressed in a World War I army uniform with a swastika armband, and operating a motion picture camera that has a cannon instead of a lens and is mounted on a tripod constructed of bayonets--over a W.W.I photograph (printed on a red background) of marching soldiers.[77] The impact of this

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[75]Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 3.

[76]Ibid.

[77]The following note about the cover of the April 1935 New Theatre appears on the inside cover of the magazine: "New Theatre appears late this month due to a last minute change in the cover. The original cover, a 'black face' Al Jolson superimposed upon a background of a skull and marching men, was designed to expose how actors were used to ballyhoo war in 1917. At the last moment, we decided that this cover

cover was considerable.

"War may break at any minute," began the lead editorial of the April 1935 New Theatre.

> The bombshell of Germany's open rearming proves that Hitler, with the excitement of a losing gambler, is prepared to stake his power in a new world war in hope of imperialist gains that will consolidate his shaky rule. . . . The Fascist states are torn by internal troubles. Seeking to turn the minds of the people from their real distress by involving them in patriotic wars of conquest, Hitler and Mussolini are now ready to send millions of workers to their death. The contradictions of capitalism make it impossible to predict the alliances. . . . Poland, Germany and Japan can put 1,500,000 armed men into action on a day's notice. Can any sane person doubt that their object is the destruction of the Soviets? Europe is doomed for another terrible war. . . . And all the Roosevelt machine has offered to disguise American preparations for participation in the next world war is the same 'watchful waiting' policy that led to Wilson's declaration of war in 1917. The only way to prevent war is to fight against it now. This anti-war issue of NEW THEATRE and the wide activities of the New Theatre League are dedicated to that fight.[78]

Part of the work of New Theatre and the New Theatre League--and one of the major reasons for this special issue--the editorial continued, was to help prevent actors from being used as pawns for pro-war propaganda--as had been the case during the first World War. Colonel Earle Booth, "czar of the PWA Dramatic Project in New York City," was attempting to use the Project for such a purpose; but the editors insisted that this time, such an attempt would be futile.

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might be misunderstood as another 'blackface' caricature of the Negro people. Despite the cost, the issue was delayed until the present cover by William Gropper was ready. . . ."

[78]Editorial, New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 3.

"When the next war breaks," they declared, "the militarists will find actors and entertainers who will refuse either to swallow the patriotic ballyhoo fed them or to use their talents to further the interests of the war makers."[79]

The three principle articles in the Anti-War issue of New Theatre--all of which were written on the theme of the theatre during World War I--were, "Entertaining the Army," by Emanuel Eisenberg; "Stars and Stripes on Broadway," by Hiram Motherwell and Helen Reynolds; and "Drama on the Western Front," by H. W. L. Dana.

"Actors who like to think of themselves as Artists unspoiled by immersion in such dreary waters as Politics or Economics may find it illuminating to make a brief excursion to a period only eighteen years gone," began Emanuel Eisenberg, in "Entertaining the Army." "For during 1917 and 1918," he explained, "a monotonous machinery was set into motion which involved the actor so intensively as a participant in and fosterer of martial violence that favorable historians have no hesitation in referring to him in this connection as 'one of the most powerful arms of the government.'"[80]

In his short essay, Eisenberg investigated some of the roles played by actors--both as individuals and as a group--and by the theatre, in general, during the war. Aside from

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[79]Ibid., p. 4.

[80]Emanuel Eisenberg, "Entertaining the Army," New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 5.

the specific tasks which actors sometimes performed--such as giving dramatic speeches to sell "Liberty Loans"--the primary function served by theatre "over there" was to take the attention of the soldiers off the war and to make them forget the uselessness of their fighting. At the end of his article, Eisenberg refers his readers to his major source of information for the piece:

> Entertaining the American Army, by James W. Evans and Captain Gardner L. Harding . . . is a complete record of the phenomena only touched in this article.
>
> The book is compulsory reading for any actor who is still unpersuaded that he is an inevitable agent for the instigation and prolongation of war, so long as he remains indifferent to issues of social change and to the roaring imminence of another world war.[81]

That the theatre over here, during the war years, was also used as a refuge from the cares of war, was the main point made by Hiram Motherwell and Helen Reynolds in their article, "Stars and Stripes on Broadway." Although the subject of war was treated more often in plays during the war in Europe (before US involvement), than it had been previously; it was usually dealt with indirectly--as a side issue--for instance, as a romantic vehicle for having a heroine who is left behind by her soldier-sweetheart.

"The most positive way in which the war fever affected the theatre," wrote Motherwell and Reynolds, "was in the suppression of plays of protest. It was not that there were not groups of active protesters, but any production that

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[81]Ibid., p. 33.

was not flagrantly in key with the Star Spangled Banner was sure to be suppressed and it was impossible to raise the money for certain failure."[82]

The authors explained that, although there were many anti-war plays written during the war years, most of them were of poor quality. The radicals actually did little in the theatre during the first World War. John Reed, for example, got so caught up in the war's adventure, that he became a war correspondent in France.

The only radicalism in the theatre in those years was technical or aesthetic--in the work of groups like the Provincetown Players of the Washington Square Players. And an important side effect of the war, to the development of the American theatre, was that many important European actors and acting companies visited this country. There were no workers' theatres or agit-prop troupes, during the war years, and the only anti-war presentations were pageants that were produced by the Women's Peace Party.

Once the United States entered the war, musicals and vaudeville were used to stir patriotism, and there was little room for experimentation and aesthetic concerns in the commercial theatre. Theatres were used by the government for recruiting purposes--e.g., during intermissions, and,

> What was left of the theatre was a desert of risque bedroom farces, pathetic comedies, love-and-springtime

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[82]Hiram M otherwell and Helen Reynolds, "Stars and Stripes on Broadway," New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 6.

> musicals. Copeau . . . could not have chosen a worse time to present a mildly social play. The Bad Shepherds by Octave Mirabeau enraged the critics. The Times review stated feverishly that it 'brought home to the audience how completely the war had put into the background' such 'extreme views on both sides of the question of the rights of capital and labor.' All that was changed--workers and employers were friends now, fighting side by side in a greater struggle--for freedom and equality--to end all wars.[83]

H. W. L. Dana discussed, " . . . the way in which the great drama of the World War warped and distorted the little drama of the stage and screen and how the stage and screen in turn were used to carry on the war propaganda,"[84] in his contribution to the Anti-War issue of New Theatre, "Drama on the Western Front." In this piece, Dana compared the wartime theatres of France, Germany and England and how they were used, "to spread lies, inflame hatred, and militarize the masses."[85] He pointed out that, although there were protest movements against the war in all three countries, they were easily suppressed. "Would this revolutionary struggle of workers and intellectuals against war be suppressed with equal ease today?" he asked.[86]

Dana said that when he visited Germany in August 1914, only the plays that were one hundred percent German patriotic were being permitted. "As soon as Germany made war on Belgium

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[83] Ibid., p. 9

[84] H. W. L. Dana, "Drama on the Western Front," New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 10.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

and France," wrote Dana, "I found the German dramatists making war on the Belgian and French dramatists."[87] Hauptmann and Suderman, as well as Max Reinhardt, were among the ninety-three famous German intellectuals who signed a manifesto "defending German militarism and attacking the 'lies' of the Allies."[88]

Once the war began, Dana continued, many of the younger German dramatists went enthusiastically into battle, and then became quickly revolted by what they encountered there. Out of their experiences came a significant number of powerful anti-war dramas--few of which were permitted performances during the war years. Among the plays which he cited in this context were Before the Decision and A Generation, by Fritz von Unruh; The Son, The Savior and an adaptation of the Antigone, by Walter Hansclever; an adaptation of The Trojan Woman, by Franz Werfel; Ernst Toller's Transfiguration; and Bertolt Brecht's Drums in the Night.

The French dramatists, wrote Dana, were even more filled with war-hatred than were the Germans. There were, in fact, quite a few plays written in France, in which French wives and children killed their husbands or parents who were either Germans or German sympathizers. "Catholicism, Capitalism, Militarism were triumphant in the French theatres during the war."[89] French drama which had once been known

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[87] Ibid

[88] Ibid.

[89] Ibid., p. 13.

for its brightness and lightness of touch, became grimly serious once the war began.

In London, on the contrary, the theatres became more gay--a place to go to forget the war. A type of drama which Dana called "a New Restoration Comedy" became typical on the English Stage. And, in England, as in France and Germany, the majority of important dramatists supported the war effort and signed a document attesting to their patriotic feelings that was almost an exact counterpart of the manifesto signed by the intellectuals in Germany. Bernard Shaw--who stood practically alone--was the only English dramatist who took a stand against the World War. Shaw wrote a number of plays, including the powerful Heartbreak House, as an expression of his dissent, said Dana.

Starting in 1924, ten years after the beginning of the war, anti-war plays, such as What Price Glory? by Anderson and Stallings; Journey's End, by R. C. Sherrif; All Quiet on the Western Front, by Remarque; and Piscator's version of Brave Soldier Schweig began to be produced commercially, on the same stages in America, France, England and Germany that had been used as vehicles for supporting the war.

Dana felt that there was a lesson to be learned from studying the drama and the theatre as it functioned during the war:

> . . . One thing becomes clear. The theatre is a weapon. During the last World War . . . the theatres were used as a weapon in the hands of the militarists, the munition profiteers and the bankers--a weapon for war propaganda.

> Almost every effort to counteract this in the theatre seemed hopelessly sentimental, disorganized, and isolated. The aloofness of the bourgeois theatres from the working class, the absence of any well organized workers' theatres, the lack of any international organization of revolutionary theatres, all make any effective protest impossible. It is only by a United Front of dramatists with the working-class, by the building up of large audiences everywhere for workers' theatres, and by uniting these efforts internationally that the theatre can be made a powerful weapon in the fight against fascism and war.[90]

New Theatre continued to attempt to involve theatre professionals in the Popular Front anti-war movement. In June 1935, the magazine's editors announced that a "$200 Prize Play Contest" for anti-war and anti-fascist plays was being co-sponsored by the New Theatre League and the American League Against War and Fascism. The sponsors of the contest were clearly interested in having the prospective participating playwrights write their plays according to the methodology of socialist realism. They were not interested in the sheer emotionalism of melodrama; nor would they accept agit-prop plays: "There is an abundance of sob-stuff about war; and plenty of slogans about fascism. This is not what we need. We must have real people in our plays; they must project social truth through motivated characters and imaginative realism. This is the job facing our playwrights."[91]

Private Hicks, a one act play by Albert Maltz was the winning play in the anti-war/anti-fascist prize play

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[90] Ibid., p. 32.

[91] "A $200 Prize Play Contest," New Theatre, June, 1935, p. 25.

contest. The play, which was published in the January 1936 New Theatre, is about a young National Guardsman who dramatically refuses (by throwing down his rifle) to obey his commander's orders to fire on a group of strikers. Hicks' example convinces several of his comrades to act in a like manner; and, at the end of the play, the dissident guardsmen plan to distribute leaflets which will explain their action and, hopefully, engender further support.

Herbert Kline wrote an enthusiastic article about the prize-winning Maltz play for the same issue of New Theatre in which the play appeared. Kline said that Private Hicks had created the greatest stir in "new theatre" circles, since Waiting for Lefty (one year earlier). In fact, wrote Kline, there were some critics who believed that the Maltz play had greater propaganda value and could appeal to broader audiences than could Lefty. Kline said that Private Hicks was being produced by groups all over the country, and he urged other professional playwrights to follow the example of Odets, Paul Green and Maltz, in writing plays for production by "little" theatre groups.[92] One group that produced Private Hicks--in May 1936--was the Theatre Collective.

"An Open Letter to Playwrights" was published in the March 1936 New Theatre, and called for short plays to fight "war and reaction." There were, according to the "letter"

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[92]Herbert Kline, "Private Hicks," New Theatre, January, 1936, p. 33.

three hundred small theatres throughout the country which were in need of such plays. The response to Waiting for Lefty and Private Hicks (the most serviceable plays of the new theatre movement) was almost desperate in its eagerness," the letter continued. "Six weeks after we published "Private Hicks" [sic] seventeen requests for production rights had been received."[93]

Bury the Dead, a long one-act play by Irwin Shaw was published in New Theatre in April 1936--almost as if in response to the "Open Letter to Playwrights" that had appeared in the magazine the previous month. The basic situation of Bury the Dead is quite similar to that in Hans Chlumberg's World War I anti-war drama, Miracle at Verdun: a group of soldiers refuse to remain buried and are rejected--for various and diverse reasons--by their "loved ones" who cannot bear to hear what the soldiers have to tell them about war. The Shaw play is, however, written in an expressionistic style (as opposed to the realism of the earlier play) and the potential impact of this less literal work seems, to me, to be far greater.

According to the editorial in the April 1936 New Theatre, Bury the Dead (which had already opened on Broadway that month, in a production by the Actors Repertory Company) had been received with enthusiasm that had only been surpassed

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[93]"An Open Letter to Playwrights," New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 3.

by the reception given to Waiting for Lefty. The play had been published in that month's issue of the magazine, the editors said, in the hope that it would spur the anti-war movement: "Bury the Dead should stir two particular classes of people into action: the students, and all those who depend on their own labor, manual or otherwise, for their living. Their lives and labor will be forfeit in the next war."[94]

An unsigned article entitled, "'Bury the Dead': A Hollywood Preview," appeared in the May 1936 New Theatre. Shaw's play had been given public reading on March 29--for a meeting of twelve hundred members of the film colony--in order to stimulate interest in the upcoming production of the play by the Contemporary Theatre of Los Angeles. Frederic March, Florence Eldridge and John Cromwell had read the play to the assembled audience; and Donald Ogden Stewart had served as Chairman for a discussion of the play that followed.

The general response to Bury the Dead, at the meeting described above, was enthusiastic. Despite some dispute over the question of whether or not Shaw should have been more specific in the play, by explaining what could be done to prevent the next war, the general audience reaction to Bury the Dead was much the same as that of Clifford Odets, who said: "What we are doing here when we all come here, when our writers write plays like this one, when our actors

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[94]Editorial, New Theatre, April, 1936, p. 3.

and directors are interested enough to read them, is making ourselves an outpost of civilization. (Applause.) And what I think we will all agree upon is that more and more of our kind of people must push forward until that outpost of civilization covers the whole damn world."[95]

Stewart concluded the meeting by asking the audience to support the Contemporary Theatre of Los Angeles, as well as the other theatres of the New Theatre League. He also asked for contributions from the Hollywood audience--one-half to be given to the Contemporary Theatre; one-half to be given to New Theatre magazine--to which he further suggested the audience members should subscribe.

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There were few reports, in New Theatre, of specific incidents of censorship in the theatre, prior to the May 1935 issue of the magazine. In "The Censors See Red," that month, Richard Pack stated that the performances of several plays had recently been suppressed, on the grounds of being immoral and dangerous. Pack cited three occasions, in the past month, when the performances of plays had been prevented: In Boston, Waiting for Lefty was suppressed by a police ban, and four members of the cast were arrested; in Philadelphia, the New Theatre Players' production of Too Late To Die was closed on a trumped up fire hazard charge; and, in New Haven, the

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[95] "'Bury the Dead': A Hollywood Preview," New Theatre, May, 1936, p. 8.

Board of Education had revoked its permission for Waiting for Lefty to be performed in the public schools. "With increasing rapidity," wrote Pack,

> . . . theatre workers and theatre goers are being taught that wherever a play appears which contains a clear statement of the facts of American life, reactionary authorities are likely to attempt to prevent its showing. The authorities have not yet co-ordinated a definite censorship procedure but they have power and will use it to protect the status quo with disregard for fundamental rights or cultural values. Immediate mass protests that speak without fear and reach the audience who want these plays can stop this censorship from above.[96]

Pack referred to incidents of censorship in other cities as well. Workers' theatres in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Rock Island, Illinois, Kansas City and Washington, D.C., he claimed, had been harassed by the authorities in the past several months. In New York City, the previous December, according to Pack, the Commissioner of Licenses had notified the League of New York Theatres that he wanted tickets to the previews of all shows being presented by League members, in order that "all necessary changes" could be made before the plays opened.[97]

"Significantly," declared Pack, "the censorship in the theatre has increased, since the Catholic Church, through the Legion of Decency, started the campaign to 'clean up' the screen."[98] The radio, Pack reminded his New Theatre

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[96]Richard Pack, "The Censors See Red," New Theatre, May, 1935, p. 5.

[97]Ibid., p. 6. [98]Ibid.

readers, was already under Federal control, since the Federal Communications Commission had the power to license all broadcasting stations.

Opposition to censorship had crystallized in a new organization: the Committee Against Theatre Censorship, which had its temporary headquarters at the address of the New Theatre League. The Committee Against Theatre Censorship had been endorsed by many other organizations--including the Theatre Union, the New Theatre League, the Group Theatre and the American Union Against Reaction--and had branches in Boston, New Haven, Chicago and Philadelphia. Among the prominent theatre people and critics who had also endorsed the Committee, Pack listed: Brooks Atkinson, Anita Block, Roman Bohnen, Albert Bein, John Mason Brown, Michael Blankfort, William Boehnel, Clifton Fadiman, Bennett Cerf, Joseph Wood Krutch, Bruce Bliven, John Howard Lawson, Clifford Odets, Lawrence Langer, Elmer Rice and Richard Watts Jr.[99]

Pack ended his article by urging all theatres to be alive to the issue of censorship and by suggesting that all theatres should consider affiliating with the New Theatre League, "which has as part of its broad program the resolution to struggle against war, fascism and censorship. Only by united mass action can the censors be defeated!"[100]

Bulletins about individual incidents of censorship in the commercial theatre, on the Federal Theatre Projects,

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[99]Ibid., p. 7

[100]Ibid.

and in the non-professional workers' theatres continued to be published in the editorial section of New Theatre magazine. Among the contemporary plays which were objected to by the censors most frequently--judging from the reports published in New Theatre--were Sean O'Casey's Within the Gates, Waiting for Lefty, by Odets, and The Children's Hour, by Lillian Hellman.

Notes about the censorship of films, such as Chaplin's Modern Times, also appeared in the magazine. In August 1936, an article challenging the Pope's Encyclical on Films, by Robert Forsythe, was published in New Theatre. Commenting on Forsythe's piece and on the Encyclical, the magazine's editors wrote, "the road from censorship to the concentration camp is not a long one."[101] Another editorial comment on the subject of film censorship--in the September 1936 New Theatre--in relation to Nazi Germany, noted that US newsreels were only being permitted to show the Olympics, in Germany, as Hitler wanted them to be seen. Leni Reifenstahl had been appointed by Hitler to supervise the preparation of these newsreels.[102]

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New Theatre-New Theatre and Film maintained its commitment to the crusade against war and fascism throughout the duration of its publication. Notes concerning specific events in that struggle continued to be published in the

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[101]Editorials, New Theatre, August, 1936, p. 3.

[102]"Newsreel Muzzle," New Theatre, September, 1936, p. 3.

editorial columns, and articles on the subject also appeared in the magazine with regularity. In the January 1936 New Theatre, the editors reminded their readers that the third US Congress Against War and Fascism would be held in Cleveland that month. "A Congress Against War and Fascism is not a theoretical meeting," they declared. "It is the best practical way that you have of stopping the threat of reaction in America, and the present looming menace of world war."[103]

Also in the January 1936 New Theatre, the magazine's drama critic John Gassner was prompted by the recent visit to the United States by Luigi Pirandello, to comment on the work of the famous Italian playwright and on his public statement of support for Mussolini. It is interesting to notice the extent to which Gassner's assessment of Pirandello's work, at the time, was influenced by his opinion of the playwright's politics. Gassner wrote:

> Pirandello has been forced into a single channel that has narrowed his talent and stagnated it. We can pay him our tribute for contributing toward the liquidiation of the glib well-made play of the nineteenth century (though he has palpably substituted a glibness of his own) and for relegating the ornately vapid dramas of D'Annunzio to the garbage can of ham histrionics. A certain historical importance pertains to this contribution . . . but only a professional apologist can find the great majority of his work vital or even more than moderately readable. His passiveness and defeatism, which have made his plays caustic and inconclusive, seem to have also scarred him as a man; his recent arbitrary support of Italian imperialism and fascist ambitions is an indication of this sad condition. . . .[104]

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[103]Editorials, New Theatre, January, 1936, p. 3.

[104]John W. Gassner, "On Pirandello," New Theatre, January, 1936, p. 37.

H. W. L. Dana wrote an essay about his "Impressions of Nazi Drama," for the September 1936 New Theatre. Theatre in Germany was, by the time of this essay, completely subordinated to the demands of Hitler. Dana said that the degree to which theatre had become a tool of fascism was made clear by the fact that control over the theatre in Germany had recently been transferred from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Propaganda. "There are those who still insist that the Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Dictatorship of Fascism come to the same thing," wrote Dana. "Yet, if in no other way, the essential difference can be tested by the widening of culture in the Soviet Union and the narrowing of culture in Nazi Germany."[105]

At the time of Dana's article, the struggle between fascism and communism was already taking place on a very concrete level--in Spain. The first mention, in New Theatre, of the Spanish Civil War, was in the September 1936 issue of the magazine. Angela Enters, a dancer and mime, wrote a piece for the magazine, entitled, "Spain Says 'Salud!'"--based on her impressions of the war between the Fascists and the Loyalists which had broken out in the little town of Malaga, on July 18, 1936. "This is a last-ditch war to the death--for life--by the Spanish people," wrote Enters. "They

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[105]H. W. L. Dana, "Impressions of Nazi Drama," New Theatre, September, 1936, p. 14.

will win."[106] Commenting on the Enters' article, and on the struggle in Spain, the New Theatre editors wrote, " . . . whatever the success of General Franco's mercenaries, one fact is certain: the people of Malaga, of all the towns like Malaga in Spain, will never submit to fascist tyranny and rule."[107]

Angel Flores and Ben Ossa wrote a guest editorial on "Spain 1936--The Theatre in Arms!" for the November 1936 New Theatre. For the first time, they wrote, Spain now has a people's theatre. "This acting company comprises newspapermen, teachers, painters, and workers--all in military uniforms, rifles slung around their shoulders."[108] The actors in this theatre engage in street fighting, while preparing their plays which they perform in hospitals, orphans' homes, and in similar settings. Before concluding their article on the new people's theatres in Spain, Flores and Ossa asked the essential questions relating to the war which had prompted the birth of those theatres:

> Will Spain have an opportunity to carry out the progressive program that promised new economic, social and cultural gains to the Spanish people? Or will Franco and Mola's mercenaries, with the aid of German, Italian and Portu-

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[106]Angela Enters, "Spain Says 'Salud!,'" New Theatre, September, 1936, p. 28.

[107]Editorials, New Theatre, September, 1936, p. 3.

[108]Angel Flores and Ben Ossa, "Spain 1936--The Theatre in Arms!" New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 3.

> guese fascists, destroy the Spanish people's government and set up a fascist dictatorship instead? These questions should concern every American. 'It' can happen here and everywhere, if fascism is permitted to extend its power in country after country, with the hypocritical acquiescence of democratic nations. After Italy, Germany. After Germany, Austria. After Austria, Spain? After Spain . . . ?[109]

The answers to the persistent and eloquent questions posed by Angel Flores and Ben Ossa are now, of course, a part of history. They were not answered during the remaining short period of the magazine's publication. The November 1936 New Theatre was the last issue of the magazine under that name--its publication was then suspended for three months.

When the magazine resumed publication, it was as New Theatre and Film, and Herbert Kline, its editor, had resigned, in order to go to Spain and serve as a war correspondent for The New Masses. An article by Ralph Bates, "Teatro Espanol," about the murder of Garcia Lorca by the Fascists, and the developing people's theatres in war-torn Spain, was published in March 1937 New Theatre and Film. No further articles about the struggle against war, fascism and censorship were included in that issue, or in the final edition of the magazine, the April 1937 New Theatre and Film.

Surely a crusade that is as all-encompassing and yet intangible as the fight against war, fascism and censorship cannot be "lost" or "won" by a magazine, or even by a rather

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[109] Ibid.

well coordinated protest movement. The United States did not go to war until 1941. But the great vehemence with which the anti-war crusade was waged by Workers Theatre and then New Theatre and finally New Theatre and Film, had little or nothing to do with this country's policy of neutrality during the period of the magazines' crusading. When Workers Theatre first began to warn its readers about the possibility of a United States war against the Soviet Union, the actual likelihood of such a war was certainly nonexistent. Even as events unfolded in Germany--and Workers Theatre and then New Theatre continued to rail against the possibility of US involvement in another World War--the idea of such an involvement was also an anathema to the majority of the American people.

American anti-war sentiment was widespread in the nineteen thirties. A Gallup Poll in 1935 reported that seventy-one percent of the citizens surveyed were opposed to US participation in a European war[110]; sixty-four percent of the Americans who, in May 1940, were asked the Gallup question, "Do you think the US should keep out of war or do everything possible to help England, even at the risk of getting into war ourselves?" responded that the country should stay out of the conflict.[111] The anti-war agitation by the Left was not really a significant factor in keeping

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[110]William Manchester, The Glory and The Dream: A Narrative History of America, 1932-1972 (2 vols., Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), I, 151.

[111]Ibid., p. 277.

the United States out of a war during the thirties. It took a Pearl Harbor to get the country into World War II.

In the four years between the final issue of New Theatre and Film and the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, several events (the Dies Committee investigations, the termination of the Federal Theatre Project, the Hitler-Stalin non-aggression pact) had transpired which had had the effect of radically changing the number of adherents to and the policies of the American Left. There was, for example, no left-wing theatre movement of any import, by December, 1941. And many of the individuals who had been adament pacifists in the early days of Workers Theatre and New Theatre were ready to go (and did go) marching off to World War II.

Although Workers Theatre and New Theatre campaigned against censorship in the theatre during 1932, 1933 and 1934, no reports of theatre censorship in this country were published in the magazine until 1935. By that year, the workers' theatre movement had broadened considerably, had acquired some powerful plays, and had begun to reach a wider audience. Censorship in the film industry was an accepted fact of life in 1935. After all, at that time, ". . . 85 million Americans went to the movies, a large part of them as families. . . ."[112] Theatre censorship did not really become a significant issue, however, until 1936, when the

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[112]Ibid., pp. 143-144.

Federal Theatre Project began to reach its vast new audience and the substance of its output began to be of concern to many US legislators.

In other words: theatre censorship did not become a palpable threat until individuals in high and powerful places began to feel threatened by certain types of material which they then set out to censor. If the left-wing theatre movement had not decided to support and to become involved in the Federal Theatre Project, then the activities of the Project would not have been found to be "un-American," and the Project would probably not have been so abruptly terminated by Congress.

This brings us to the question of fascism. The "It" of Sinclair Lewis' famous novel did not happen here. Fascism did not come to this country--at least not on any grand scale. "It" did however, happen here for many of the activists in the left-wing theatre movement. Starting in 1938, with the Dies Committee investigation into "un-American activities" on the Federal Theatre Project, and on through the nineteen fifties, the names, the deeds, and various interpretations of the deeds of many of the individuals who read, wrote for, and were written about in Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, became part of the Congressional Record. The extent of the effect of these investigations and their subsequent repercussions, on the lives of the investigated

and their families can never be adequately measured.[113]

[113]Two important sources on the subject of the investigations and the effects of the investigations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities are Walter Goodman's The Committee (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968) and Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968, by Eric Bentley (New York: The Viking Press, 1971).

CHAPTER V

AESTHETICS AND CRITICAL POSITION: THIRD PERIOD DOGMATISM

> A workers' theatre must be based upon three principles. First it must awaken class consciousness leading to organization; second it must go to the masses rather than waiting for the masses to come to it, and third, it must have a mass appeal. . . .
>
> . . . These three principles also determine the 'content' the 'form' and the 'style' that our intellectuals talk about so much and understand so little.
>
> --from "Basic Principles," by Albert Prentis, in Workers Theatre, May 1931, p. 1.

Throughout the years of the magazines' publication, the problem of formulating a viable aesthetic for the developing left-wing theatre was foremost among the considerations of the contributors and staff of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film. How could the desired audience of workers best be reached? What style of writing was most suited to the new revolutionary content? How much attention should be concentrated on creating polished artistic productions? What, precisely, was the place of art in this theatre of propaganda? And, finally, what should the relationship be between the left-wing theatre and the "bourgeois" professional theatre? These were among the questions that were raised and debated by the editors and contributors to the

magazines during the six and one-half years of their existence.

As might be expected, the answers offered to the various questions changed, in general accordance with the frequently changing policies of the American Communist Party and the Comintern in Moscow. As the American Communist movement evolved, expanding its scope and its outlook, the approach of the left-wing theatre to the issues of art and aesthetics also broadened.

The developing aesthetic position of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film is evident not only in the articles which dealt with the specific questions of form, style, content and the like, but also in the pieces written for the magazines about the different aspects of theatre technique, such as playwriting, directing and acting. The reviews of the contemporary theatrical productions, as well as the plays that were chosen for publication in the magazines, also reflected their evolving aesthetic principles as well as the aesthetic outlook of the entire left-wing theatre movement, during the nineteen-thirties.

1931

The Aesthetic Debate

As I have explained in Chapter I, when Workers Theatre first appeared in 1931, under the auspices of the Workers Laboratory theatre, the WLT was operating with the aid of the communist Workers International Relief organization. The

American Communist Party, at that time, and since 1929, was following the rigorous specifications of the Comintern's highly orthodox and doctrinaire Third Period Policy. This policy stipulated strict adherence to all of the tenets of communism. No disagreement with the Party line was tolerated; and the closer any individual or group came to the party policy--but without accepting it in its entirety--the greater the enemy of the Party this "dissident" was considered to be. There was no possibility of making concessions to accomodate liberal, progressive or other anti-fascist groups. And, as might be expected, no attempt was made to mask Party propaganda or even to make the propaganda more palatable for those uncommitted individuals who might be leaning towards leftist positions. The discussions, in Workers Theatre, about how to best use the theatre arts as weapons in the revolutionary class struggle, all reflected the influence of the Third Period Policy of the American Communist Party.

An article entitled, "Wanted: A Technique for the Workers Theatre in America," by Sidney Ball of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, appeared in the June 1931 third issue of Workers Theatre. In this article, Ball discussed the conclusions that he had reached as a result of having studied many plays used successfully by workers' theatres in Germany and Russia. In these plays, said Ball, realism has been discarded. The characters who are played by workers, are represented simply: a capitalist, for example, wears a high

hat as an indication of his social position. Lines are delivered in a straight-forward, natural manner. There has been no attempt at creating atmosphere in these plays, Ball wrote. Discussion and propaganda constitute the major portion of their content.[1]

"On Breaking Thro' the Proscenium," by Jack Shapiro, another member of the WLT, was also included in the June 1931 Workers Theatre. Shapiro's thinking was quite similar to that of Sidney Ball. He spoke about the growing dissatisfaction with the "conventional peepshow concept of theatre."[2] The bourgeois attempts to break through the proscenium and to unite actor, play, and audience, had all been unsuccessful, Shapiro observed. The revolutionary theatre, however, had had no such problem in attaining that goal: to begin with, there was generally no proscenium where the plays were performed; and furthermore, the aspirations and worries of the actors and the audience were the same because the actors were workers. What theatrical tools should be used? asked Shapiro. The audience must share in the plays and the action should not be restricted to the stage, he answered.

As of August 1931, Workers Theatre was published the United Theatres of New York--a loose affiliation of the

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[1]Sidney Ball, "Wanted: A Technique for the Workers' Theatre in America," Workers Theatre, June, 1931, p. 5.

[2]Jack Shapiro, "On Breaking Thro' the Proscenium," Workers Theatre, June, 1931, p. 7.

German-speaking Prolet-Buehne and the original publisher of the magazine, the Workers Laboratory Theatre. An interesting contrast between the American group, the WLT, and the German Prolet-Buehne, is evident when one compares the articles written by the members of the two groups, as well as the reviews of their productions and the scripts from their repertoires which appeared in the magazine.

Although the members of both groups were staunchly committed to the Communist struggle, the German group, headed by John Bonn and his wife Anne Howe, was considerably more militant and doctrinaire than their American colleagues. The sole method used and espoused by the Prolet-Buehne was the stylized, somewhat expressionistic agit-prop (agitation and propaganda) play. Although the WLT also used the agit-prop form, the group continually experimented to find new methods and always consciously endeavored to use popular entertainment forms, such as vaudeville, burlesque and the musical comedy.

So long as the Third Period Policy of the Communist Party was in effect, the aesthetic views of the members of the Prolet-Buehne and the WLT were given equal emphasis in Workers Theatre. As the Popular Front outlook began to be adopted, around September 1933, when Workers Theatre was succeeded by New Theatre, fewer articles by Bonn and his followers appeared in the magazine. It seems to have been more difficult for them to drop the overtly "schematic," "leftist" tone that was slowly becoming unacceptable. Al-

though Bonn and the members of the Prolet-Buehne were active in the New Theatre League when that organization was formed, their activity became increasingly less visible as the left-wing movement was thrown open in order to appeal to all anti-fascist progressives.

An article excerpted from a report delivered by John Bonn at the Workers' Cultural Convention, held in New York City on June 14, 1931, appeared in the August 1931 Workers Theatre. One of Bonn's main points--and a view which he was to retract in the future--was that, "We cannot learn from the Bourgeois Theatre. We have to build up from the bottom, learning by experience and Self-criticism."[3]

After discussing workers' theatres in Germany and Russia, Bonn considered the shortcomings of the workers' threatres in America. He spoke of three main types of workers' theatre groups: the bourgeois, the compromise, and the agit-prop group. The bourgeois group, Bonn said, neglects propaganda and expends all of its energies in trying to be too artistic. The compromise type of group realizes that agitation and propaganda are the purpose of workers' theatre, but tries to accomplish these aims through the old bourgeois methods. The agit-prop group, because it is in the early stages of its development, is the least artistic type of workers' theatre. But, Bonn declared, from the political standpoint,

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[3]John Bonn, "Report at the Workers' Cultural Convention," Workers Theatre, August, 1931, p. 2.

the agit-prop group was the strongest of the three types of groups.

In order to become an effective force in the class struggle, Bonn emphasized that the groups had to find a way to reach the masses and to establish closer contact with the workers. Furthermore, there was the need to find the style and the method of work which would make it possible for them to activate their audiences. In order to build a strong workers' theatre movement, Bonn said that it was essential for the groups to develop clear and elementary plays and to experiment with collective playwriting. A design for a technical apparatus that could be used in any location--thus making it possible for the groups to perform in locales that had no stage--was also needed. The article concluded with Bonn's calling for the formation of a Workers Dramatic Union of the USA.

Albert Prentis, a member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, wrote an article for the September 1931 Workers Theatre on "The Relationship Between Content and Form." Prentis saw the aim of the workers' theatre in exactly the same way as did John Bonn: to propagandize the masses to unite and fight for evolutionary change. In order to accomplish this goal, however, Prentis recommended an entirely different method of performance, one which would become, "a communal rite, not unlike the primitive dances or religious ceremonies during which solo actors appeared in their midst

and by means of enacted incidents in the struggle for existence, tried to arouse the spectators to participate in the rite, to take part in the struggle."[4]

Audience participation, in the opinion of Prentis, was the key to effective audience propagandizement. Without such participation, a performance was incomplete. Solo actors should be trained so that they would be inspiring to an audience; and the audience had to be trained, too, so that it would be capable of responding. "Since one of the effects of a theatrical performance in the identification of the audience with the performers," Prentis continued, "we must produce our plays in such a manner as to help our audience towards that effect."[5] Prentis suggested that performances should be given in places where the workers felt at home. The curtain between the actor and the audience was to be torn down and the actors would perform amidst the audience. The language and psychological barriers between the actors and the audience had to be broken down. Plays should be written in the dialects of their intended audiences and should deal with situations familiar to them. If the audience is familiar with the material of the play and identifies with the actors, Prentis argued, the experiences of the play will become integrated into its thinking. But, if the audience feels that it is only watching

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[4]Albert Prentis, "The Relationship Between Content and Form," Workers Theatre, September, 1931, p. 10.

[5]Ibid., p. 10.

a theatrical performance, the message of the play will not be thoroughly assimilated and it will be forgotten.

"The aim of a theatrical performance," wrote Prentis, "is to act upon as many of our senses as possible in order to impress upon our memory a certain experience. . . . A non-realistic performance, say a mass recitation by its very nature affects primarily one sense and it is weaker to that extent."[6] Prentis emphasized that the realism of which he was writing was not the same as the realism of Belasco. The settings, for example, should just suggest locales and the audience could be expected to fill in the rest with its imagination. But symbolism is only effective when the audience is familiar with the symbols that are being used, Prentis maintained. "At the present stage of our theatre," he wrote, "each character must display his characteristics in a realistic manner. As we become acquainted with our stock characters, we will know at once by the mere mention of their name, by their mere appearance, what they are symbols of. . . . Thus the realism of today will merge into the Symbolism of tomorrow."[7]

"Narrowing the Field of the Workers' Theatres," by N. Buchwald--a member of the Yiddish-speaking workers' theatre group, the Artef--appeared in the October 1931 Workers Theatre, and was apparently written as a response to the

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[6]Ibid., p. 11.

[7]Ibid., p. 12.

article by John Bonn that had appeared in the August issue of the magazine. Buchwald, like Prentis, was in agreement with John Bonn over the purpose of the workers' theatre. And he also disagreed with some of Bonn's attitudes and methods of work. To begin with, Buchwald felt that Bonn underestimated the effect of the bourgeois theatre on the masses. This theatre certainly did propagandize them, he said. It functioned, "to imbue the masses with a spirit of loyalty and devotion to the political, social, economic and ethical institutions and standards of the ruling class, to keep the masses safe for capitalism."[8] Bonn was wrong in treating the bourgeois theatre with such disdain, Buchwald asserted, because the bourgeois theatre had the masses on its side and the workers' theatre should be concerned with how to get the masses over to its own position. "We must . . . examine the bourgeois theatre very closely," wrote Buchwald, "learn the methods it employs in its propaganda, learn and as far as possible--adopt the techniques it uses in making its propaganda effective."[9]

Referring to the section of Bonn's article in which the latter had spoken about the three types of workers' theatres, Buchwald took issue with Bonn's insistence on the agit-prop method as the only one appropriate for the purposes of the workers' theatre. "There is something in the theory

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[8]N. Buchwald, "Narrowing the Field of the Workers' Theatres," Workers Theatre, October, 1931, p. 7.

[9]Ibid., p. 8.

and practice of the so-called agit-prop theatre that makes a virtue of primitivism," he wrote. "The insistence on simple form, on banishing scenery, lighting effects, make-up and even expert acting--all this smacks very much of formalism gone wrong."[10] The agit-prop method was too narrow a conception and was not the only right method for the workers' theatre. Finally, and no doubt in defense of his own group, the Artef, Buchwald said that it was wrong to "minimize the great potentialities of proletarian 'art' groups in the field of effective revolutionary propaganda theatre."[11]

So, by the publication of the October 1931 Workers Theatre, all of the standard questions in the perennial and ageless debate over how to best reach an audience and influence its actions had been already raised. Should the audience be approached through its emotions or its intellect? What amount of aesthetic distance is most conducive to an audience's being reached? Is the identification of the audience with the characters in the play helpful for driving home the desired lesson? If so, is audience involvement best achieved through audience participation? Or, should the audience be taught directly, as if at school in the theatre? All of this discussion notwithstanding, for the time being, the debate was being settled abroad, in the Soviet Union.

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[10]Ibid.

[11]Ibid., p. 9.

The First Enlarged Plenum of the International Workers Dramatic Union met in Moscow, from June 25 to July 2, 1931. Heinrich Diament, Secretary of the Comintern, addressed the Plenum, and a report of his speech, including some rather clumsily translated passages from it, was prepared for the December 1931 Workers Theatre, by Bernard Reines--a member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre who attended the conference. Discussing the development of workers' theatres in several capitalist countries, Diament is quoted by Reines as having said:

> A process of transformation of stationary workers' theatres into agit-prop groups is proceeding in various countries (France, America, Belgium). This process shows: a) that the proletariat cannot, in conditions of a capitalist society, create its own stable economically secured theatre; b) that the workers' theatre, which has come out of the womb of the working class, has to win anew the lost confidence of the working masses. It wins this confidence by going to the masses. THE BASIS OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WORKERS' THEATRE IS THAT FORM WHEREBY IT GOES THERE WHERE THE MASSES ARE TO BE FOUND. (emphasis B. Reines) The growth of confidence in such theatrical forms may lead to it that under certain conditions, the masses will one fine day return to the stationary theatre...[12]

In his speech, Diament voiced concern over the insufficient artistic and political education of the members of the individual workers' theatre sections. He criticized the slowness of the transition to agit-prop methods, particularly in Belgium and America. He also spoke of the fact that the revolutionary movement as a whole had tended to underestimate the potential of the workers' theatres. Diament said that he

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[12] B. Reines, "Report from the First Enlarged Plenum of the International Workers Dramatic Union, Workers Theatre, December, 1931, p. 2

regretted the lack of a central revolutionary cultural organization in most capitalist countries.

Among the Secretary's recommendations were the following: a single national center for the workers' theatres should be established in each country, and revolutionary competitions between the various groups should be held. The workers' theatre groups should adapt their work to the political campaigns and to the local economic struggles of the proletariat. Courses in Marxism should be offered for the members of the groups. And finally, Diament felt that a new repertoire of revolutionary plays was needed in each country.

Reines concluded his report by observing, "It is plain that the workers' theatre in America is yet far from being a mass weapon of the working class. A beginning has been made in a few places."[13]

Hallie Flanagan, at the time the director of the Experimental Theatre at Vassar College, wrote an article about the workers' theatre movement, entitled "A Theatre is Born," for the November 1931 Theatre Arts Monthly. Albert Prentis wrote an answer to Flanagan's article for the December 1931 Workers Theatre, which he titled "Our Theatre is Born." In his article, Prentis maintained that Flanagan had written her piece with sympathy, if not understanding, when she had said that the workers' theatres were "'childish,

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[13]Ibid., p. 3.

repetitious, violent and lack art,'" but that they were pleasing to their audiences. Flanagan, Prentis wrote,

> . . . does not seem to grasp the fact that we have a new factor in our theatre, a new actor in our plays that the other theatre has not--the audience. By making the audience participate in our performance, by giving expression to their wishes, we eliminate the necessity of putting into our productions that 'art,' those fine touches that the bourgeois theatre looks for. . . . If we cannot get literary plays, we get along without them, we can paint our characters with single strokes. We do not need revolving stages or make-up or elaborate sets; we merely suggest, the audience amplifies the remainder far better than all our realism could do. . . . Our theatre is the expression of the audience itself; . . . in our theatre the audience receives symbolic fulfillment of its wishes and hopes. . . .[14]

Theatre Technique

The approaches to the various theatre arts that were advocated by the contributors to Workers Theatre, during the first year of its publication, also reflected the hard-line political thinking that was basic to the magazine's philosophy. An article on the methods of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, by Harry Ober, appeared in the first issue of Workers Theatre, in April, 1931.

In speaking of the need to substitute the principle of group cooperation for that of individual gain, Ober wrote, "The individuality of the author, director, as well as actor accounts for very little. Our aim: the presentation of the class struggle as clearly as possible is our only guide."[15]

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[14]Albert Prentis, "Our Theatre is Born," Workers Theatre, December, 1931, p. 6.

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

Furthermore, Ober stated that, "Any person who makes himself indispensable, irreplaceable and monopolizes all important functions is regarded as a bureaucrat and a dangerous element."[16]

An article by Bernard Reines in the next issue of Workers Theatre described "The Collective Method in the Workers' Theatre." Reines reported that all plays were written for the Workers Laboratory Theatre by a playwriting committee that was comprised of all interested members of the group. The committee chose the subject for the play, and there was a general discussion about the phases of the subject which would be covered in it. One comrade wrote the dialogue, and then the written play was discussed by the committee. The play was next submitted to the executive committee of the WLT and finally to the general membership, for questions and suggestions.[17]

Another member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, Harry Elion, contributed an article on "Experience in Collective Playwriting," to the September 1931 Workers Theatre. Elion felt that the collective method, if used correctly, could be very effective. "The workers' theatre uses the day to day events of the class struggle for its material," he wrote. "The ideas used are often ideas created by the forces of the class struggle. For this reason the scientific approach to

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[16]Ibid., p. 10.

[17]Bernard Reines, "The Collective Method in the Workers' Theatre," Workers Theatre, May, 1931, p.

playwriting is most essential."[18]

In a piece written on the same subject for the December 1931 issue of the magazine, Jack Shapiro spoke of the need to learn the "trade" of playwrighting because "our responsibilities are much greater than those of the bourgeois playwright."[19] Shapiro expressed certainty, moreover, that "we shall acquire eloquence and proficiency because he who has a message to carry must in time find the means and words to do so effectively."[20]

And what were the early workers' theatre plays like? What were the results of this "scientific" collective approach to playwrighting? Twenty-one playscripts were included in the nine issues of Workers Theatre published during 1931. In many cases, it is difficult to tell if the plays were written by individuals, or if they were arrived at collectively. There is a certain uniform simplicity of style and content in the majority of the plays; although in a few instances, the developing skill of a playwright is evident.

Several of the plays which appeared in Workers Theatre in 1931 are realistic sketches with uncomplicated plots, generalized stock characters who represent the various forces

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[18]Harry Elion, "Experience in Collective Playwrighting," Workers Theatre, September, 1931, p. 14.

[19]Jack Shapiro, "On Writing for the Workers' Theatre," Workers Theatre, December, 1931, p. 4a.

[20]Ibid.

involved in the workers' struggle for survival, and contrived conclusions, in which the workers are converted to the communist cause. Unemployed, the first play to be published in Workers Theatre, in April 1931, is an example of a play written in this manner.

There are six characters in Unemployed: the Capitalist, the Minister, ("Mr. Religious Dope"), the Labor Leader, the Worker and the Communist. This anonymous play, with its stock characters speaking extremely stilted dialogue, depicts the callousness of the Capitalist and all of his allies, in regard to the workers' plight. The Minister, a servant to the Capitalist, tries to placate the workers with religious platitudes. The Labor Leader collaborates with the Capitalist to keep the Worker in his place. The Communist enters and, in educating the worker, is the hero of the day. Called an agitator by the Labor Leader, he replies:

> Yes I am an agitator--an agitator for the fight against exploitation and oppression, an agitator for the freeing of the working class, an agitator against all misleaders who under the mask of friends of labor betray us to our exploiters. Yes I agitate for the defense of the Soviet Union, the only country in the world where there are no more exploiters, the only country in the world where the workers are free, the only country in the world where the worker rules.[21]

Unemployed ends with a call for organizing the workers' fight for unemployment insurance, followed by the audience and actors joining together in singing the Internationale--an ending typical of the early workers' theatre

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[21]Unemployed, Workers Theatre, April, 1931, p. 15.

plays.

I'll Tell You How to Vote, by Harry Elion, was included in the September 1931 Workers Theatre and is an illustration of the attempt by the Workers Laboratory Theatre to use popular entertainment forms for the expression of their own political content. The author's introduction to I'll Tell You How to Vote, reads as follows: "This material should be produced in review form. The various sketches, songs and the mass recital should be produced as one program. One worker can serve as a master of ceremonies. His task should be to link up the individual members and give the necessary unity to the whole program. He can introduce day to day news items in an interesting manner in speech or any other form. . . ."[22]

The message contained in the following excerpt from one of the songs in I'll Tell You How to Vote is the message intended by the play in its entirety:

> You often wonder why there's nothing to eat
> No shoes, no clothing, no milk or meat
> I'll tell you the reason, just stay in your seat
> It's cause there's too much goods and too much wheat.
>
> Workers are starving, nothing to eat
> 'Cause there's too much goods and too much wheat.
> They tell the farmer to stop growing more
> and better get ready for another big war.
> . . . . . .
> The miners are striking, the workers protest.
> They want to get rid of the awful pest
> That leaves the workers with nothing to eat,

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[22]Harry Elion, I'll Tell You How to Vote, Workers Theatre, September, 1931, p. 15.

'Cause there's too much goods and too much wheat.
HERE'S YOUR CHANCE, RAISE YOUR FIST.
SHOW YOUR STRENGTH. VOTE COMMUNIST.[23]

Step on It, by Tric, is one of the more effective of the early workers' theatre plays. The play is written in an expressionistic style and uses rhythmic sounds and speech to build up its momentum. The characters in the play are the Boss, Green, Muste, TUUL,[24] and five workers. The scene of the play is,

> A factory room. On the walls, at equal intervals from left to right are signs that read "NO ADMISSION," "NO SMOKING," "NO TALKING," "NO RESTING," "NO LOITERING." Five workers are placed along the rear wall with their backs to the audience, standing in front of a long shelf or bench, and one after another, in rhythmic intervals, they beat upon pieces of tin that make clinking sounds. If there is a curtain, the rhythmic clinking is heard before the curtain goes up. If there is no curtain, the clinking is heard without any other sound for two or three rounds. When the workers begin to talk they talk in a low voice that is scarcely audible for one round and then their voices grow louder.
> . . .
>
> Enter Boss at left
> Boss: Step on it, step on it, step on it! Faster, faster. One, two, one, two. That's the stuff. Step on it. (Exits at left)
> 1 Worker: I am sleepy
> 2 " : I am tired
> 3 " : I am sick.
> 4 " : My feet hurt
> 5 " : My head hurts
> 1 " : The wages have been cut.
> 2 " : The hours are longer.
> 3 " : We must work faster
> 4 " : The fines are bigger.
> 5 " : Lunch time is shorter.
> 1 " : Wage cut 10 per cent.
> 2 " : Sixty hours a week.

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[23] Ibid., p. 18.

[24] TUUL stands for the Trade Union Unity League--an organization of communist labor unions.

3 Worker: Output doubled.
4 " : 20 per cent more fines.
5 " : Fifteen minutes for lunch.
1 " : We work
2 " : and work
3 " : and work
4 " : and work
5 " : and work (etc. for three rounds). . . .[25]

The workers try to organize a strike, but their attempts are discouraged, first by Green, their union leader, then by Muste, a socialist, and finally, by the Priest. In the climactic scene, TUUL, a communist organizer, arrives and rallies the workers for what they must do. The play concludes with an unusual de-frocking scene and the triumph of the workers.

TUUL Org.: Comrades, is he eating by the sweat of his brow, this priest? He is feeding on your sweat, comrades. He is feeding on your blood. He is not your friend, comrades. He tells you lies to make you work for him. He is your enemy, he is the enemy, the enemy of the working class. Look!
(The TUUL Org. tears off the mask from the Priest's face and the cassock off his head, and Muste stands revealed.)

Muste: Help, help, I'm only here to help you. (The men leave their work and crowd around Muste. The TUUL Org. tears off Muste's dark glasses and his hat, and his cloak, and Green stands revealed.)

All the workers: It's William Green. We don't want him. Out with him. (They crowd around him to rush him outside.)

TUUL Org.: Wait a minute. Take off his cap and his sign. (Workers' Boss stands revealed.)

Boss: Now boys, now boys, get back to work. I'm the boss here.

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[25]Tric, Step on It, Workers Theatre, November, 1931, pp. 8-9.

All the workers: Why it's the Boss
We thought it was the Priest.
We thought it was William Green.
We thought it was Muste.
And it's the boss.
He still has clothes on.
Maybe it's still a disguise.
Maybe he's the devil
There is no devil. That's a priest's lie to frighten the workers.
Let's take off more clothes and see.
Take off his vest.
Take off his shoes.
Take off his shirt.
Take off his pants.
He's disappeared.
No here it is.
It's a rat.
Now it's a cockroach.
Now it's a bedbug.

ALL: STEP ON IT! STEP ON IT![26]

It is easy to imagine a production of this simple and yet extremely inventive play as being quite entertaining and also effective, insofar as communicating its intended lesson is concerned. The theatrical use of audio and visual devices, in addition to the spoken message of the play, contributes to the strength of the piece.

The mass recitation, in which the performers acting as a chorus, used chanting and group movements to get their message across to the audience, was another form that was frequently used in the early days of the workers' theatre movement. A rather fine example of this type of play is Lenin Calls, an anonymous mass recitation that was translated from German and published in the December 1931 Workers Theatre.

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[26]Ibid., pp. 12-13.

The potential of the mass recitation to evoke a mood and thereby affect an audience is well illustrated in the following excerpt from Lenin Calls:

Capitalist peace is WAR!
--War
--on the unemployed
--on the striking workers
ALL: War on the workers!
--Hear!
--See!
--Think!
--Awake!
--The bugles will blow
And drums will beat.
--Blows and shots
--Factory whistles
--With cries
Posters, banners, leaflets
--On both sides of the ocean.
All--The world will re-echo with Lenin's step
--Germany hears his step
All--Lenin
--And underground in the mines of Wales
All--Lenin
--Up and down the Yangtze he goes
All--Lenin
--Over rivers and seas
--Through mighty winds and primeval forests
--Far over the cloud-topped Himalayas
--Lenin
--Mighty, irresistible
--Lenin! Lenin! Lenin![27]

The impact of this recitation which was performed by a simply costumed chorus, using dramatic vocal effects and mass movements, was undoubtedly quite powerful.

The methods promoted for producing the early workers' theatre plays were generally in keeping with the form, style and content of the plays, as well as with the politics-over-

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[27]Lenin Calls, Workers Theatre, December, 1931, p. 11.

art approach to the theatre that was advocated in Workers Theatre. An article entitled "Training the Actor for the Proletarian Theatre," by H. Shapiro of the WLT, appeared in the July 1931 Workers Theatre and is an illustration of the pragmatic approach to theatre technique espoused by the magazine.

Shapiro stated that there were two important factors involved in the training of proletarian actors: the understanding of the purpose of the workers' theatre, and the perfecting of the actor's tools. In studying the history of the theatre, wrote Shapiro, "we find that the theatre in its healthy state, depends for the birth and development to its zenith, on its usefulness to the society of its time. Its chief purpose was to train subjects for their particular class in society, and training an actor meant to present a perfect specimen of a class as an example to the rest of the people in his class."[28] In order to be a good proletarian actor, Shapiro continued, the individual must first be "a good class-conscious worker equipped with Marxist-Leninist teachings and ready to fight for the cause of the working class."[29]

The actor's tools are his voice and his use of gestures. Shapiro said that the proletarian actor must

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[28]H. Shapiro, "Training the Actor for the Proletarian Theatre," Workers Theatre, July, 1931, p. 2.

[29]Ibid., p. 3.

develop his voice so that it can be easily heard and understood, whether he is performing in a hall, or on the streets. His aim should not be "to parade beautiful sounding diction, absolute professional pronunciation--a delicate nuance . . . ,"[30] but to make his pronunciation clear and to develop his vocal range. The proletarian actor's gestures are used, "not for the purpose of showing elegance, or graceful poses, but primarily for the purpose of emphasizing our words and teachings that they may be better understood."[31] Shapiro suggested some exercises which the amateur actors could use to improve their voices and their use of gestures.

Shapiro contended that, in portraying chracters,

> it is to be remembered that it is not necessary to portray a particular character but rather a class angle or conception of that character, which should not be difficult for a class conscious worker. The leading comrade therefore, must be careful not to force his or her conception of the character upon the actor, but rather the class angle--our angle, through the actor's own person. Under such conditions no compromise will be made with our teaching and, therefore, none with the aim or purpose of our theatre.[32]

In order to avoid a stilted delivery, Shapiro recommended that the actors do improvisations on the themes being presented in their plays. All rehearsals, he suggested, should start with improvisations. "In conclusion, comrades," wrote Shapiro, "let us remember that a sound ideology and a will to emancipate ourselves and our class are the greatest factors in our theatrical training."[33]

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Ibid.

[33]Ibid., p. 4.

John Bonn wrote an article on the "Problems of Play Directing" which was published, in three installments, in the October and December 1931 and January 1932 issues of Workers Theatre. Bonn's first point was that professional, skilled directors were not needed for workers' theatres and that agit-prop plays should be written in such a way that professional directors would not be necessary. But Bonn also emphasized that directing is not easy and requires much practice and experience. The most competent theatre workers were needed for the job of director. Bonn next considered the technique of directing a play.

"Directing," he wrote, "means to complete a play by its performance. . . . The playwright is only the co-author of the final work, the performance."[34] The other "co-authors" said Bonn, are the director, the actors, the designer and the composer. The director, therefore, should work on the playwriting committee. If he has not participated in writing the play, it is the director's job to adapt it to the special conditions of his group and to their prospective performance.

Workers' theatre plays, continued Bonn must be written to fit the apparatus of the workers' theatre. They should be written so as not to require much time for rehearsal. Short scenes which can be presented after only

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[34]John Bonn, "Problems of Play Directing," Workers Theatre, October, 1931, p. 5.

three or four rehearsals are best for the workers' theatre. It is best for there to be only a few characters in each play. These characters should be stock types, for there is no time for working on individual characterizations, in the workers' theatre.[35]

It is interesting to compare the early methods of the American workers' theatres with those of a workers' theatre group in Russia. A letter written to Workers Theatre, from the Semperante Theatre--an improvisational workers' theatre group in Moscow--concerning its methods of play production, appeared in the November 1931 number of the magazine. The letter had been written by A. V. Bykov and A. A. Levshin, the founders and co-directors of the theatre:

> Like all the theatres of improvisation that preceded us, Semperante is essentially a real revolutionary theatre, one reflecting the life and the ideology of the masses of the workers. . . . In the theatre of improvisation we come into contact with the real creation of the actor proper who creates both his thoughts and his words. And if one is filled with revolutionary ideology one cannot speak from the platform words or convey ideas foreign to that ideology. No matter what problem must be solved on the stage we will always approach it from the class angle.[36]

Because the Semperante was an improvisational theatre, it used scenarios as the basis for its performances, rather than completed scripts with dialogue. The group's approach

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[35]John Bonn, "Problems of Play Directing, Cont.," Workers Theatre, December, 1931, p. 7.

[36]"Letter from the Semperante," Workers Theatre, November, 1931, p. 3.

to the preparation of its scenarios, however, was very much the same as the collective playwrighting method that was used by the Workers Laboratory Theatre and the Prolet-Buehne for creating their scripts. The themes of the scenarios--"Themes of large social import: 'Socialist Construction,' 'sorties of the class enemy,' 'our slackening or weakening fronts. . . .'"[37]--were chosen by the group as a whole. The scenarios were then written by an individual group member, and finally, were submitted to the group for discussions and alterations.

The greatest difference between the methodology of the American workers' theatres and this Russian workers' theatre group, lay in their approach to characterization. Whereas the American worker-actors were being told to portray their characters, not as private individuals, but as stock types--from the class angle, their Russian counterparts, influenced, no doubt by the work of Stanislavsky, Nemirovitch-Dantchenko, and the Moscow Art Theatre, sought more individualized characterizations and approached their characters from the inside. "For perfect assimilation of the part," wrote Bykov and Levshin, "the actor must not only know all of the psychological characteristics of the characters, he must also know his biography."[38] Once the actors have the "images" of the characters prepared, the directors of the Semperante

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[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., p. 4.

explained, they become acquainted with each other in small skits, sometimes involving situations outside of the scenario. "We place ourselves in these studies into the various relationships and situations, trying to carry these situations to psychologically logical conclusions."[39]

Theatre Criticism

(A) The Commercial Stage

The principles of Marxist-Leninist theory and the Third Period policies of the American Communist Party served, not at all unexpectedly, as the aesthetic guidelines for the theatre criticism that was written for Workers Theatre, during 1931. In a preface to his review of Hans Chlumberg's play, Miracle at Verdun (the first review to appear in Workers Theatre), Albert Prentis addressed himself to the question of revolutionary theatre criticism:

> What principles must guide a proletarian writer when reviewing a play, especially one written presumably to criticize social evils? What must he look for, what must he point out, what must he criticize? . . .
> . . . . . .
> At a recent symposium directed by Harrison Jorge on the topic of 'Workers' Theatre' when the subject swung around to art, aesthetics, expressionism and other high falutinisms, someone in the audience stated the matter plainly by saying that the workers' theatre should be utilitarian--it should aim to carry the message of organization to the masses--and that utility of this theatre will determine its own technique and form. Also that all of the so-called arts of the theatre should be determined by theatre utilitarianism. . . .[40]

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[39] Ibid.

[40] Albert Prentis, review of Miracle at Verdun, Workers Theatre, May, 1931, p. 6-b.

Using the yardstick of utilitarianism to criticize the Theatre Guild production of the Chlumberg play--which he dubbed "The Mess at Verdun"--Prentis said that the idea of the play is good, but that it was poorly handled by a bourgeois playwright and director.

Miracle at Verdun is about the universal fatalistic acceptance of war and its accompanying tragedies as inevitable and therefore incapable of being affected by protest. Chlumberg's play begins with a ceremony honoring the dead of the World War I Battle of Verdun, at the site of the battle. Once the various dignitaries have left, the dead of the battle rise up and go out into the world to try to take up their lives from where they had left off twenty years earlier. The dead--French, German, American, Russian and English soldiers--are rejected wherever they go: there is no place left for them in the world of the living. No one believes in the possibility of undoing what has been done by the war. Wars are an expected part of life; and life must go on.

Prentis complained that Miracle at Verdun had been written for a bourgeois audience and that the playwright had been so careful not to offend this audience that he had blunted his play's message. Prentis felt that the play should have a carefully spelled out moral; anti-militarism. The reason for the last war should be stated explicitly, preferably by a Russian character, he said. Finally, Prentis declared that the play should lead to a meaningful climax, and should end

with a call to annihilate all of the machinery making future wars possible.

A review of I. J. Golden's Precendent, which was presented at the Provincetown Theatre, also appeared in the May 1931 Workers Theatre. The criteria of utilitarianism was employed by Sidney Ball for his review of Precedent. Ball began by complaining that the play did not show the Mooney-Billings case--on which it was based--in the proper light.

> It entirely neglects the treacherous role played by the AF of L leaders who assisted the bosses in railroading those innocent workers to jail.
>
> . . . The emotional protest that is aroused by the play 'Precedent' is not directed at any channel that will help to free Mooney. As the play ends, the defense is about to appeal to the U.S. Secretary of Labor--a hireling of the same bosses that caused the frameup. This is the author's contribution to the defense of Tom Mooney.[41]

The only aspects of the production of Precedent that impressed Ball at all were some of the stage settings. "One or two were excellent in that they were simple and easy to handle yet gave the gist of the picture wanted . . . ," he wrote.[42] Generally speaking, however, "A workers' theatre group has very little to learn from 'Precedent.' Such a production requiring a large number of trained actors, and put on in a regular theatre requires a greater technical outlay than most workers' theatre groups can afford. . . ."[43]

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[41]Sidney Ball, review of Precedent, Workers Theatre, May, 1931, p. 5-b. I have tried--without success--to find a copy of Precedent.

[42]Ibid., p. 4-b.

[43]Ibid., p. 5-b.

The work of prominent contemporary theatre artists was also evaluated and criticized in the pages of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film. In the early, more militant days of Workers Theatre, the attitude of its writers towards most of the widely acclaimed theatre professionals was generally quite negative, often hostile, and always totally independent.

For example: Albert Prentis wrote an article on "Dos Passos and the Theatre" for the June 1931 Workers Theatre, in which he discussed some statements made by Dos Passos in a piece written for the April issue of the New Republic. According to Prentis, Dos Passos had stated that there was a need for a permanent theatre to put on plays for the masses in a "novel experimental manner." The New Playwrights, of which he had been a member, had attempted to do this and had failed.

Prentis said that Dos Passos was wrong to be concerned with reputable organizations or experimental productions; in doing this, he asserted, Dos Passos was talking about "show business," not about theatre for the masses. Prentis said that Dos Passos should realize that the whole bourgeois system needs to be junked and that only a revolutionary theatre, that is connected to the revolutionary struggle will do. A workers' theatre, wrote Prentis, can be powerful and permanent. Art theatres, such as the theatres of Copeau, Piscator and the New Playwrights, which have been based on bourgeois founda-

tions, cannot be either meaningful or long-lived.[44]

Prentis criticized another famous and respected American writer, in a piece entitled "Mourning Becomes Eugene O'Neill," written for the December 1931 Workers Theatre. Prentis objected to O'Neill's fascination with the theatre of Ancient Greece, saying that the Ancient Greek theatre was used as a tool by the Priests, to help to strengthen the religious bonds of the people and to keep the poorer classes in their place. Prentis' greatest objection, however, was to O'Neill's use of the Greek concept of Fate. "Man does not have to be in the hands of Fate," he wrote. "Man, collective man, is learning to control Fate by changing the environment. . . ."[45]

In an oblique reference to O'Neill's earlier plays, Prentis concluded his article by criticizing O'Neill for his more recent withdrawal from the daily struggle for existence. " . . . Eugene O'Neill has forgotten his shipmates who made him famous," wrote Prentis. "While they are being starved and shanghaied and beaten up and deported, he runs away from life and hides in his ivory tower. There he can write dispassionately for his paying public, there he can write things to thrill them. Of Despair, Fate, Murder and Doom. Mourning becomes Eugene O'Neill."[46]

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[44]A. Prentis, "Dos Passos and the Theatre," Workers Theatre, June, 1931, p. 9.

[45]A. Prentis, "Mourning Becomes Eugene O'Neill," Workers Theatre, December, 1931, p. 20.

[46]Ibid., p. 21.

(B) Self-Criticism

The reviews in Workers Theatre were critical of most of the contemporary commercial theatrical productions, but the magazine's reviewers--in keeping with the spirit of the Communist practice of rigorous self-criticism--were even more exacting, when they considered the productions that were presented by their own workers' theatre groups.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the workers' theatres were foreign language immigrant groups. The largest percentage of these early groups appear to have been Yiddish speaking; the most well-known of which was the Artef. The first Workers Theatre review of an Artef production appeared in the third issue of the magazine, in June 1931. Al Saxe, one of the founders and the director of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, discussed the Artef production of a Yiddish play called The Whirl of the Machines.

Saxe was pleased that the Artef had finally produced a proletarian play that ended with a revolutionary song, but he pointed out that there were still many flaws in the production. The play's construction, for instance, was sloppy and had too many minor themes. Furthermore, the lack of unity in the direction, and particularly the poor direction of the mass scenes, illustrated what Saxe felt was "a lack of revolutionary understanding."[47]

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[47]Al Saxe, review of The Whirl of the Machines, Workers Theatre, June, 1931, pp. 5-b-6b.

The two criticisms that were most frequently received by the Yiddish-speaking workers' theatre groups, were that their repertoires were not sufficiently proletarian in content, and that they tried to make their productions too artistic. An article in the August 1931 Workers Theatre entitled "Tasks Before the Jewish-speaking Drama Sections," by I. J. Plattner, contained both of these criticisms and also suggested how the groups might improve themselves: "Self-activisation, liquidation of starism, keeping uppermost in mind the class interests of the workers, their needs and struggles, these must be the tasks of the dramatic groups and they must work accordingly."[48]

Al Prentis reviewed a production of Hirsch Lekert, presented by the Brighton Beach Drama Section, for the August 1931 Workers Theatre. Hirsch Lekert is a play about a worker who is executed for trying to avenge some fellow-workers who had been punished for demonstrating against the governor of their Russian province. Although Prentis had liked the acting, he felt that, in general there was too much realism in the production; particularly in the settings which he felt must have required a great deal of effort to prepare. "What poor theatre, what waste of energy!" he wrote.[49] Prentis said that the Yiddish workers' groups should do plays dealing with

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[48]J. Plattner, "Tasks Before the Jewish-speaking Dramasections, Workers Theatre, August, 1931, p. 6.

[49]A. Prentis, review of Hirsch Leckert, Workers Theatre, August, 1931, p. 20.

current subjects. "Such events like the miners' strike, the death of Kantovis, the Scottsboro case have more dramatic value than all plays ever written, including Shakespeare's, because they are closer to us and affect us directly."[50] Prentis concluded his review with the suggestion that performances should be given in workers' halls, rather than in temples, and that they should begin at a reasonable time, "Not 11 P.M., when workers like to go home and rest up for another hard labor day."[51]

The dogmatism of the Third Period policy frequently inhibited the critical abilities of the Workers Theatre reviewers. When Sam Beder, a member of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, reviewed a production of Valentin Katayev's Squaring the Circle that had been given by the Young Circle Dramatic Studio of the (Socialist) Rand School, his judgment of the presentation was obviously affected by the extreme enmity with which the Communists, during the Third Period, regarded the Socialists and all of their activities.

Squaring the Circle, written by Katayev in 1928, is a farce that satirizes the various character types as well as some of the difficulties--such as the housing and food shortages--that existed during the early days of the post-revolutionary Soviet Union. The play deals with the problems that two mis-matched young couples face as they try to co-

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[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

exist in one very crowded room. In poking good-natured fun at the two highly doctrinaire communist characters in the play, Katayev shows that Communism has its human side. The most admirable character in the play, an important Party official, comes in near the end of the play and turns out to be a romantic at heart, who tries to make the young people see that they should be a little less serious and pragmatic and that they should enjoy their lives and each other. Communism, Katayev is saying, is not all intellect, dogma, and deprivation.

Beder's overly serious Third Period outlook made it impossible for him to really see Squaring the Circle as it had been intended by Katayev, and he wrote:

> The Young Circle Drama [sic] Studio seems . . . to accept the author's intended self-criticism in the play as a form of burlesque to entertain the bourgeoisie, to place the Soviet workers in a ridiculous plight, to clown them whenever the opportunity offers itself. The author has made sure to direct the play and actors for bourgeois entertainment only. This group does not show the Soviet workers working together to build socialism, they refuse to show the workers as students developing and raising their cultural level, aiming to break down the vestiges of bourgeois ideology, its corrupting morals and ethics.[52]

Beder concluded his review by saying that the Young Circle Dramatic Studio and their sponsor, the Rand School were social fascists--the typical Third Period epithet--who, "only aim to deceive the masses, to misrepresent and break down the inspiration which the Soviet Union is to the entire

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[52]Sam Beder, review of Squaring the Circle, Workers Theatre, June, 1931, p. 4-b.

working class of the world. . . ."[53]

Harry Elion reviewed a Prolet-Buehne production, entitled Tempo! Tempo! for the September 1931 Workers Theatre. The play uses steady rhythm and stylized movements to deal with the speed-up, unemployment, and other aspects of the workers' exploitation in capitalist countries. These conditions are compared with the rapid industrialization and improvement of the workers' lot in the USSR. "Tempo! Tempo!," wrote Elion,

> is one of the most effective agitprop plays produced by the Prolet-Buehne. It combines its content with a form which lends to the performance a vigour and effectiveness rarely achieved by a production. The success of this play is largely due to this happy combination of content and form. . . .
> . . . . . .
> The whole play is in couplet form of trochaic quadrameter. This form lends to the play a rhythm which expresses a speed more than any description could accomplish. One gets caught up in the swing of the quickly moving lines and the whole body reacts to the "speed and speed" of the industrial capitalist world.[54]

Fight Against Imperialist War!--"The first revolutionary mass performance in a public square in USA (August 1st 1931)"[55]--was produced by the Dram Bureau of the Workers' Cultural Federation and, according to Albert Prentis who reviewed the pageant for Workers Theatre, it was attended by

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[53]Ibid.

[54]Harry Elion, review of Tempo! Tempo!, Workers Theatre, September, 1931, p. 35.

[55]A. Prentis, review of Fight Against Imperialist War!, Workers Theatre, September, 1931, p. 34.

15,000 workers. The pageant, Prentis noted, was well received and, ". . . although not a word was uttered tens of thousands of workers speaking different languages were able to understand all that was going on on the platform."[56] In the spirit of constructive self-criticism, however, Prentis did have some suggestions for improving this form of presentation:

--the action should be directed at all sides of the audience surrounding the platform

--pictures should be used to supplement the pantomime

--the actions should be bigger than life

--sound effects could be used to accompany the action.[57]

When I'll Tell You How to Vote[58] was presented by the Workers Laboratory Theatre, Jack Shapiro, a member of the group, reviewed the performance for Workers Theatre magazine. The production, which was a first attempt at using the revue or vaudeville form for a propaganda play, illustrated, "that this style is to be taken seriously in the work of the Agitprop theatre."[59] Shapiro wrote that although the performance was well-given and well-received,

> A very important shortcoming . . . needs some stressing. In employing satire as a means for propaganda a workers theatre must be very careful not to fall into low and

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[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.

[58]The reader is referred back to

[59]Jack Shapiro, review of I'll Tell You How to Vote, Workers Theatre, October, 1931, p. 36.

> pointless burlesque. Whatever fun is to be poked at enemies of the working class must tend to show up the role of these enemies and must not be merely funny. Otherwise it is, from a revolutionary point of view a waste and possibly harmful. . . .
>
> After all, it was a successful performance, showing that the Workers' Theatre can be full of propaganda and entertaining at the same time.[60]

The following statement appeared at the head of the Reviews section of the November 1931 Workers Theatre:

> Criticism Wanted!
>
> Something is wrong with this section. And here is the mistake; the writers of the reviews visit the various performances with the purpose of writing criticism. They criticize the performances with their definite idea of what a workers' play should be. They are active in the workers' theatre movement, and their reviews must therefore be considered as self-criticism. This is certainly useful and helpful. But we need more: we need direct and steady contact with our audience. We want to learn what the workers expect from us and what they think of our performances. We therefore ask the visitors to our performances to write what they liked and disliked in the plays, and to let us know their recommendations as [sic] how to improve our work.
>
> The group should, before each performance, encourage the audience to this type of proletarian constructive criticism.
>
> This section should not be written for the readers but by the readers.[61]

A notice in the "In the Red Spotlight" column of the December 1931 Workers Theatre concluded the year on a note that was indicative of the Third Period policy which then governed the magazine's aesthetic outlook:

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Workers Theatre, November 1931, p. 31.

THE JEWISH DRAM SECTIONS SPEND 400 DOLLARS for an instruction course in acting, directing, stage painting, costume designing; and (don't faint) make-up. . . .

The Jewish comrades had undoubtedly the good intention and the right idea to strengthen the propaganda power of the workers' theatre by developping [sic] all the junk that we must throw away in order to become a strong weapon in the class struggle. The Jewish groups are making a big mistake. . . .

But that is not only a matter between the Jewish Dram Sections and the Artef. Weakening a number of Dram groups means doing harm to the whole workers' theatre movement of this country and to the entire revolutionary movement. What are the Cultural Federation, the Dram Buro, and the N.Y. Dram Council doing to prevent this damage in the last moment?[62]

1932

Aesthetics and Theatre Technique

During 1932, and until March 1933, Workers Theatre continued to operate within the framework of the same basic world view and political outlook as it had during 1931. But even though the Third Period policies of the Communist Party were being adhered to as strictly as ever they had been, since 1929, by the American Communist movement as a whole, many of the individuals who were active in the workers' theatre were beginning to realize that they could not remain entirely indifferent to the "bourgeois" professional theatre.

In an article on "Technique in the Workers' Theatre" which appeared in the January 1932 Workers Theatre, Albert Prentis addressed himself to the question of whether or not

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[62] Workers Theatre, December, 1931, p. 28.

the workers' theatre should adopt any of the methods of the bourgeois theatre. After analyzing the opposing aims of the bourgeois theatre and the workers' theatre, and also the differing playwriting techniques, Prentis concluded that, " . . . as far as the written play is concerned, we may adopt the so-called bourgeois technique and adapt it to our own use."[63]

Prentis continued his discussion of "Technique in the Workers' Theatre," for the February issue of the magazine, and elaborated upon his earlier point by suggesting that the workers' theatre, " . . . should take over all bourgeois technique, subject it to a materialistic analysis, discard the useless and utilize the useful and practical."[64] It would be foolish, he maintained, to reject all the old tools and techniques of the theatre, until new and more effective methods had been developed. In support of this contention, Prentis pointed out that the great Russian director, Vsevelod Meierhold was a graduate of the bourgeois [Moscow Art] theatre and had always acknowledged his debt to it. In order to learn as much as is possible from the bourgeois theatre, Prentis said that professional theatre workers should be invited to teach the amateurs in the workers' theatre, and that they should be asked to participate in their work. Such a suggestion was certainly a significant step in a new

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[63]A. Prentis, "Technique in the Workers' Theatre," Workers Theatre, January, 1932, p. 7.

[64]A. Prentis, "Technique in the Workers' Theatre," Workers Theatre, February, 1932, p. 14.

direction.

This step taken by Prentis, became a part of a larger trend when, at the First Workers' Theatre Conference and Spartakiade, held in New York City in April 1932,[65] John Bonn, who earlier had maintained that there was nothing of interest to the workers' theatre in the bourgeois theatre, declared that he had taken "a wrong leftist standpoint" on the issue, and stated that the bourgeois theatre should not be ignored. Bonn also urged that the disenfranchised professional theatre workers should be won over into the ranks of the militant workers' theatre.[66]

"Scenery: The Visual Attack" was the title of an article written by Mordecai Gorelik for the March 1932 Workers Theatre.[67] The very inclusion of an article on scenic technique in the magazine, indicated that the workers' theatres were becoming more interested in having productions that were artistic as well as propagandistic. Gorelik's article was grounded in the realities of the limited resources of the workers' theatre. He began his discussion by pointing out that the revolutionary designer must grasp the essentials of stagecraft so that he can arrive at powerful visual effects with a minimum of financial expense. In keeping with the

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[65] See Chapter I, pp. 25-31.

[66] John Bonn, "Dram Buro Report," Workers Theatre, May, 1932, p. 8.

[67] By that time, Gorelik was the scene designer for the Group Theatre.

spirit of subjugating the needs of the individual to those of the group, Gorelik stated that the designer's first task is to serve the needs of the play and that he should have no preconceived notions of what kind of scenery he would like to use.

Gorelik reasoned that there is no such thing as an actor without scenery, because even if there is no special scenery, the natural environment of the production serves as its scenery. An adequate amount of good and useful scenery, he stated, is better than an inadequate amount; and the effect of the natural environment on the special scenery for the production should always be taken into account. If necessary, however, plays can be written or re-written to be done with little scenery.

The basic principles of scene design outlined by Gorelik, in the article, were discussed on the most elementary level. Gorelik spent much of the piece, for example, simply speaking about how to make the scenery easily visible to the audience. All in all, the two basic aspects of scene design that were given the most emphasis by Gorelik were variety and practicality.[68] Following Gorelik's piece, was an editor's note to the effect that an article on some technical aspect of theatre production would appear in that column, in each issue of Workers Theatre that would follow.

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[68]Mordecai Gorelik, "Scenery: The Visual Attack," Workers Theatre, March, 1932, pp. 3-5.

Regardless of some slight changes, however, the aesthetic policy of Workers Theatre was still essentially the same as it had been during the first year of the magazine's publication. In an article calling for more plays for the workers' theatre, "Building a Repertory for the Workers' Theatre," Jack Shapiro advised prospective new playwrights to, "make the plays short and concise and make a thorough study of the Communist Party Platform before writing them."[69]

Criticism

(A) The Commercial Theatre

Although the contributors to Workers Theatre continued to find little to admire in the professional theatrical productions which they attended, their new utilitarian interest in the professional theatre was evident in the reviews which they wrote for the magazine. It was no surprise that Al Saxe was displeased by the Broadway production of Of Thee I Sing--a play which satirizes both the electoral process and the ability of the electorate to choose its own government wisely. In his review for the August 1932 Workers Theatre, Saxe pointed out that Of Thee I Sing is a propaganda play which propagandizes indifference to politics (a message which is precisely the antithesis of all that the workers' theatre stood for). But Saxe expressed admiration for the craftsmanship of Of Thee I Sing, and said that the workers'

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[69] J. Shapiro, "Building a Repertory for the Workers' Theatre," Workers Theatre, June-July, 1932, p. 7.

theatre could make some use of the play for its own purposes: "Of Thee I Sing has clever satire which can be used in the workers' theatre," wrote Saxe. "Instead of the interludes of cheap dance routine which accompanied the Pulitzer play these interludes between satirical skits can be bridged by the introduction of agit-prop recitations. Not alone to vary the theatrical menu but also to give direction to a show that needs a constructive point of view with the satire."[70]

The left-wing theatre workers were always particularly sensitive to the attempts on the part of commercial playwrights and producers to write and produce plays dealing with social issues. In the early days of Workers Theatre, perhaps because the writers for the magazine felt that the commercial social playwrights were treading on the territory of the Left--but leading their audiences to incorrect conclusions--the reviewers for the magazine were likely to be more critical of commercial plays with social messages and themes, than of those without such concerns. Later on, in the period leading up to and following the Popular Front declaration, the attempts of commercial playwrights to include social messages in their plays were greeted with sympathy and often approval, by the left-wing theatre critics.

Elmer Rice, always a commercial playwright, and always a playwright who was interested in social issues, was

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[70]Alfred Saxe, "A Play With Propaganda and Three Without," Workers Theatre, August, 1932, p. 8.

one writer to whom a substantial amount of criticism was devoted, during the years when Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film were published. And therefore the changing attitudes of the Left to the commercial, social, but non-partisan theatre, is evident in the criticism of Rice that appeared in the magazines.

A production of Rice's Counsellor-at-Law--which he directed--opened at the Plymouth Theatre on November 6, 1931. Counsellor-at-Law is about an individual--George Simon, portrayed by Paul Muni--who, through intelligence, hard work, a certain rugged charm, and the ability to take advantage of a good opportunity (even if to do so is slightly illegal), has managed to work his way out of the Yorkville ghetto, into becoming one of the top corporation lawyers in New York City. Simon is good to his mother, always takes time out to fight for the underdog, and also always makes it his business to help out the friends of his youth. But he has also become accustomed to a lifestyle, with a high society woman as his wife, that requires him to earn a tremendous income; which, in turn, causes him to make certain compromises of a less than admirable nature.

When Alfred Saxe reviewed Counsellor-at-Law, he described George Simon as a character who,

> through contact with the society of capitalism has imbibed well the doctrine of devil take the hindmost--and who through this doctrine has become a vicious, brutal, domineering get-what-he-wants type--nevertheless Mr. Rice presents him in a very sympathetic light--Mr.

> Counsellor-at-Law is a charity giver--the same sort of charity giver as Rosenwald, Rockefeller, Morgan, etc., who donate millions to the schools and churches, the millions which they have taken from the sweat of the people in 'Street Scene. . . ."[71] This is the propaganda of sympathy and idealization of our successful men regardless of how they got that way--sympathy for these strong men--these hero's [sic] of capitalism who have risen from the ranks.[72]

With the stated aim of the Group Theatre having been, "to give voice to the essential moral and social preoccupations of our time,"[73] it was only natural for the left-wing theatre workers, as well as the staff and editors of Workers Theatre to be especially interested in all of the Group Theatre productions, and in the political activities of the individual members of the Group. For although the Group Theatre was an entirely commercial organization which had absolutely no political program, of all the permanent socially-oriented theatres of the day, the Group was both the most long-lived--it functioned, with some pauses, from 1931 to 1941--and enjoyed the most widespread popularity. Furthermore, the Group Theatre directors consistently chose to produce plays that were of topical interest and generally had liberal, sometimes almost radical messages.

The left-wing theatre movement always expected and

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[71]Later in the review, Saxe described Street Scene as, "propaganda for a continuation of life as Elmer Rice sees it."

[72]Ibid.

[73]Harold Clurman, "The Group Theatre Speaks for Itself," New York Times, December 13, 1931, Sec. 8, p. 2.

wanted more evidence of political commitment from the Group Theatre than that organization was desirous of giving. In the early Third period days of the left-wing theatre movement and of Workers Theatre magazine, the Left was more often displeased than it was pleased by the Group Theatre productions. Starting in 1935, however, with both the Popular Front declaration and the emergence of Clifford Odets as the major social playwright of the period, the staff and contributors to New Theatre had a great deal to say in praise of the Group Theatre, and were happy to embrace it as an important participant in the left-wing theatre movement. There were, however, many members of the Group Theatre who were not entirely comfortable with being characterized as a left-wing theatre. And there was considerable debate--and sometimes discord--within the organization, over the question of how important a role political commitment should play in the Group Theatre's program.[74]

The first Group Theatre play to be reviewed in Workers Theatre was its second production, 1931 by Claire and Paul Sifton. 1931 is about the situation of an Everyman figure--a young unemployed worker named Adam. Written in an agit-prop documentary form, fourteen realistic scenes depicting Adam's plight are alternated with ten expressionistic "Interludes" which show masses of workers reacting,

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[74]Harold Clurman, The Fervent Years, Chapters 7, 8, 10, 14, passim.

with increasing anger, to their hopeless situation. In the final scene of the play, Adam joins these now-radicalized masses when they break into a restaurant where he has finally gotten a menial job for miserable wages. Adam and the masses march offstage, singing the "Internationale."

Harry Elion reviewed the Group Theatre production of 1931 for the February 1932 Workers Theatre. His major complaint with the play was that it doesn't present and answer to the problems of unemployment and refuses to be specific in placing the blame for the economic situation. Even the demonstration at the end of the play, Elion said, lacks organization and produces no intelligible protest. "There is an obviously conscious elimination of any positive element in the performance."[75]

A discussion of the Group Theatre, "Broadway and the Group Theatre," by Arthur Dour, appeared in the September-October 1932 Workers Theatre. After examining the present financial, moral and artistic poverty of the Broadway theatre, Dour turned his attention to the Group Theatre, which he saw as, "the only sign of life in the present moribund drama."[76]

He continued:

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[75]H. Elion, review of 1931, Workers Theatre, February, 1932, p. 32.

[76]A. Dour, "Broadway and the Group Theatre," Workers Theatre, September-October, 1932, p. 5.

> This organization is of extraordinary interest at present. Descending from and reacting against the Theatre Guild, the Group Theatre, after a long period of incubation during which it rehearsed plays but did not produce them, arrived last year at a Broadway status. . . .
>
> . . . The directors [have] disavowed any political attitude, admitting, however, that the Group Theatre in the course of its development might have to put itself on record politically. . . .
>
> . . . . . .
>
> . . . Still shy of making any political alignment, the Group, partly due to general economic conditions and partly to its specific problems of subsidy, is nevertheless being pushed step by step toward political clarification, and toward at least a theoretic acquaintance with Marxism. . . .[77]

After explaining the ideological differences existing among the various members of the Group--"the opportunistic and radical elements within the organization"[78]--and the difficulties which these differences would pose for the stability of the Group, Dour emphasized that,

> From the proletarian point of view the Group is a key to the Broadway theatre. If the Group does not succeed in holding itself together by means of straddling during the coming season--and a break-up this season is a possibility--it will either take up some commercial offer and go entirely right, or there will remain a Group Theatre nucleus which because of its valuable experience will be of great importance to the proletarian working class.[79]

Dour concluded his article by saying that it was now up to the workers' theatre to broaden its base beyond that which presently existed in the agit-prop groups. He seemed to suggest that if the Group Theatre did disband, perhaps

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[77]Ibid., p. 6.

[78]Ibid.

[79]Ibid.

some of its more radical members would come into the workers' theatre, for he said that a stationary theatre was needed which would be able, "to receive incoming unclarified elements without loss of time and without possibility of distortion."[80]

(B) Self-Criticism

The desirability of a stationary theatre which would be more attractive to the theatre workers outside of the left-wing theatre movement was also mentioned by Jack Shapiro, as a side comment to his review of John Wexley's Steel, which appeared in the March 1932 Workers Theatre: "There is a very definite need on our cultural front for theatre in English, of a more or less permanent quality, of the type which can rally around us our hosts of friends and sympathizers, who find themselves now on the fringe of the movement."[81]

Although the workers' theatre was beginning to show a readiness to modify some of its methods, the days of the Popular Front, and of Workers Theatre making friendly gestures to non-Communist left-wing groups, such as the Socialists, were still more than a year off. That this was the case is evident in the following excerpt from an article--"Our Widening Front" by Bernard Reines--which appeared in the September-October 1932 Workers Theatre:

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[80] Ibid.

[81] Jack Shapiro, review of Steel, Workers Theatre, March, 1932, p. 34.

> Sensing the growing influence of the revolutionary theatre workers, leaders of the Socialist Party have sought to counteract this influence by hastily calling together and organizing a 'Federation of Workers Theatres' under our revolutionary slogan, 'Theatre is a Weapon.' We have seen them stage defeatest plays with workers committing suicide instead of fighting (DOLE BROTHERS), and pseudo-satirical bourgeois plays in the 'best society comedy' traditon (GENTLEMEN WANTED). We have seen some of our young workers abandon the reformist 'Workers Theatre' [the name of the Socialist group at the Rand School] and come over to the revolutionary workers' theatre. . . .[82]

Regardless of the more recently recognized need for the workers' theatre to appeal to a wider audience, the agit-prop play, with its short scenes, stylized characters and use of familiar political slogans, was still the predominant form used by the amateur left-wing theatres during 1932 and 1933. Nathanial Buchwald, in the introduction to his report, "The Judges Award," which he delivered at the conclusion of the First Workers' Theatre Spartakiade in April 1932, and which was published in the May 1932 Special Conference and Spartakiade issue of Workers Theatre, commented that,

> If we view the Spartakiade as a composite picture of our agit-prop groups we find in it both clear and effective political content and at least the beginning of a distinct and effective style. All the plays put together gave the impression of something vehemently revolutionary, and in the very variety of forms there was the promise of a new style that is alive and dynamic, a style that even in its first attempts achieved that oneness of stage and audience, of player and spectator, which the bourgeois theatre failed to achieve for all

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[82]Bernard Reines, "Our Widening Front," Workers Theatre, September-October, 1932, p. 4.

their formalistic innovations and thematic lures.[83]

Among the three prize winners at the Spartakiade, and one of the many agit-prop plays to be published in Workers Theatre during 1932 and 1933, was 15 Minute Red Revue by John Bonn of the Prolet-Buehne. The first section of this play which appeared in the June-July issue of the magazine, was called "Agitprop," and is a description of that form, as Bonn saw it:

> Part I, Players line up, front stage, one by one, while saying their lines. (The numbers 1, 2, 3, etc., stand for 1st Worker, 2nd Worker, etc.)
>
> 1. Comrades workers, listen, stop--
> Prolet-Buehne agit-prop
> 2. Agitprop--against hunger and destitution--
> Agitprop--theatre of revolution--
> 3. Agitprop--wakes the masses to fight--
> Agitprop--is the workers' light--
> 4. Agitprop--in streets and factory gates--
> Agitprop--all over the United States--
> 5. Agitprop--and the bosses quake with fear--
> Agitprop--for the workers' day is near--
> 6. Agitprop--against the yellow socialists--
> Agitprop--against the preachers and fascists--
> 7. Agitprop--against police terror and exploitation--
> Agitprop--against the lying press and starvation
> 8. Agitprop--is the cannon's roar--
> Agitprop--is class war--
> 9. Agitprop--bears the battle's brunt--
> Agitprop--builds the revolutionary front--
> 10. Agitprop--strikes the boss's iron hand--
> Agitprop--defends the Soviet Union, the workers' fatherland!
> 10. The workers' news--
> 9. The workers' views--
> 8. Protest of masses--
> 7. War of classes--
> 6. Strong--unyielding--
> 5. Victory wielding--
> 4. Tempo--action--

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[83]Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Judges Award," Workers Theatre, May, 1932, p. 10.

3. Fights reaction--
2. In street and shop--
1. We never stop!

All. AGITPOP![84]

Buchwald's criticism of the Prolet-Buehne's performance of 15 Minute Red Revue at the Spartakiade, appeared with the playscript, in the June-July 1932 Workers Theatre. Although Buchwald felt that, "politically the play is clear and simple, theatrically it is spectacular and dynamic,"[85] he also thought that it was unlikely that a neutral audience would be impressed by the play.

> In general, the work of the Prolet-Buehne, though outstanding in the field of agit-prop theatre, leans too heavily on direction and delivery of lines and too little on the literary and dramaturgical shaping of its plays. The Prolet-Buehne players speak their lines with a ringing galvanic forcefulness, and the director marshalls them on the stage in perfect rhythm--in a variety of group patterns with changing tempi building up to a spectacular dramatic climax. But the plays themselves are frequently devoid of theatrical form and the vocabulary leans to the conventional propagandist jargon. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . On the dramaturgical side the play lacks the element of narrative, of suspense, of the dramatic building up of a situation. Its lines ring with the overtones of sectarian phraseology and formulation.[86]

Buchwald pointed out, however, that this group which he was criticizing was very special--the Prolet-Buehne was a pioneer in the field of agit-prop work. "A little more variety in its methods," he wrote, "a little more attention

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[84]John Bonn, 15 Minute Red Revue, Workers Theatre, June-July, 1932, p. 11.

[85]Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Prize Winners of the Spartakiade," Workers Theatre, June-July, 1932, p. 10.

[86]Ibid.

to dramaturgy, a little less of that stiff, strait-laced manner will go a long way towards perfecting the work of that group. Its position of leadership in the field makes it doubly desirable that the Prolet-Buehne correct some of its shortcomings."[87]

Buchwald's criticisms of 15 Minute Red Revue were to be expected. For he and his group, the Yiddish-speaking Artef, were almost diametrically opposed to the aesthetics for the revolutionary theatre that were propounded by the Prolet-Buehne. The extreme theoretical differences between the two groups had become clear, the previous October, when Buchwald's piece, "Narrowing the Field of the Workers' Theatres," was published in Workers Theatre.[88]

In January 1932, Al Saxe reviewed the Artef production of Can You Hear Their Voices? for Workers Theatre. The play had been adapted by Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Clifford from a Wittaker Chambers story ("Can You Make Out Their Voices?") which had been published in the March 1931 New Masses. Nathaniel Buchwald had translated the play into Yiddish, and adapted it for the Artef production.

"Can You Make Out Their Vocies?" by Wittaker Chambers, is the story of a group of Midwestern "dirt farmers" who are nearly devastated by the combination of the Depression

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[87]Ibid.

[88]Please see above, pp. 254-55.

and the fierce drought which had stricken that area of the country during 1931. The story is written in the rugged realistic "proletarian" style that was popular among the communists of the period, and it tells about how one communist among the group of farmers is able to instill class-consciousness in his neighbors. The farmer, Jim Wardell, convinces the other farmers in his group that they must come together and take definitive action against their oppressors--who are, in this case, personified by a big businessman named Purcell. Bearing guns, but without firing them, they take the food that they need from the stores in town. At the end of the story, Wardell sends his two sons away--to the comrades in the North--and he and his group get ready to deal with the militia which has been sent to the area. When the two boys call back to their parents that they will return in the Spring, Wardell's wife asks him, "Can you make out both their voices?"[89]

Hallie Flanagan and Margaret Clifford adapted the story into a documentary form, using the technique of projecting slides with statistics, newspaper headlines, and short explanatory notes, to make the story more meaningful for their Vassar audience. And also, no doubt because of their orientation to a college audience, they added a subplot dealing with a young co-ed--the daughter of the Senator

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[89]Whittaker Chambers, "Can You Make Out Their Voices?" The New Masses, March, 1931, p. 16.

of the Midwestern state in the story--who is vaguely aware of the current social struggle. The scenes involving this girl are juxtaposed with the scenes about the farmers in the play.

In his review of the Artef production of Can You Hear Their Voices?, Saxe said that while the Chambers story had a fairly clear working-class orientation, "Flanagan and Clifford mutilated the class line of the story and adapted it into a play form with a clear liberal ideology."[90] Buchwald, wrote Saxe, tried unsuccessfully to re-insert the class line, but the moral of the Yiddish production was that the educated liberals must help the poor and thus prevent a communist revolution. Saxe was understandably appalled by a sign that was flashed on the screen at the end of the play which read, "These boys are symbols of thousands of our people who are turning somewhere for leaders. Will it be to the educated minority? Can you hear their voices?"[91]

Saxe's final complaint was that, because of the acting, the capitalist in the play seemed to be a charming liberal, and the workers didn't seem at all real. "The class interpretation has suffered at the hands of acting as an art in itself," he wrote.[92] "The importance of the Artef as a

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[90]Al Saxe, review of Can You Hear Their Voices?, Workers Theatre, January, 1932, p. 3.

[91]Ibid., p. 4. [92]Ibid., p. 5.

cultural weapon among the Yiddish proletariat makes it imperative that the Artef be consistently clear, not only as to what a workingclass technique consists of, but also must see to it that this technique be carried out. The power of any revolutionary organization lies not alone in knowing your theory," Saxe asserted, "but further in turning your theory into action."[93]

Hands Off!, an election agit-prop play written by Nathaniel Buchwald, was published in the June-July 1932 Workers Theatre. In a short review entitled, "Jewish Group Takes Turn to Agit Prop," published in the August 1932 issue of the magazine, the Coney Island Dram Group was commended for doing Hands Off! and, "for being the first Jewish dramatic group in New York City to take a definite turn toward agit-prop work. We hope other groups will follow their example."[94] The performance of an agit-prop play, by a group which had formerly done only realistic dramas based on traditional subjects, was an example of the willingness of the particpants in the workers' theatre movement to take heed of the constructive criticism that was offered to them by their comrades.

The Workers Laboratory Theatre continued to experiment with new play forms in 1932. A review of a "political side show," Look! Look! Look!, which the group had performed on

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[93]Ibid.

[94]J. Zucker, "Jewish Group Takes Turn to Agit Prop," Workers Theatre, August, 1932, p. 19.

Solidarity Day, was published in the August 1932 Workers Theatre. The anonymous reviewer of the presentation wrote that the WLT production represented a new form, based on the traditional native entertainments found at country fairs and amusement parks. To use political satire effectively in side show form, the critic said that the sketches should be short and easily understood by workers who read only the News and the Mirror. The side show must be entertaining and it must also have the correct class approach to the various situations satirized. The WLT side show sometimes failed in achieving all of these necessary aims: some of the objects of its satire--e.g., Ghandi and the DAR--were not familiar to the workers, and the political significance of some of the sketches was lost in ridiculous humor. Nonetheless, the reviewer concluded, the idea of a political side show is excellent and should continue to be used.[95]

1933

Socialist Realism and the Developing Aesthetics for the Revolutionary Theatre

An important step towards bringing many "bourgeois" professional theatre artists into the left-wing theatre came with the abandonment of the didactic agit-prop play as the primary form of the workers' theatre. This development represented a liberalization of the leftist theatre, as well as a broadening of its artistic scope, and came about partly as

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[95]Review of Look! Look! Look!, Workers Theatre, August, 1932, p. 5.

a result of the method of socialist realism being officially adopted in the Soviet Union. It is rather ironic that the effect of the Soviet method of socialist realism, on the American left-wing dramaturgy, should have been to encourage expansion in the area of theatre technique. For the imposition of this methodology on the widely varied and experimental theatres of the USSR had quite the opposite effect.

Norris Houghton visited the theatres of the Soviet Union during 1934 and 1935. In Moscow Rehearsals, written one year after his return to the US, Houghton voiced his concern over the diminishing effect that the acceptance of socialist realism as the sole method of writing and producing plays was already having on the scope of Russian theatrical activity:

> Will this mean eventually, because of the exigencies of the new phase of the Revolution, a standardization of method and style will take place, that when the first shock of upheaval of everything in Russia has been stabilized and life becomes calmer, the theatre will lose the vitality of its individual expressions which has made it so varied and so vivid? Were three New York producers presenting the same play at once, it might be very possible to see the first act in one theatre, the second in another, and the third in a third and still receive a fairly unified impression of the play, for the idiom of the New York theatres is on the whole a common one. In Moscow ten years ago this would have been impossible, for there were as many completely different vehicles for the expression of an idea as there were theatres. What will the situation be there five years hence?[96]

The first indication, in Workers Theatre, of the Soviet

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[96]Norris Houghton, Moscow Rehearsals: An Account of Methods of Production in the Soviet Theatre (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), pp. 251-52.

shift towards socialist realism, was in an article, "From the Report of the TRAM Theatres," by Mary Vaughn, in the January-February 1933 issue. This "Report" is actually a series of quotations from written reports by the International Workers Dramatic Union, dealing with the TRAM amateur workers' theatre groups, in Russia. "The critical wisdom of these reports," wrote Vaughn, "may be most profitably applied in the organizing of the revolutionary theatre in America."[97] One of the most significant paragraphs quoted in the "Report" reads:

> 'The TRAM players must learn to create a complete image, solving this problem by means of a truthful presentation of reality, by serious work on the image, rejecting once and for all . . . the mechanical repetition of the director's instruction, and the similar accessories of the bourgeois stage. It must be remembered that a complete artistic image can be created only by cultured, politically educated players and producers who have mastered Marxist-Leninist theory.'[98]

The next, and this time, specific, reference to socialist realism, in Workers Theatre, was in the March 1933 issue--the same edition as that in which Ben Blake called for broadening the scope of the magazine so as to interest artists from the bourgeois theatre. The article in question was a summary of a report that Y. Boyarsky, president of the Central Committee of Art and Theatrical Workers, had delivered at the Plenary Session of the International Union of Revolution-

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[97]Mary Vaughn, "From the Report of the TRAM Theatres," Workers Theatre, January-February, 1933, p. 13.

[98]Ibid.

ary Theatres, held in Moscow, on November 9 to 12, 1932. In his report, "15 Years of Soviet Theatre," Boyarsky had discussed the achievements and also the shortcomings of the post-revolutionary threatre. He had also spoken of the need for new plays, "exposing with . . . real profundity the processes going on in the country. . . ."[99] Boyarsky had cited Yegor Bulichev and Others, the most recent play by Maxim Gorky, as being, "of great significance for the present epoch in the Soviet Theatre, since its high literary quality and the wide range of its theme and types provide a vivid idea of an important historical epoch."[100] The article continues with the statement that, "Comrade Boyarsky went on to point out that the next problem before the Soviet Theatre is to show the new human being, the hero of the five year plan, both at work and in his daily life, to show the method of socialist realism with the aid of the faithful description of actuality, to which qualities it is that Gorky's play owes its success."[101]

Although the method of socialist realism had been endorsed in late 1932, the meaning and implications of its aesthetic principles were discussed and definitively explicated at the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934. Andrei A. Zhdanov, in his report to the Congress, "Soviet Literature--

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[99] Y. Boyarsky, "15 Years of Soviet Theatre," Workers Theatre, March, 1933, p. 7.

[100] Ibid.

[101] Ibid.

the Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," defined socialist realism as meaning, "to depict reality in its revolutionary development."[102]

> In our country the main heroes of works of literature are the active builders of a new life--working men and women, men and women collective farmers, Party members, business managers, engineers, members of the Young Communist League, Pioneer. Such are the chief heroes of our Soviet literature. Our literature is impregnated with enthusiasm and the spirit of heroic deeds. . . . It is optimistic in essence, because it is the literature of the rising class of the proletariat, the only progressive and advanced class. Our Soviet literature is strong by virtue of the fact that it is serving a new cause--the cause of socialist construction.[103]

"Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls,"[104] Zhdanov pointed out. This potential of the Soviet writers to "remold the mentality of their readers," could not be fulfilled, he warned, without, " . . . untiring work directed towards self-education and towards improving their ideological equipment in the spirit of socialism. . . ."[105]

Nikolai Bukharin, in his report, "Poetry, Poetics and the Problems of Poetry in the U.S.S.R.," considered the question of the form appropriate to socialist realism. "Realism generally and socialist realism in particular, as a

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[102]Andrei A. Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature--The Richest in Ideas, The Most Advanced Literature," from "Selections from Problems of Soviet Literature. Reports and Speeches of the First Soviet Writers Congress," in Bernard F. Dukore, ed., Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974), p. 962.

[103]Ibid.

[104]Ibid.

[105]Ibid., p. 964.

method, he explained, "is the enemy of everything supernatural, mystic, all other-worldly idealism. . . ."[106] Furthermore, Bukharin stated, the elements of form will . . . be other than is the case . . . in symbolism."[107]

In his speech, Bukharin elaborated on another aspect of socialist realism--the concept of individualism. " . . . The growth of individuality," he declared, "is by no means equivalent to the growth of individualism, i.e., of that which disunites people. On the contrary, the feeling of a collective bond between people is one of the principle traits of socialist realism. Thus socialist realism is anti-individualistic."[108]

Once fully defined, therefore, the doctrine of socialist realism encompassed the content, form, style and attitude (of optimism) that the Soviet artists were to employ in their work. This method, which was applied to all areas of the arts, was eventually rigorously required of all artists. In an article entitled, "Russian Theatre in the 20th Century," which appeared in the March 1973 The Drama Review--twenty-seven years after the publication of Moscow Rehearsals--Norris Houghton commented on his initial impressions of the effect that socialist realism was having on the Soviet theatre, and asserted that his pessimistic predictions about the future of the theatres there had been accurate.

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[106]Nikolai Bukharin, "Poetry, Poetics and the Problems of Poetry in the U.S.S.R.," in Dukore, Dramatic Theory and Criticism, p. 967.

[107]Ibid.

[108]Ibid., p. 969.

> In the 1934-35 season the process was just beginning. It was evident, I now perceive, in the mediocrity of the new plays I witnessed, plays about collective farming, hydro-electric plants and dam building, about the heroes of the Revolution and the Civil War, about the conversion of the intelligentsia to Communism. They were the vanguard of hundreds of dramas that were ground out during the latter years of the '30's, the '40's and up to the mid-'50's. In their repetitiveness, in their lack of dramatic power (one always knew how the play would end), in the two-dimensionality of their characters, in their insistence on doctrinaire preachment, these products of socialist realism succeeded finally in turning the vigorous Russian stage into a prairie of vacuity, one great yawn of boredom.[109]

The implications of socialist realism in the USSR were inevitably as political as they were aesthetic. In the United States, however, even though the method was officially embraced and used as a critical yardstick by the Party and by its most ardent artist-members--such as John Howard Lawson--the impact of the method of socialist realism was mainly aesthetic. The implementation of the method remained a matter of free artistic choice. Failure to employ the method resulted in nothing more than criticism in the pages of Workers Theatre, New Theatre or other left-wing publications.

Furthermore, in this country, where the agit-prop play was characterized by an emphasis on politics and rhetoric and a de-emphasis on art and experimentation, the announcement of socialist realism served as a push in the direction of greater artistic development. The step away from mass chants and sloganizing, toward verisimilitude, albeit with a purpose,

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[109]Norris Houghton, "Russian Theatre in the 20th Century," The Drama Review, March, 1973, p. 9.

was a step which called attention to the need for greater skillfulness in the arts of the theatre. Now, believeable characters, logical plot development and realistic dialogue were elements that had to be presented, not only with practical competence, but with artistic skill. The move away from the agit-prop play was a move towards accepting, even eliciting help and training from professional theatre artists who were more often sympathizers than they were partisans.

Finally, the step towards realism, in the American workers' theatre, helped to realize the intent of the resolution on art and propaganda which had been formulated at the First International Olympiad of the Revolutionary Theatre, held in Moscow in May 1933. The resolution, simply stated, was that, "lofty ideological content must be presented in fine artistic form."[110] For, as the talented and highly regarded director Vsevolod Meyerhold, in an article for the May 1933 International Theatre,[111] succinctly expressed it, "great ideas will be lost if not expressed skillfully."[112]

It is rather ironic that for Meyerhold--and for many other innovative artists in the USSR--the declaration of

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[110]Introduction to V. Meyerhold, "On Ideology and Technology in the Theatre," International Theatre, no. 2 (Moscow, USSR, 1934), p. 6.

[111]International Theatre was a magazine that was published by the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres. Published in Moscow, it appeared in English, French and German editions. Ben Blake was the United States representative to the Editorial Board of the magazine.

[112]Meyerhold, "On Ideology and Technology in the Theatre," International Theatre, p. 6.

socialist realism was, in effect, a sort of death-knell, while for the young and committed left-wing theatre workers in the US it served as an impetus for creative development and a push toward the more skillful expression of "great ideas."

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An article in the April 1933 Workers Theatre, by Harry Elion, entitled "The Problems of Repertory," illustrates the then-changing approach to the art versus propaganda debate. Elion recalled that in the early days of the workers' theatre movement, quantity rather than quality was the major consideration insofar as the plays written for the various amateur groups were regarded. The early plays were crude and lacking in logical development, wrote Elion. "They began with discontent and ended with revolution. (Unemployed, Bigg Stiff, Buy Now). There was little dramatic or logical development of a situation, which made the plays unconvincing."[113]

The contact of the Workers Laboratory Theatre with the Prolet-Buehne added a new dimension to the workers' theatre, said Elion; and the outgrowth of that collaboration was an original and valuable form: the American version of the agit-prop play. But, he added, the agit-prop play failed to fully reflect American culture. According to Elion, the workers' theatre groups had recently seen how effectively the musical, the song and dance revue, and the vaudeville forms could be used by the proletarian theatres.

Elion suggested that the workers' theatres had taken

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[113]Harry Elion, "The Problems of Repertory," Workers Theatre, April, 1933, p. 6.

too narrow a view of proletarian content: there was a much wider range of proletarian experiences than economic struggles, such as strikes. The workers' theatre should broaden its concepts of content and form, he declared; and to do so it had to train its playwrights in playwriting techniques. Elion proposed a three-part approach to the problems of repertory. His proposals were:

1. to draw in professional playwrights to conduct playwriting classes,
2. to hold local playwriting conferences which would acquaint outsiders with the work of the workrs' theatres and help to bring them into the movement,
3. to study the dramatic masterpieces of the past.

The following statement appeared as a part of the editorial in the first (September-October 1933) New Theatre, and was a further indication of the developing attitude of the workers' theatre movement: "The workers' theatre now realizes that it must study the techniques of the theatres of the past, adopting the best of the old to the service of the masses--experimenting--studying--criticizing itself. This understanding must be reflected in NEW THEATRE."[114]

Communist Party policies were changing quickly, in response to developments in Germany, and the aesthetic principles of Workers Theatre and New Theatre were being modified by the times. The March 25, 1933 editorial of the Daily Worker called for "A United Front to Fight Fascism."[115]

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[114] New Theatre, September-October, 1933, p. 3.

[115] See Chapter I,

And, in an apparent response to this new imperative, a note in the July-August 1933 Workers Theatre, headed "A Caution on Repertory," and signed by the National Executive Committee, League of Workers Theatres, read as follows:

> Members of the League of Workers Theatres must pay serious attention to the problem of the treatment in plays of various labor and political organizations. The revolutionary theatre must call a halt to the writing and production of plays which indulge in mere name-calling and crude caricaturing of, for example, Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party, and the individuals who lead the American Federation of Labor. Revolutionary plays which offer criticism and attack should deal with concrete and substantially serious material, which alone can convince serious-minded workers of the correctness of the points made. Of course the form may be comic and satirical, but in any case the essential point should be soundly presented. Plays which concern themselves mainly with real or suggested mannerisms instead of sound analysis, should be frowned upon. This will be an important factor in spreading the influence of the revolutionary theatre.[116]

Dramatic Criticism

The ever-evolving aesthetic principles of Workers Theatre, which reflected shifting policies in the American Communist Party were, in turn, reflected in the dramatic criticism--of individual theatre artists, theatrical productions, and of the work of the left-wing theatre groups--that appeared in the magazine during 1933. The magazine and the left-wing theatre movement as a whole continued to demonstrate its interest in the few Broadway theatre productions that dealt with social issues. And although the criticism of such

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[116]"A Caution on Repertory," Workers Theatre, July-August, 1933, p. 13.

professional productions was still politically motivated, the magazine was beginning to make obvious overtures to those professional playwrights with social consciences to come over to the revolutionary theatre.

In an article written for the March 1933 Workers Theatre, entitled "Broadway and the Art Theatre--End of an Era," Jerry K. Graham wrote that the professional theatre had reached a turning point (but made no mention, of course, of any turning point in the policies of the left-wing theatre). The legitimate theatres, as well as the art theatres were in a terrible state of decline, Graham pointed out, and the theatre had come to "the end of the art theatre era, the prelude to the era of the political theatre."[117] Graham interpreted the presentation, on Broadway, of Elmer Rice's production of his play We the People as evidence that the professional theatre had finally begun an era of political awareness.

We the People is about two American families--one urban and one rural--and their struggle for survival during the harsh Depression years. The two families are representatives of all families during the period; their stories are connected because of a romance between the daughter of one family and the son of the other. Rice wrote We the People as a series of twenty short realistic episodes. He tried to

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[117]Jerry K. Graham, "Broadway and the Art Theatre--End of an Era," Workers Theatre, March, 1933, p. 4.

provide a broad picture of the many varieties of injustice that are endured by people in this country. Among the themes that Rice included in this play are the mistreatment of aliens, the inequality of women, prejudice against blacks, US imperialism, the poor treatment of war veterans, the evils of capitalism, anti-semitism, dirty politics and big business, and the restraints on free speech. It is not at all surprising that the result of attempting to relate all of these themes in a single linear plot is a play that is choppy and, in my opinion, extremely contrived. This contrivance is particularly evident, in the final scene of We the People, when many of the very diverse characters come together and one of their number recites the Declaration of Independence and indicates that if the rights of the people are not respected by their government, then such a government will be removed by force.

There is no specifically political message at the end of We the People, however, and the lack of such a statement led Graham to comment that Rice was not yet sufficiently sure of where he stood politically to produce a clear play. "Frankly propagandistic," he wrote, "Rice's play reflects tail-end fashion, the perplexities of the lower-middle class before a dawning consciousness of the class struggle. . . ."[118]

We the People was about to close at the time that Graham wrote his review for Workers Theatre. Graham stressed

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[118] Ibid.

that, before the play finished its run, "it will have demonstrated two things of importance to the workers' theatre. First, that without political clarification, a first-rate craftsman from the bourgeois theatre is only a little better than a raw apprentice in the revolutionary theatre. Second, that the framework of the bourgeois theatre will not support a revolutionary production, which requires a workingclass audience."[119]

Michael Blankfort, a theatre critic for the Communist magazine The New Masses, and a producer and revolutionary playwright as well, wrote an assessment of the 1932-33 Broadway season, for the July-August 1933 Workers Theatre. "From the point of view of the working class," Blankfort began his review,"Broadway and its playwrights might just as well have been on Mars."[120] Only five of the 117 plays produced during that season had touched on problems of a social nature.

Blankfort did not like Rice's We the People any more than Jerry Graham had. He felt that it was a bad play, both structurally and dramatically, and that it was, "the product of a playwright whose amorphouse political ideas were further confused by a false perspective."[121] Blankfort said that the play's "ideological failure resided in the attempt to solve

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[119]Ibid.

[120]Michael Blankfort, "Broadway on Reivew--Season of 1932-33," Workers Theatre, July-August, 1933, p. 4.

[121]Ibid., p. 5.

the economic crisis by a final appeal to all classes to collaborate and make clean their American house."[122]

Another "social" play of the 1932-33 season was George O'Neil's American Dream which deals with the spiritual degeneration of an old American family--even as the financial fortunes of the family continue to improve and to move closer to the cherished American ideal of success. The three acts of the play are set in the 17th, 19th and 20th centuries. In each of the acts, the protagonist, whose name is Daniel Pingree, is shown to be a rebel who is dissatisfied with the moral and material values of his family. In the final act of the play, set in 1933, Pingree--who has written a treatise that is rejected by the local Communist cell--commits suicide. The one Communist character in the play, as Blankfort points out in his review, is so idealized, that he seems unreal and serves no function at all in the play's plot. Nevertheless, Blankfort feels that, "Neither Mr. O'Neil nor Mr. Elmer Rice . . . need be rejected as useless to a revolutionary theatre. Both are guilty of fundamental errors but these grow, it is hoped, out of political adolescence rather than a willful denial of reality."[123]

The "social play of the year" was Maxwell Anderson's Both Your Houses, which Blankfort characterized as, " . . . an apology for graft and political racketeering." Blankfort declared that, "Mr. Anderson and the Theatre Guild so dis-

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[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid.

guised the cause and effect of corruption, that the system which permitted its unemployed relief funds to be so viciously misused, and its so-called legislators and executors to be bought off by the highest bidder, was ignored, and by ignoring was condoned. And for this they were awarded the Pulitzer Prize as the most outstanding contribution to American culture."[124]

At the end of his review, in which he also discussed Coward's Design for Living, Biography by S. N. Behrman, Dinner at Eight by Kaufman, along with several other Broadway plays of the season, Blankfort observed that,

> Any summary of the bourgeois theatre of the last year or last years would find it clear that the playwright must be given his due for technical proficiency; that the playwright must be severely criticized for the quality and direction of his content the very vitality and significance of which can only come with a realistic view of society and the individuals and classes it contains. The sole hope for the honest playwright lies in an alighnment with the militant workingclass because only the workingclass can make a better world, in fact, only through it can come a clear sight of the world.[125]

The premiere production of the play which has been cited as the first example of socialist realism--Maxim Gorky's Yegor Bulichev and Others--was reviewed for Workers Theatre by Nathaniel Buchwald, the magazine's correspondent in the USSR. Gorky's play is about a wealthy merchant, Yegor Bulichev, who is dying of cancer while, in the background, the February Revolution is taking place. Although the play is rich in its characterizations and in the many intricacies

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[124]Ibid, p. 4

[125]Ibid., p. 5.

of its plot, it also has a larger significance, and is about the crumbling away of the old order and the rising up of the new.

Yegor Bulichev and Others is a play about revolution and there are revolutions, on three levels, within the play. The first is the revolution that takes place within Bulichev himself. As his body wastes away from the pestilence of cancer, Bulichev goes through a personal revolution of sorts, and is cleansed of his capitalistic greed, his false relations, and many of his old ways. Because Bulichev is dying, he has not time for or interest in false social amenities; he also gives up his belief in as well as his dependency on God.

Another revolution takes place in the play--in the Bulichev household. The "others"--Yegor Bulichev's family and business associates--who attempt to manipulate him and those few people whom he really loves and who truly care about him, are rebuffed, and the would-be manipulators are out-manipulated by their intended victims. The victors in this internal household struggle are those characters who are on the side of change and who will be sympathetic to the Revolution--the third in this play--that is taking place outside, in all of Russia.

In his review for Workers Theatre, Nathaniel Buchwald noted that Yegor Bulichev and Others was written as an epitaph for the old order. What impressed him the most about the play, however, was Gorky's ability at characterization and dialogue. Buchwald was also enthusiastic about various

elements in the play's production at the Vaktangov Theatre in Moscow: "Again one saw before oneself the tradition of the Stanislavsky school, with its high theatrical culture, with its chisled individual character portrayal based on a thorough understanding of the character and on the character's dramatic relationship to the whole play."[126]

An announcement of importance to the left-wing theatre movement appeared in the March 1933 Workers Theatre which contained Buchwald's review:

> The Theatre Union, organized to produce in a competent professional manner plays dealing with the struggle of the workingclass and collapsing of capitalism, has held four meetings at which it enlisted a membership of nearly 100 experienced theatre workers. The Theatre is now planning to take a group of 35 or 40 theatre workers to the suburbs during the Summer, there to rehearse three full length plays. In the Fall, the Theatre will open its season. The plays include an anti-imperialist war play, a play on the mutiny in the fleet, and a bonus march play. Prices will be within the range of the workers.[127]

It was not mentioned, in this announcement, that the Theatre Union was a united front organization, whose membership subscribed to the left-wing point of view, but did not support any single political party. What was important, at the moment, was the fact that the revolutionary theatre movement finally had a permanent, stationary professional company.

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[126]Nathaniel Buchwald, "Maxim Gorky's New Play," Workers Theatre, March, 1933, p. 5.

[127]Workers Theatre, March, 1933, p. 16. The first two plays alluded to here are Peace on Earth and Sailors of Cattaro; I don't know what play is the "bonus march play."

The Theatre Collective--an off-shoot of the Workers Laboratory Theatre--was another full-time stationary (but to begin with, non-professional) revolutionary theatre group. Jerry Graham mentioned the formation of the Theatre Collective, in his article for the March 1933 Workers Theatre, and said that its organization marked a new step forward for the left-wing theatre movement. The group, he reported, was constantly getting new recruits from the professional stage.

The Theatre Collective's production of 1931, by Paul and Claire Sifton, was reviewed by Ben Blake, in the July-August 1933 Workers Theatre. The play, which had been revised by the authors to show that the workingclass was developing a strong revolutionary movement, had, "made history as the first English-language production by a revolutionary professional theatre in New York since the New Playwrights Theatre," declared Blake.[128] "'1931' gave evidence that the Theatre Collective has assembled a fine acting company and good theatre technicians. Now the directing forces must be strengthened and more playwrights recruited. A definite artistic policy needs to be worked out. And the organization of a mass audience of subscribers is imperative."[129]

The Yiddish-language Artef group continued to produce plays which were insufficiently political and too consciously

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[128] B. B. "1931--The Theatre Collective's Production, Workers Theatre, July-August, 1933, p. 9.

[129] Ibid.

"artistic," as far as the reviewers of Workers Theatre were concerned. Al Saxe reviewed the Artef production of a play entitled, The Steppe is in Flames, for the March 1933 issue of the magazine, and stated that the Artef offering was a weak play made weaker by its production. He observed that this had been the case in a number of Artef productions in which an over-abundance of technique had been coupled with a poor understanding of the ideas in the plays. His criticism of the acting in the production, however, was considerably more sophisticated than the criticism of Artef which had formerly appeared in the magazine. "Their emotions are false--made up of make-up--and the stencils of the actor, the voices placed at a certain pitch the gestures made just so, the creation of a character through the surface elements, entirely neglecting the basis from which these elements grow: THE EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL RECREATION OF A CHARACTER with the ASSISTANCE of make-up, scenery, lighting, etc."[130]

By the end of 1933, Workers Theatre was well on its way towards developing aesthetic principles that were based on artistic considerations at least as much as they were based on political concerns. And, as we have seen, the reviews which were written for the magazine were beginning to reflect this new aesthetic outlook as a basis for dramatic criticism. The editors of the magazine were hopeful that

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[130]Alfred Saxe, review of "The Steppe is in Flames--Artef's New Production," Workers Theatre, March, 1933, p. 14.

the young playwrights in the workers' theatre movement would soon begin to evidence more skill in their playwrighting, but the plays which appeared in Workers Theatre during 1933--there were far fewer that year--were very much the same as those which had been published in the magazine in previous years: elementary agit-prop plays, mass recitations and episodic realistic sketches--all dominated by rhetoric and simplistic political messages.

One rather interesting play which was published in the May-June 1933 issue of Workers Theatre was Dr. Krupps Specialist, an anonymous Russian play which had been translated for the magazine by Olga Siegel and Jack Martin of the Workers Laboratory Theatre. This short play, which appears to have been an early example of socialist realism, is a satire of the American-capitalist way of getting things done. Dr. Krupps Specialist is about a collective farm that has had a huge increase in the size of its wheat crop and is in need of a fast and efficient method of harvesting it. Dr. Krupps, an American "specialist" volunteers his services. Krupps, who views his clever work as being something of a fine art, assumes that the Russians want their crop destroyed so that the price of wheat will go up. The reaction of the two women who run the collective, to Krupps' suggestion, is predictable:

Annusa: The crazy capitalist parasite--he thinks the Soviet Union is run for profit.

Radianova: The price of bread isn't going to go up in the Soviet Union. Our aim is cheap bread and plenty for all.[131]

In September 1933, Workers Theatre was succeeded by New Theatre magazine. New Theatre did not appear again until January 1934, by which time the recently modified aesthetic principles, along with the broadening political approach of the Communist Party, were well assimilated into all of the magazine's content. That such a development had taken place was illustrated in a review of two English workers' theatre groups, written for the January 1934 New Theatre by John Bonn, once the most doctrinaire of all the theoriticians and spokesmen for the workers' theatre movement. In his review, Bonn wrote that the two groups, The Red Front and the Red Players, were guilty of practicing "conscious primitiveness." ". . . The Theory of primitiveness is correct as long as it is applicable to the beginning of a new theatre movement, as a transitional method of work in order to get the best results out of the still primitive forms," wrote Bonn. "But it becomes absurd when accepted as the principle of theatre as a whole."[132]

The left-wing theatre movement had, indeed, turned an important corner. The age of primitiveness was over.

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[131]Olga Siegel and Jack Martin, trans., Dr. Krupps Specialist, Workers Theatre, May-June, 1933, p. 8.

[132]John Bonn, "The International Scene," New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 23.

CHAPTER VI

AESTHETICS AND CRITICAL POSITION

PERIOD OF TRANSITION

The Evolving Aesthetics for the Left-Wing Theatre

With the emergence of New Theatre magazine, the workers in the left-wing theatre appear to have begun to regard politics and aesthetics as more separate entities, as they now concentrated their attention on finding the way to an aesthetic for a broad-based revolutionary theatre that would have mass appeal. In an article about the Workers Laboratory Theatre production of Newsboy, Al Saxe, the group's director, wrote, "Our basis for development lies in an eagerness to delve into new fields, to learn from the theatre of the past--to draw in professionals and semi-professionals to assist in this scientific Marxist understanding of life and its application to the artistic problems of the theatre."[1]

The deepening Depression, coupled with the recently liberalized policies of the Communist Party, were helping to popularize the left-wing movement, in general, and, along with it, the left-wing theatre. Sympathetic theatre professionals began to take a more active interest in the left-

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[1]Al Saxe, "Newsboy--From Script to Performance," New Theatre, July-August, 1934, p. 29.

wing theatres, and in participating in the work of these groups. In response to this potentially expanded readership, the tone of the articles in New Theatre was becoming more theatrically sophisticated and less politically doctrinaire.

Michael Blankfort wrote an article, in three installments, for New Theatre, which was entitled "Facing the New Audience--Sketches Towards an Aesthetic for the Revolutionary Theatre." The first part of the essay was published in the June 1934 issue of the magazine, and Blankfort's main point was that it is the audience and what the audience wishes to see in the theatre that determines what the playwright must do in his plays.

Specific audiences have specific wishes, and most audience wishes stem from their perception of some sort of conflict in their lives. "A psychological wish," wrote Balnkfort, "is really an economic wish with its roots in the conflicts and contradictions of our present day culture and economy."[2] The question, of course, is how to best satisfy the audience's wish, in the theatre. And, of particular interest to Blankfort is the relationship of wish-fulfillment, through the theatre, to the class struggle.

In the second installment of his essay, Blankfort described the ways in which the audience's wishes are fulfilled in the bourgeois theatre, and how this wish-fulfillment

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[2]Michael Blankfort, "Facing the New Audience--Sketches Toward An Aesthetic for the Revolutionary Theatre," New Theatre, June, 1934, p. 12.

is used--both consciously and unconsciously--for the purpose of strengthening capitalism. One desire that is shared by all audiences, said Blankfort, is the desire for an escape from the problems which it faces. The bourgeois theatre fulfills this wish, in many of its plays, simply by making the audience forget its own specific worries and lose itself in the conflicts of the play. By emphasizing bourgeois values and the conflicts of the plot, the audience escapes from its own set of problems.

Tragedies, such as Strange Interlude, commented Blankfort, offer the audience another sort of escape. By having a purgative effect on the emotions of the audience, tragedy makes the audience feel out of touch with its more immediate and mundane concerns. A third method used by the bourgeois theatre to fulfill the audience's desire for escape, is found in plays that have plots in which the hero escapes his problems, and the audience, in identifying with the hero, is given the consoliation of a fantasy escape.

There is, Blankfort concluded, a relationship between wish-fulfillment and class interests: the ruling class always makes use of the culture to perpetuate its power. In order for the workers' theatre to use the theatre for its own purposes, Blankfort said that the need for wish-fulfillment should be satisfied by showing how escape from the real problems of the workers' daily existence is possible. The July-August installment of the essay concluded with Blankfort stating that,

"Tobacco Road like The House of Conolly by Paul Green and several of the Tchekov plays present the question [of] whether or not a picture of decay of the upper class, or a picture of the misery of the working class is sufficient to satisfy the requirements for a workers' theatre. Whether a play has to have a call to action is one of our most important considerations."[3]

The final installment of Blankfort's article was published in the November 1934 issue of New Theatre, and began with his assertion that workers' theatre plays must not only appeal to the militant and class-conscious vanguard, but also must attract the masses of less advanced workers. The plays, "must hew to the line: To present the working class point of view and revolutionary ideology most effectively and most dramatically."[4] In addition, the plays must be written with the understanding of who their audiences will be and of what will be the most dramatic way of presenting the new material to them.

Most revolutionary plays have been "pendulum plays," observed Blankfort. They are supposed to accomplish their aim because the unclassconscious worker is expected to identify with the hero of the play who turns left. There is, however, a dangerous tendency inherent in the pendulum play: it gives the false impression that the entire working class is turning

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[3]Michael Blankfort, "Facing the New Audience--Part II," New Theatre, July-August, 1934, p. 15.

[4]Michael Blankfort, "Facing the New Audience--Concluded," New Theatre, November, 1934, p. 25.

left at the same rate. Also, the pendulum play approaches the class struggle in too mechanical a manner--as if everyone who participates in a strike is a class-conscious worker. The pendulum play may give rise to a fictitious type of wish-fulfillment--an escape of sorts. "Revolutionary idealism," wrote Blankfort, ". . . differs from other kinds in that it is a stimulant toward the achievement of the projected victory by means of very concrete steps, i.e., demonstrations, strikes, revolution."

Characters in the revolutionary play must be depicted concretely, so as to be understandable, declared Blankfort. They should not be distorted in order to make them militant by the play's ending. The character's turn to the Left at the end of the play must be consistent with his actions during the play.

Blankfort identified the two major difficulties encountered by the revolutionary playwright as the "call to action" and "last scene trouble"--two problems which were often combined. Blankfort said that, above all, the revolutionary playwright must avoid abstractions and that both of these difficulties should be solved by using the human conflicts in the play as a basis for their resolution. The call to action is only effective when it is dramatic and arises from the conflict of two convincingly human forces in the play. "Only through the <u>characters</u> we create in our plays,

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[5]Ibid., n. 1., p. 25.

can we hope to write effective propaganda plays," he emphasized. The essay concluded with a return to the question of the playwright's fulfilling the audience's wishes:

> The bourgeois theatre fulfills the wishes of its audiences and in doing so fuses that fulfillment with the interests of the oppressor class. We, too, must satisfy audience wishes, psychological and economic, but our task is to fuse that satisfaction with the interests of the workingclass.
>
> The outlook of our theatre is a brilliant one. We are pioneering. In a sense we are just emerging from the morality drama. We await our Shakespeare.[6]

The emergence of the Shakespeare of the American revolutionary theatre of the nineteen thirties--Clifford Odets--was stimulated by a Playwriting Contest that was announced in the September 1934 New Theatre--the second issue of the magazine under the editorship of Herbert Kline. The announcement of the contest, which was co-sponsored by New Theatre and The New Masses, was headed, "Send Us Scripts. The Workers' Theatre Appeals--to Professionals--for Plays," and stated that although the workers' theatre was unable to offer playwrights a livelihood, it could give them a forum and a producing organization. The audiences of the workers' theatres, the announcement continued, wanted to see new plays and was tired of the same old simplistic formulas. "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 it is so much Esperanto to the

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[6]Ibid., p. 37.

worker who wants that polemic presented in terms of flesh and blood--not to mention a little thunder."[7]

The judges listed for the Playwrighting Contest were: Harry Elion, representing the League of Workers Theatres; Al Saxe, of the Workers Laboratory Theatre; Herbert Kline, for New Theatre; and Joseph North and Stanley Burnshaw, both of The New Masses.

John Gassner contributed his first article to New Theatre, in October, 1934. With the inclusion of Gassner on the staff, the magazine added significantly to its professional appeal as well as to its importance as both a contemporary influence and as a retrospective barometer of the left-wing theatre and, in fact, of the American theatre in general, during the nineteen-thirties. In the preface to the anthology of his dramatic criticism, Dramatic Soundings--Evaluations and Retractions Culled from 30 Years of Dramatic Criticism, Gassner spoke of himself as a former left-winger, writing, " . . . I, too was once a partisan, in my salad days in the thirties."[8]

Gassner was a playreader for the Theatre Guild throughout the nineteen-thirties, including the period when he wrote dramatic criticism for New Theatre. His first article

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[7]"Send Us Scripts--The Workers' Theatre Appeals--to Professionals--for Plays," New Theatre, September, 1934, p. 26.

[8]John Gassner, "Preface," Dramatic Soundings: Evaluations and Retractions Culled from 30 Years of Dramatic Criticism (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. xi.

for the magazine, "A Playreader on Playwrights," appeared in the October 1934 issue, and began with his assertion that no one could paint a more dismal picture of the bourgeois theatre than the playreader. As far as he as a playreader was concerned, he wrote, "The bourgeois theatre is dead."[9] Gassner continued:

> . . . The bourgeois theatre is rapidly becoming an arid waste. . . . New material, a new class of playwrights must be brought into the theatre if it is to survive. . . . The frequent complaint of producers that they have no worth-while (bourgeois) plays to present is a significant admission. Irrespective of political affiliations, the lover of the theatre must cast his eye in the direction of the revolutionary theatre, though it is questionable whether he can understand the revolutionary theatre without some political orientation.[10]

Gassner said that revolutionary plays were still relatively rare and that they still had many faults. The following are some of the general weaknesses that Gassner said he had encountered in many of the revolutionary plays that had come to his attention, along with some of his suggestions for their improvement:

--The plays contained too much rant.

--Revolution was accomplished too easily in these plays.

--Hubbub was often confused with true excitement.

--The plays often commented on the struggle, instead of showing it directly.

--Some of the plays covered too much ground, instead of focusing on one pivotal issue.

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[9]John Gassner, "A Playreader on Playwrights," New Theatre, October, 1934, p. 9.

[10]Ibid., p. 10.

--Many of the plays didn't individualize the workers, but treated them as Marxist pawns.

--The playwrights should avoid caricatures and theatrical villains.

--Changes that take place--e.g., conversions--should be clearly motivated.

Gassner said, however, that all of these weaknesses notwithstanding, most of the revolutionary plays that he had read and seen started with genuine conflict and concern, and therein lay their importance. He concluded the article with the observation that,

> Revolutionary playwrights struggling with their problems need, above all, experimental production, and this can best be provided by the workers' theatres that have been showing so much vitality in the past year. . . . The workers' theatres should do at least as much for the revolutionary drama as the little theatres of two decades ago did for the competent middle class playwright of today. No true lover of the theatre can afford to remain indifferent to their success.[11]

The theoreticians, critics and artists of the left-wing theatre movement continued to grapple with the problem of finding and refining forms that were suitable to their revolutionary content; but basic to all of their discussions, by 1934, was the understanding that, above all, theatre had to be artistic and entertaining in order for it to be compelling.

Although the official endorsement of the method of socialist realism in the USSR had had the effect of prompting a move away from the agit-prop play form, in the American

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[11]Ibid., p. 11.

workers' theatres, there were nevertheless, some theatre workers who still felt that there advantages to the form, and who wanted to re-examine and improve upon its American version. Al Saxe, the director of the Workers Laboratory Theatre, and Peter Martin, a member of the group, were two such individuals who saw the possibilities inherent in a more sophisticated use of the agit-prop play. Martin wrote an article for the March 1934 New Theatre entitled, "Montage: A New Form for the Revolutionary Theatre." Martin began by explaining Eisenstein's method of montage. According to Martin, the montage method consisted of juxtaposing two very different elements to produce a third element. The latter element, he said, had special significance, both in itself and in relation to the two elements that had been used to produce it. Martin believed that the montage technique could be used to special advantage in the workers' theatre because it could help to show the basic contradictions that are inherent in the capitalist system.

As an illustration of his point, Martin referred to experiments done by the Workers Laboratory Theatre which resulted in the group's production of Newsboy. In Newsboy, portions of the Siftons' 1931, a poem by V. J. Jerome, and themes from the ballets of Kurt Jooss were used. Instead of a simple narrative, Martin explained, Newsboy employed a building of images, "a series of dramatic wrenches that cover the field of contradictions in the bourgeois press. The

spacial (visual) element of the montage-method prevails over the temporal (auditory), and the dialectics are expressed more in the content than in the structure. . . ."[12]

Martin noted that Saxe would use the montage technique in the WLT's next production--Scottsboro--which would be comprised of bits from Green Pastures, a poem entitled "Scottsboro Limited," the court case records, plus some original material. He concluded the article by urging other workers' theatre groups to experiment with the montage principle.

> The advantages are tremendous--a mobility of expression of revolutionary content, a complete break with the technical encumbrance of 'realistic' drops and sets, and the attainment of a form which will be the most complete medium of revolutionary drama. Gone will be the static factors of drama, and in place of them will be a method reflecting revolutionary themes so efficiently that it becomes more than expert technique: it inspires. With out inspiration, there is no great art, without great art there can be no effective propaganda.[13]

"Writing for the Workers' Theatre," by Herbert Kline, appeared in the December 1934 New Theatre. Kline reported that in going through the play scripts that were on file at the League of Workers Theatres, he had found the plays to be of a surprisingly poor quality. It seemed amazing to him that these plays had done at all well in production, since they were, for the most part, encumbered by, "Stiff, overwritten dialogue, carry-all plots, poor timing, failure to even try for characterization and the tendency to substitute long expository argumentative conversation for dramatic images

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[12]Peter Martin, "Montage--A New Form for the Revolutionary Theatre," New Theatre, March, 1934, p. 9.

[13]Ibid., p. 10.

and action. . . ."[14] The major problem facing the revolutionary theatre of the day, wrote Kline, was the scarcity of scripts and the inadequacy of the scripts that were available.

Kline discussed the dramatic criticism of Marx and Engels and declared that, "for them dramatic content constitutes the various manifestations of the broad international class struggles that determine man's fate."[15] These conflicts, said Kline, have always been the subjects of the major dramatists such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Shakespeare--dramatists of the past who were greatly revered by Marx and Engels. Kline continued,

> The basis of Marx and Engels' approach to analyzing the relationship of the characters to their background is that the images and thoughts of people are but reflections of objective reality. When they called for rich characterizations, colorful representation of peasant life, the juxtaposition of individualized characters and the blending of intellectual depth with the social content in quick and vivacious dialogue they struck at the heart of the workers' repertoire problem of today.[16]

Kline suggested that the workers' theatre groups should follow the Soviet theatre's practice of adapting the classics of dramatic literature--plays by such masters as Aristophanes, Shakespeare and Moliere--for the purpose of production before revolutionary audiences. He also reminded his readers that there was much that the revolutionary playwright could learn from the technique of many "bourgeois" plays. Kline once again urged the leading professional play-

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[14]Herbert Kline, "Writing for the Workers' Theatre," New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 22.

[15]Ibid.

[16]Ibid., p. 23.

wrights to write for the workers' theatres. He concluded the piece by observing that better critical standards were needed for evaluating the productions of the revolutionary theatre.

Several articles on the various arts of the theatre were published in New Theatre, during 1934. The level of the writing in these articles--the majority of which dealt with acting and directing techniques--indicates that they were intended as instructional aids for the amateur workers' theatre groups. Another installment of Mordecai Gorelik's "Scenery: The Visual Machinery" appeared in the January 1934 New Theatre.

The doctrine of socialist realism had obviously affected, if not Gorelik's ideas on scenic design, at least his method of expressing these ideas, when he wrote this installment of his essay for the magazine. Gorelik began the article by saying that the designer must first seek out the conflict around which the play revolves, before he attempts to devise the scenery for the production. He regarded the stage set as the battleground for the play's conflict, because, "the same history which has caused the struggle has also caused the physical appearance of the battleground, as well as the physical properties of the weapons."[17] The task of the scenic designer was defined by Gorelik as being "to translate the historical significance of the locale of the

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[17]Mordecai Gorelik, "Scenery: The Visual Machine," New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 9

conflict into a visual machine for the projection of a play. . . ."[18]

The mere publication of an article entitled, "Why Make-Up?" by Lewis Leverett--an actor in the Group Theatre--in the October 1934 New Theatre, is an indication of the great change that had taken place in the magazine's approach to the theatre art as a weapon, since Workers Theatre had first appeared. Only three years earlier, it may be remembered, the Jewish Dram Sections were soundly criticized--and practically called counter-revolutionaries--for their interest in the technical theatre arts, including make-up.[19]

Leverett's article was written on a very elementary level and was a simple explanation of the purposes of using stage cosmetics, along with some basic guidelines, for the amateur actor's use, about how to plan a character's make-up. Interestingly, as an illustration of make-up technique, three photographs of Helen Hayes making-up for Mary of Scotland were included, "Reproduced by courtesy of Stage Magazine. Photo by Valente."[20] Furthermore, at the end of Leverett's article, the following note appeared, and is another example of the magazine's new pragmatic approach to producing revolutionary theatre in a capitalist society: "Although NEW THEATRE has no interest in drumming up any cosmetic manufacturer, we suggest that the Max Factor pamphlets on the art

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[18]Ibid.

[19]See Chapter V, p. 285.

[20]Lewis Leverett, "Why Make-Up?" New Theatre, October, 1934, p. 20.

of make-up (which can be ordered free by writing Max Factor Products, Hollywood, California) be used by worker-actors as study manuals on make-up."[21]

The editors of New Theatre continued to maintain an active and admiring interest in the theatre of the USSR. During 1934, four articles on the subject of Soviet Theatre were published in the magazine. The first of these was "The Moscow Scene," by Heinrich Diament, which appeared in the February 1934 issue.

Diament's statement that, "the struggle against formalism, against naked slogans, against schematicism are the characteristic features of our present theatrical season,"[22] is an illustration of how much the recent less-strident tone of the American left-wing theatre movement had resulted from shifts in the Soviet policy. The close relationship between the Russian policies and the theatrical methodology espoused by New Theatre is also evident in Diament's discussion of the attention being devoted, in the USSR, to the literary heritage of the past:

> The problem of the classical inheritance is for the Soviet Union not only a problem of demonstrating the past, but also a question of study and learning from these classics. The Soviet theatre . . . is critically working over the inheritance of the past and presenting it to the Soviet audience, throwing its own bright light on the past. Plays of old classics on Soviet

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[21] Ibid., p. 21.

[22] Heinrich Diament, "The Moscow Scene," New Theatre, February, 1934, p. 13.

> stages interpreted by the minds of the Soviet theatre receive new life, thus more truly reflecting these social and class processes of the centuries preparing for the great October Revolution.[23]

An article about the new Krasny-Presney Theatre of Moscow, by Stephen Karnot, appeared in the July-August 1934 New Theatre. Gorky's Mother, the first presentation of that theatre, was praised by Karnot as having been, ". . . the most amazing theatre production it has been the good fortune of this writer to witness."[24] Karnot stressed that the audience was involved in the production, but that it had not been bullied into its involvement, and he attributed the brilliance of the production to "a new synthesis of age-old elements."[25]

Individuals from the Group Theatre had begun to regularly contribute articles to New Theatre; two pieces by Group members on the subject of the Soviet theatre were published in the magazine during 1934. A descriptive article by Lee Strasberg, one of the directors of the Group, on "The Magic of Meyerhold," appeared in the September 1934 issue. And, "It Makes You Weep--An Interview with Stella Adler," by Janet Thorpe, was included in the October 1934 New Theatre. The Group Theatre actress had come away from her trip to the

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[23]Ibid., p. 14.

[24]E. Stephen Karnot, "Krasny-Presney--The Birth of a New Theatre," New Theatre, July-August, 1934, p. 6.

[25]Ibid.

theatres of the Soviet Union with an overwhelming and depressing sense of how inadequate the conditions for the artistic development of theatre artists in America were, in comparison to the conditions enjoyed by their Russian counterparts.

Critical Position

(A) The Commercial Theatre

That 1934 was a transitional year, insofar as the political policies of the Communist Party were concerned, is certainly reflected in the dramatic criticism which was published in New Theatre during that year. While some of the magazine's contributors wrote criticism that was completely in tune with the evolving Popular Front approach, many of their colleagues continued to use the formerly obligatory Third Period outlook as a basis for their aesthetic standards. Two reviews of contemporary productions--one by Oskar Johnson and the other by Ben Blake, the editor of Workers Theatre and New Theatre--in the January 1934 issue, illustrate these two contrasting approaches and are indicative of the transitional nature of the year.

Oskar Johnson's review of the Group Theatre's production of Men in White by Sidney Kingsley is an example of the emerging liberal and indulgent attitude towards attempts at social theatre on Broadway. Men in White is the story of a poor but idealistic and promising young resident named George

Fergusen. Fergusen is torn between his love for the medical profession and the ultimatum given to him by his wealthy fun-loving fiancée that he abruptly terminate his training and go into an easy and lucrative Park Avenue practice. Apart from the romantic aspect of the play, Kingsley's story is also a hymn sung in praise of the glories of modern medicine. Although he does include one money-grubbing incompetent among the many doctors in the play, most of the medical men depicted are self-sacrificing and dedicated to the art of healing. In the hospital in Men in White, the rich and poor get equally excellent treatment.

In his discussion of Men in White, Johnson acknowledged that the Group Theatre production was merely good Broadway theatre and that everything hinged on the romance in the play. He said that, although Kingsley "throws a few neat punches,"[26] there is no real protest against the system, and he pointed out that what had most affected the audience was the naturalism of the play--particularly in the operating-room scene. "It's good news-reel stuff," he wrote. "But it hasn't the guts of real drama. However," Johnson continued, "Broadway being Broadway, a few punches swung intentionally in the right direction is something not to be dismissed with a wave of the hand."[27]

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[26]Oskar Johnson, review of Men in White, New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 10.

[27]Ibid.

It is apparent from Ben Blake's reviews of Sailor Beware! and Let 'Em Eat Cake that the set of criteria which he was using for his dramatic criticism was rooted in the aesthetic policies of the Third Period. It seems likely that if Blake had reviewed the Kingsley play for New Theatre, he would have been less than tolerant of the playwright's glowing portrayal of the medical profession. Sailor Beware! is a hectic, rather simple-minded romantic comedy about a sailor and his girl. But to Blake, the play did not seem to be either harmless or innocent. "Plays like this," he wrote, "--'just plain funny'--though they may be by intention, help to make it easier for the military machine to whoop things up for the next war."[28]

As far as Blake was concerned, Let 'Em Eat Cake--the sequel to Of Thee I Sing--by Kaufman and Ryskind, with music by George and Ira Gershwin, might have been produced to prove the correctness of Joseph Freeman's[29] forecast that, "'The Broadway theatre is likely to develop very vigorous plays out of the crisis, clever in their technique and reactionary in their message. . . . The technical skill of Broadway will make them dangerous, and by the time they are revamped for Hollywood for the millions of movie fans, they will constitute

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[28]Ben Blake, review of Sailor Beware!, New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 11.

[29]Freeman, one of the editors of The New Masses, was as well-known communist literary critic.

a tremendous force on the side of the ruling class. . . .'"[30]

In Let 'Em Eat Cake, Wintergreen, having been defeated for re-election, goes into a partnership with his old political cronies--selling blue shirts made by his wife Mary. Due to the Depression and to the lack of helpful government programs, the business of Wintergreen and company almost fails, until one of the partners thinks of selling the blue shirts as a symbol of revolution. What they are selling, in fact, is the idea of revolution, and business booms! The revolution takes place, the new President is forced out of office, and Wintergreen manages to get his old job back. There are many "gags" on the subject of revolution, in Let 'Em Eat Cake, which were, understandably, offensive to people like Ben Blake who took that matter very seriously. "[This] play," wrote Blake, "in its actual distortions of political and social forces . . . is more than mockery. The dark shadow of fascism has been cast upon the curtain of the stage."[31]

Blake, nonetheless, was still capable of looking at Let 'Em Eat Cake with the pragmatic eye of a theatre worker; and he pointed out that the play, "revels in all of the 'vices' for which the workers' theatre has been constantly attacked. It is full of political propaganda. . . . The lyrics

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[30]Joseph Freeman, as quoted by Ben Blake, in Blake's review of Let 'Em Eat Cake, New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 12.

[31]Ben Blake, review of Let 'Em Eat Cake, New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 12.

are mostly political satire and propaganda. . . . And it is all very effective. People active in the revolutionary theatre (particularly in the theatre of action) could benefit tremendously by studying the techniques of political propaganda as used in this play."[32]

Tobacco Road, adapted for the stage by Jack Kirkland from an Erskine Caldwell novel, opened on December 4, 1933 and closed, after 3,182 performances, on May 31, 1941."[33] The play about the Lesters, a family of destitute Georgia sharecroppers, owed much of its success to the sordid aspects of its plot: the unusually frank language spoken by the characters and the frequent, rather explicit references to sex. Although underlying the play there is an indictment against the system which allows, and in fact forces people like the Lesters to live as they do, the indictment is never verbalized or made clear. In a short review of the play that appeared in the February 1934 New Theatre, the critic observed that, although "Tobacco Road contains excellent material for a revolutionary play . . .[a]t no time, either through situation or suggestion in the dialogue do we know why these human beings exist in this revolting primitive state."[34]

Harold Edgar wrote an article as an overview of the

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[32]Ibid.

[33]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 135.

[34]Review of Tobacco Road, New Theatre, February, 1934, p. 17.

1933-34 Broadway season, entitled, "The Winter of Broadway," for the May 1934 New Theatre. Discussing Tobacco Road, Edgar said that the one positive aspect of the play's production was that it brought new material to the Broadwy theatre. But he also pointed out that as social drama Tobacco Road was, by far, inferior to John Wexley's They Shall Not Die which, as produced by the Theatre Guild, was having a much less successful run.[35]

"Elmer Rice," by Joseph Freeman, was published in the September 1934 New Theatre, in anticipation of the announced opening of two new Rice plays on Broadway later that Autumn. Freeman's article is a summary and analysis of Rice's work up until that time. Discussing Rice's plays sequentially, Freeman attempted to prove that the playwright had been slowly moving towards a more clearly focused political outlook.

Rice's first Broadway success, On Trial (1920), was a melodrama with a definite social bias, wrote Freeman, but the playwright took a "safe" position in that play. When The Adding Machine was presented, in 1923, it seemed to be a revolutionary play, and for the Broadway of that time it was, indeed, quite radical. Looking at the play today, observed Freeman, it is evident that it was only a "gesture of re-rebellion," an appeal for sympathy, not for revolt. The villain in The Adding Machine is, after all, the machine and

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[35]Please see Chapter III, pp. 160-161.

not the system, and "thus far the dramatist is only capable of negative criticism of surfaces."[36]

Freeman stated that although Street Scene, in 1927, was just "'reportage' of the familiar liberal order,"[37] the play was a step forward because it at least showed the problems of the lower classes. In his most recent play, We the People (1933), said Freeman, Rice finally speaks out in a full voice. The ending of We the People is a weak appeal in the name of the Declaration of Independence, Freeman wrote, "yet this agitational speech--the very fact that any kind of political appeal is openly, directly made from the dramatic stage--is an innovation, a revolutionary step."[38] Freeman concluded his essay with a hopeful glance towards Rice's new plays:

> It is worth considering now, whether Rice, who has grown so steadily, if unoriginally from the clever melodrama of On Trial, to the honest, burning social indictment of We the People, will grow stlll further. He has the equipment for becoming not merely a clever playwright but an important one, seeing and speaking, like Ibsen and Shaw, ahead of his audience. His new plays, to be produced shortly, will show whether he has taken advantage of his opportunities to surpass himself . . . in the light of that knowledge of contemporary life which the revolutionary working-class gives us.[39]

Judgement Day was the first of Rice's plays to open that season, and it was undoubtedly less radical than Freeman

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[36]Joseph Freeman, "Elmer Rice," New Theatre, September, 1934, p. 6.

[37]Ibid., p. 7.

[38]Ibid., p. 8.

[39]Ibid.

had anticipated. Ben Blake who reviewed the play for the October 1934 New Theatre, wrote that, "In his latest play, Elmer Rice has taken one step forward and two steps backwards. And the step forward is a mighty slight one."[40]

Judgement Day, which the playwright labeled a "melodrama in three acts," presents a situation analagous to the Reichstag fire incident which had taken place a year earlier in Germany. The specific situation in the play is an attempted assassination of a dictator in some small, un-named Eastern European nation. The leaders of a revolutionary organization are framed and brought to trial as conspirators in the crime. They are about to be sentenced to death when one of the judges on the tribunal, a liberal aristocrat, aids the incipient revolution by killing the dictator. He then takes his own life.

Blake wrote that, "in Judgement Day Rice is again the blind idealistic liberal of the pre-We-the-People period."[41] The treatment of the issues in the play is too broad, Blake said, and he was, naturally, disturbed that the hero of the play is the liberal judge. "Elmer Rice remains a provoking figure in the contemporary theatre," Blake maintained. "Artistically and temperamentally equipped to become a major playwright he continues to muddle along without coming to

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[40]Ben Blake, review of Judgement Day, New Theatre, October, 1934, p. 17.

[41]Ibid.

grips with the fundamentals of the themes which attract him. We the People was a promise. But Judgement Day indicates that the time many of us look forward to has yet to come."[42]

For Blake, the time for his hopes about Rice as a playwright to be realized was only a fortnight away. Rice's next play, Between Two Worlds, opened two weeks after Judgement Day, and when Blake reviewed the later play, in the December 1934 New Theatre he wrote that it was "a solid, mature play, one of the most worthwhile and enjoyable productions of this or any season."[43] Between Two Worlds is a shipboard romance and intrigue with larger ideological implications. The play is about a young girl, Margaret Bowen, who, while traveling to Europe with her mother and a family friend (an expatriot Russian princess), meets and falls in love with a Bolshevik film director. By introducing both the Russian princess and the Communist, Rice is able to show the two sides of the Revolution and the suffering that had been endured by both sides: it is revealed in the course of the discussion, that the Communist's grandfather had been a serf on the estate of the Princess' grandfather. Although Margaret and the Communist don't stay together at the play's ending, she has been sufficiently influenced by him to break off her engagement to a man whom she doesn't respect. Instead,

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ben Blake, "Two Authors Between Two Worlds: The Plays of the Month," New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 19.

she plans to marry a successful and brash young advertising executive who is disgusted with the social and economic order and who plans to go into politics to try to help change the system. It is the perfect liberal solution.

Blake felt that the play had been "written from sober reflection," and that in it, "Rice has dramatized effectively the major conflict of contemporary life."[44] He noted that the play, which is comprised mainly of discussion, "demonstrates an old but seldom illustrated dramatic axiom, that a clash of ideas can be every bit as exciting as a clash of physical forces."[45] With a good deal more tolerance than he had evidenced earlier, Blake concluded his review by noting that "Between Two Worlds is a fellow-traveler's play without the usual fellow-traveler's confusion. To Mr. Rice our last word for the present is, 'keep on traveling.'"[46]

Both Judgement Day and Between Two Worlds were almost instant commercial failures. In the editorial section of the December 1934 New Theatre, part of a letter which Rice had written to the New York Times was reproduced:

> ' . . . Between the creative artist and his potential auditors stands the sordid and ugly barrier of the commercial theatre. Here as everywhere in our organization, the profit system styles the dramatic impulse and dams the free flow of human vitality. . . . And so I say goodby to Broadway. Perhaps goodbye to the theatre. I believe America is rich in dramatic material and that there is a large potential audience for what is really

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[44]Ibid., p. 20

[45]Ibid.

[46]Ibid.

> fine in the drama. But whether or not it can be organized, or whether or not it is worth the trouble, I do not know. . . .'[47]

Following the reprint of Rice's letter, the editors of New Theatre asked the obvious question: "If Elmer Rice is really a revolutionist why does he try to buck the Broadway game alone? The revolutionary and anti-fascist organizations offer him their support and await his answer."[48]

Eugene O'Neill continued to be a source of disappointment and irritation to the Left. His 1933 Broadway offering was his nostalgic comedy about adolescence, Ah Wilderness!; and, in 1934, O'Neill went even further away from any social considerations, in Days Without End, a play in which a confused, self-destructive Communist and atheist finds peace and a sense of purpose in a return to religion. Neither Ah Wilderness! nor Days Without End were reviewed in New Theatre, but two passing references to these plays illustrated the Left's opinion of O'Neill's withdrawal from the contemporary social situation. In the editorial column of the February 1934 New Theatre, the Times critic, Brooks Atkinson was criticized for having been dissatisfied with Days Without End because it lacked the religious ecstasy potential in its theme.

> That O'Neill is turning more and more from the living scene, further negating himself as a positive cultural force in contemporary chaos, bothers Mr. Atkinson not a whit. . . .
> . . . . . .

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[47] Editorials, New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 3.

[48] Ibid., pp. 3-4.

> Millions may tramp the byways of the world without sustenance and the rattle of approaching wars raise a deafening clamor, but Mr. Atkinson asks, not for a play that breathes of the living world, but for a good stiff breeze that will blow us into the seas of mysticism.[49]

And Harold Edgar, in his dismal summary of "The Winter Of Broadway," wrote, "Some critics like O'Neill's comedy 'Ah Wilderness!' but even the most liberal estimate can afford it about 35 minutes of pleasant observation of a very minor sort, the rest being an extremely weak dilution of Booth Tarkington sentiment and O'Neill 'thoughtfulness'--pretty false at best. No one liked O'Neill's 'Days Without End' except possibly some lonesome and naive Catholics.[50]

(B) Criticism: The Theatre of the Left-- Commercial and Non-commercial

Two plays by John Howard Lawson--The Pure in Heart and Gentlewoman--opened, on Broadway, within two days of each other, in March 1934. Although Lawson was consciously on his way towards embracing Communism at the time, neither of these two plays truly reflected his growing radicalism, and neither was given satisfactory notices by the Left.

The Pure in Heart is about a young girl who leaves her small town home for the glamor of New York City and the Broadway stage. After compromising herself with a director

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[49]Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1934, p. 2.

[50]Harold Edgar, "The Winter of Broadway," New Theatre, May, 1934, p. 3.

in order to get a minor role in his play, she falls in love with a resourceless young hoodlum. Both the girl and her lover are depicted as being sentenced, by the system, to lead cheerless lives at the depths of the social structure. Their only release comes at the end of the play, when both are killed by the police who have been tracking the young man.

Jennie Held reviewed The Pure in Heart for the April 1934 New Theatre. Lawson's characters, she complained, "still cry for the gold at the end of the rainbow, still see that it's nothing but tin, the system still twists and shakes them, and the end or solution is death."[51] Held had hoped that, by this time, Lawson would have become politically "clarified" enough to be able to point out the correct solution for the characters in his plays. Unfortunately however, it still hadn't happened. "Somewhere in these plays there is a buzzing about workers--when will John Howard Lawson make that a real voice?"[52]

The Group Theatre production of Gentlewoman--a play that deals with the relationship between a wealthy young widow and a "diamond-in-the-rough" Communist writer--was not reviewed in New Theatre. But Lawson was taken to task for this play and for The Pure in Heart, in a New Masses article by Michael Gold, entitled, "A Bourgeois Hamlet of Our Time." Lawson's

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[51]Jennie Held, review of The Pure in Heart, New Theatre, April, 1934, p. 19.

[52]Ibid.

relationship with the artistic mentors of the Communist Party was quite strained during this period when he was attempting--in public, through his writing--to find a political position which he could wholeheartedly adopt. It is difficult to understand why the Party was so critical of Lawson's soul-searching, while, at the same time, they were extremely tolerant of the liberalism of many famous non-partisan writers (such as Elmer Rice). In his article for the April 10, 1934 New Masses, Gold's major criticism of Lawson was for his slowness in arriving at the political conclusion towards which he had been so obviously groping, ever since his play Processional had appeared, in 1925. "The world has changed enormously but this author has learned nothing," he wrote.[53]

Lawson replied to Gold's criticisms, in an article that appeared in the next issue of The New Masses, "'Inner Conflict' in Proletarian Art." He began his piece by stating that he was in agreement with seventy percent of Gold's criticism. Lawson acknowledged that he had been trying to achieve "revolutionary clarity," and he said that he thought that his plays, taken sequentially, evinced development in that direction. "I believe Gentlewoman, in spite of its faults, shows a considerable ideological advance."[54] Lawson

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[53]Michael Gold, "A Bourgeois Hamlet of Our Time," The New Masses, April 10, 1934, p. 28.

[54]John Howard Lawson, "Inner Conflict in Proletarian Art," The New Masses, April 17, 1934, p. 29.

condemned the double standard of criticism that was applied by the Party to those authors who seemed to be within its sphere, as compared to those who would probably continue to hover at the outskirts of the movement.

> I object to blithe acceptance of writers whose left conversion is meaningless and grows out of temporary emotional excitement. [He had, earlier in the article, referred to Theodore Dreiser and Sherwood Anderson in this connection.] I also object to hasty judgements against intellectuals whose progress toward the left has been slow and who are aware that there is no sense in lip-service without a lasting comprehension of the issues.[55]

Finally, Lawson declared that he would continue to take his time in working towards the level of political clarity which he considered essential. "Mike's case simmers down to the fact that I ask a 'monotonous question': 'Where do I belong in the warring world of the two classes?' I'm sorry that the question bores him, but I intend to make my answer with due consideration, and with as much vigor as I possess."[56]

In discussing some of the contributions by left-wing playwrights to the 1933-34 season, as a part of his New Theatre article, "A Playreader on Playwrights," John Gassner wrote about Lawson's two plays in a considerably more positive vein than had Jennie Held or Mike Gold:

> More credit should have been given to The Pure in Heart for its picture of the cesspool of commercialized art and the frustrated lives and perverted sensibilities it produces. In the case of Gentlewoman, Lawson's lesson of the futility of a rapprochement between natural revolutionists and diletante gentlefolk, his pricking of

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[55]Ibid., p. 30.

[56]Ibid.

> the bohemianism (which often serves as a defense mechanism against revolutionary urges), and his presentation of the sterility of upper class society were unjustly disregarded.[57]

The Left's criticism of Lawson's two 1934 plays, and of his continued reluctance to take a concrete political stand, appears to have induced him to definitively affirm his commitment to the Communist Party. Only two months after his exchange with Gold in The New Masses, Lawson wrote an article for New Theatre entitled, "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre." The two most significant paragraphs in this June 1934 article, insofar as our present discussion is concerned, read as follows:

> I believe that there are many members of the theatrical profession who are orienting themselves towards the Left, but who, like myself, have been slow in definitizing the manner in terms of their own activity. At the present time it is urgently necessary to face the issue decisively --and to help in the building of the revolutionary theatre.
> . . . . . .
> In spite of the chatter about 'propaganda,' all the genuine aesthetic values are on the side of proletarian art. Creative work draws its whole inspiration and meaning from the vital forces of our period; in our day, the vital forces at work are the growing strength of the revolution, the upsurge of a new class.[58]

Once Lawson had made his decision, his commitment was total and, it is not too surprising to note that he soon became extremely exacting (politically), in his criticism of the work of other left-wing playwrights and groups. One

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[57]John Gassner, "A Playreader on Playwrights," New Theatre, October, 1934, p. 11.

[58]John Howard Lawson, "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," New Theatre, June, 1934, pp. 6-7.

group that was criticized by Lawson, in this regard, was the Theatre Union. In a November 1934 New Theatre article, "Straight From the Shoulder," Lawson wrote, " . . . it seems to me that the necessity of being specific in regard to party and political questions is the first obligation of every revolutionary writer; the propaganda effect of his work depends on his being able to grapple, in sharply dramatic terms, with the detailed reality of economics and politics.[59]

Lawson continued by declaring that the basic principle of dramatic writing is political accuracy. He stated that the previous year's productions of Peace on Earth, They Shall Not Die and Stevedore had been the first genuine beginnings of proletarian art in the theatre. But he also maintained that the political line, in each of these plays, should have been expressed more specifically.

Lawson said that he disagreed with Michael Blankfort's statement that the revolutionary play should provide the audience with an avenue of escape.[60] "The function of revolutionary drama is to circumvent this escape"; he wrote, "it is successful in proportion to its ability to force partisanship upon the audience."[61] The class struggle cannot be written in general terms, he declared, and the fact that

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[59]John Howard Lawson, "Straight From the Shoulder," New Theatre, November, 1934, p. 11.

[60]See above, pp. 328-29.

[61]John Howard Lawson, "Straight From the Shoulder," p. 11.

the Communist Party is at the heart of the struggle should be made clear at all times. Lawson said that it was not mandatory for a playwright to adopt a purely Communist point of view, but that it was simply necessary for him to present his own viewpoint, whatever it was, clearly and specifically.

A reply to Lawson's article, by Liston M. Oak, a member of the Theatre Union's Executive Board, appeared next to the piece. "Political accuracy and ideological clarity does not necessitate specific organizational labels," wrote Oak. "The Theatre Union is not an agit-prop theatre. It is a united front theatre organized to produce plays that, without compromise on questions of principle, will appeal particularly to unorganized workers who are not yet class conscious."[62]

New Theatre's editorial comment on Lawson's article and Oak's response, appeared as a footnote to both articles: "To demand that the political party and labor organizations represented on the stage be 'labeled' is to take a 'leftist' position that is unrealistic in relationship to the united front audience."[63] By November 1934, it appears, Lawson was, once again, out of step with the changing policies of the Comintern and The American Communist Party. His doctrinaire approach to the theatre was more in keeping with the almost defunct Third Period policies than with those of the evolving

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

[63]Editor's Comment, New Theatre, November, 1934, p. 12.

Popular Front.

The political policy of the Theatre Union was much the same as the more recent political and aesthetic policies of New Theatre. The magazine's movement towards a united front position had been evident since September 1933, when Workers Theatre had become New Theatre. Once Herbert Kline assumed the editorship of the magazine, as of the July-August 1934 issue, the more "liberalized" policies towards which the magazine had been edging became nearly official.

Peace on Earth, by Albert Maltz and George Sklar and directed by Michael Blankfort, was the first Theatre Union production, in November 1933. The play combines naturalistic and expressionistic scenes, and is about the conversion of a liberal, but basically apolitical college professor to radical activism. At the beginning of Peace on Earth, Professor Peter Owens, the protagonist of the play, learns about a strike by local dock workers who have refused to handle a shipment of gun cotton that has been manufactured by a local munitions magnate--an individual who is one of the major trustees at Owens' college. The normally iconoclastic Owens, through a combination of circumstances, becomes involved in the strike and in some violence that is connected with it. Owens is imprisoned and sentenced to be hanged. As he goes to his execution, at the play's conclusion, a huge public demonstration in favor of the strikers--and sparked by his approaching martyrdom--is held outside the prison.

Jack Shapiro began his review of Peace on Earth, for the January 1934 New Theatre, with the following statement: "Something new and significant has made its entrance upon the American stage with the launching of the first production of the Theatre Union, Peace on Earth. The authors of the play have virtually plunged into the social-political whirlpool and have emerged to say something vitally important--a rather risky procedure for those who would invite the plaudits of the average reviewer."[64]

Although Shapiro suggested that the play had certain weaknesses (which he didn't specify in the review), he concluded on a basically optimistic note: "The revolutionary theatre and drama are still in early stages. There is no doubt that towards its further development Peace on Earth is an important contribution."[65]

The second Theatre Union production was Stevedore, by Paul Peters and George Sklar, which opened in April 1934. Stevedore is about the cooperation of black and white longshoremen against their common enemy. Lonnie Thompson, the black protagonist of Stevedore, has been falsely accused of raping a white woman. He has been framed because of his activities as an organizer of black longshoremen into a labor union. Thompson is tracked down in his ghetto neighborhood

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[64]Jack Shapiro, review of Peace on Earth, New Theatre, January, 1934, p. 11.

[65]Ibid.

and killed by a large group of thugs, who have been hired to do this job by the white bosses. Before these thugs are able to do any further harm in the black community, Lem Morris, a white union organizer, convinces his fellow workers of the need for solidarity with the blacks. Blacks and whites together, the workers wage a successful fight against their class oppressors.

Jack Shapiro, reviewing Stevedore for the May 1934 New Theatre, said that the play was a clear expression of the Theatre Union point of view that the interests of the masses of working people as a class are the only constructive guide in the present situation. "Revolutionary drama," wrote Shapiro, "is not evolved out of thin air. 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."[66]

Shapiro was impressed by the fine craftsmanship of Stevedore as a play. He pointed out that many revolutionary plays sacrifice their dramatic impact by underscoring their messages. Instead of doing this, Peters and Sklar had inspired their audience to think creatively about the problem that was being presented in the play. Stevedore, "gives us a situation rather than the playwrights' comments, but a situation translated through the revolutionary vision of the authors," Shapiro

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[66]Jack Shapiro, review of Stevedore, New Theatre, May, 1934, p. 13.

explained. "As a result the audience inevitably draws the right conclusions but draws them creatively from the dramatic action."[67]

Shapiro said that the actors in the production--most of whom were black--had a gusto and spontaneity that was rarely seen on the stage. He also praised the beautiful settings and the fine direction of the play. Because the result of the production was so overwhelming, Shapiro was reluctant to suggest--but nonetheless did--that the first two scenes were not in keeping with the style and spirit of the play, and were not really necessary. This one objection notwithstanding, the review ended with Shapiro proclaiming enthusiastically that, "Stevedore is a great step forward, a tremendous victory for the revolutionary theatre."[68]

It is interesting and also rather ironic to note that from 1934 and on throughout the remainder of the period of New Theatre's publication, the left-wing group that--apart from the Theatre Union--was the most consistently praised by the magazine's reviewers was the Yiddish-speaking Artef. For it should be remembered that in the early, Third Period days of Workers Theatre, when the propaganda and not the aesthetic values of a production were emphasized, the Artef was frequently taken to task for concentrating too much of its attention on questions of art, and not enough attention on

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[67]Ibid.

[68]Ibid.

effective propaganda. By 1934, of course, times had changed, and the artistic skills which the Artef had been steadfastly developing over the years were now valued by the entire left-wing theatre movement. The following excerpt from the editorial section of the February 1934 New Theatre is an example of the new esteem with which the Yiddish group was now regarded:

> Significant indeed is the fact that the first American production of Maxim Gorky's new play Yegor Bulitchev is given neither by a commercial theatre nor by an art theatre, but by the ARTEF, Jewish Workers Theatre, whose members spend their days in the shops, evenings at rehearsals, and weekends performing.
> . . . . . .
> . . . The Artef has undertaken a giant labor and has come off altogether credibly.[69]

Jennie Held reviewed the Artef production of the Gorky play, in the same February 1934 issue of the magazine, and wrote that, "The most ambitious production ever undertaken by an American Workers Theatre is that of Yegor Bulitchev, given its first American staging by Artef. And the Artef has risen to the occasion to a notable degree."[70] She further reported that,

> This production has called forth some of the Artef's best work. The acting is generally capable and marks an advance over their previous production, but some of it suffers from over-stylization and is often labored. The designer, Solotoroff, has succeeded in producing sets that have strength, simplicity and beauty, yet at the same time create the atmosphere of wealth and power

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[69]Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1934, p. 3.

[70]Jennie Held, review of Yegor Bulitchev, New Theatre, February, 1934, p. 16.

which the play calls for.[71]

An unsigned article, "The Artef and Its Accomplishments," was also published in the February 1934 New Theatre, and was an additional statement of the Left's approval of the group and its work. This article, a short history of the Artef, praised its progress in arriving at an artistic portrayal of the class struggle. There was, as might be expected, no indication in the piece that the Artef had formerly been censured in Workers Theatre and New Theatre for the same attention to artistic detail which, in this pre-Popular Front period, was now bringing it so much approbation.

Another article, "The Artef," by Samuel Kreiter, appeared in the November 1934 New Theatre. Kreiter was impressed with the group's development and particularly with their new production of Recruits, by L. Resnick. He said that Beno Schneider's direction of the play had resulted in a perfect synthesis of Reinhardt's expressionism and Stanislavsky's naturalism, and that the production got at , " . . . the inner dramatic pathos and intense truth that underlies mass struggle, without deviating from character portrayal. . . ."[72]

The other permanent, stationary workers' theatre group, the Theatre Collective, an offshoot of the Workers

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[71] Ibid.

[72] Samuel Kreiter, "The Artef," New Theatre, November, 1934, p. 21.

Laboratory Theatre, had, so far, not lived up to the expectations which the Left had originally entertained for it. The second production by the Theatre Collective, Marion Models, Inc., by Jack Shapiro, Olga Shapiro and John Bonn, was reviewed by Nathaniel Buchwald for the July-august 1934 New Theatre. Buchwald wrote that although the play was an advance over the usual dramas about the hardships of the garment workers, and included some interesting and realistic characters, it was schematic and its dialogue, for the most part, consisted of the characters spouting revolutionary phrases. He pointed out that, as was often the case with revolutionary plays, the villainous characters were depicted more realistically than were the revolutionary types. " . . . The play," said Buchwald, "gives one the impression of struggle between originality and stencil. Stencil is the victor."[73] Furthermore, according to Buchwald's account, the play was worse on stage--because of its poor direction, inexperienced actors and arty, formal set--than it was in script form.

"The Stage No 'Critic' Knows," by Michael Gold--an article about the amateur workers' theatres--appeared in the March 27, 1934 New Masses and attested to the importance which the Left still attached to the work of the proletarian groups. For even after the Communist Party had begun to broaden its

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[73]Nathaniel Buchwald, review of Marion Models, Inc., New Theatre, July-August, 1934, p. 11.

perspectives and to look to the professional theatre for its ability to reach a wider mass audience, the workers' theatres, because they were, politically, in the advance guard of the left-wing theatre movement, were of great concern to those who formulated Party policies. " . . . The Workers' Theatre does three things:" wrote Gold, "it heals; inspires; vivifies; it leads to the future; it believes in something, and teaches others to believe."[74]

New Theatre, however, well on its way to becoming a Popular Front publication, with a "progressive," but non-specific political orientation, had, by 1934, begun to devote less space to pieces about the amateur, part-time radical groups. And although the contributors to the magazine were still obviously interested in the work of these groups, it appears that they had become somewhat more distanced from that work.

When Nathaniel Buchwald came back from Moscow--where he had been the Workers Theatre correspondent--he wrote an article about the developments in the American workers' theatre that were evident to him upon his return. In his January 1934 New Theatre essay, "A Theatre Advancing," Buchwald reported that there had been rapid progress in the right direction during the last year, and he described two programs of workers' theatre plays which he had recently

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[74]Michael Gold, "The Stage No 'Critic' Knows," The New Masses, March 27, 1934, p. 29.

attended.

The first of these presentations was a program at City College by the Theatre of Action of the Workers Laboratory Theatre: World's Fair. This production had been enthusiastically received by the student audience and Buchwald wrote that,

> The secret of this success is not far to seek. The Workers Laboratory Theatre has recognized the value and acquired the knack of presenting its plays in the vernacular and of making them entertaining first of all. It has abandoned the slogan-ridden script in favor of swift and racy colloquialisms, and the barren 'agitpop' cliche's [sic] give way to native theatrical idiom. Of political content the group sacrificed nothing, its skits being as clear-cut in their revolutionary ideology and as unmistakable in their propagandist intent as an 'agit-prop' play ever was.
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> . . . . . .
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> This tendency away from sloganized agitprop stencils and in the direction of live, truly popular and truly entertaining revolutionary theatre, is characteristic of the whole workers' theatre movement in its present phase. The success of the Workers Laboratory Theatre will serve both as a model and an encouragement to those groups which are determined to make the overdue step in the right direction.[75]

One group which had not yet been able to make this transition successfully was the Theatre of the Workers' School--a group that was directed by John Bonn, formerly the head of the German-speaking agit-prop group, the Prolet-Buehne. Two skits by Bonn's group were presented at a program at the New School and, according to Buchwald were, "Very feeble, showing the agit-prop theatre at its weakest."[76]

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[75]Nathaniel Buchwald, "A Theatre Advancing," New Theatre, January, 1934, pp. 19-20.

[76]Ibid., p. 20.

Buchwald wrote that, " . . . Doubly handicapped by the schematic nature of the characters and their own lack of sufficient training, the performers were anything but impressive in these skits. The first step in breaking away from the schematic theatre is to discard schematic plays. The play is the thing in the revolutionary theatre also. . . ."[77]

Buchwald concluded his article by noting that the audiences at both of the programs which he had attended were, in the main, composed of young white collar workers. He said that it was fine that the workers' theatres could attract and satisfy paying customers.

> But only by extending the proletarian clientele of the workers' theatres can they really become a powerful weapon in the struggle of the working class for emancipation from the profit system. It may not be premature to warn the leaders of the workers' theatre groups against the danger of orienting their work mainly upon non-proletarian audiences, however sympathetic these may be. Having overcome some of its earlier defects, the workers' theatre movement should now set before itself the goal of reaching a wider working audience.[78]

This "wider worker audience" to which Buchwald alluded, was actually the potential audience of workers in the labor unions.

In connection with its more recent attitude of willingness to accomodate sympathetic liberals in order to bring them into the organized "progressive" movement, New Theatre was beginning to indicate more awareness of the work of the non-political art theatres, or "little threatres," as they were then called. Although the reviewers of productions

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[77]Ibid.

[78]Ibid.

by such groups were, more often than not, critical of what they had seen, their criticism was generally written in a more tolerant tone than were their reviews of the work of the amateur left-wing work rs' groups. A review by Peter Martin of a production by The Apprentice Players, was published in the April 1934 issue of the magazine, and is an example of this approach. The Apprentice Players had presented a play entitled Armored Train,[79] at the New School. Martin reports that this group, composed of full-time "progressive bourgeois" professionals, had demonstrated their talent, but,

> . . . may be said to have failed to understand the class nature of the conflicts and contradictions inherent in the personalities of both peasants and White Russians, and consequently in the situations of the play. . . .
> . . . . . .
> The Apprentice Players are sincere and hard-w rking and if truly progressive will profit by the mistakes of this production, the most glaring of which is the presentation of a revolutionary play without a previous investigation of the approach of revolutionary theatre groups. Such an investigation or visit is heartily anticipated by the workers' theatre.[80]

Another "little theatre" which, because of both its liberal outlook and the fine quality of its work, was regarded with sympathetic interest by New Theatre and by the activists in the left-wing theatre movement, was the Hedgerow Theatre, in Rose Valley, Pennsylvania--headed by Jasper Deeter. A review by Lester Glass of this theatre's production

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[79]The author of this play is not given in the review.

[80]Peter Martin, review of Armored Train, New Theatre, April, 1934, p. 21.

of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg Ohio appeared in the October 1934 New Theatre. "The history of the little theatre movement is replete with isms, expressionism, stylism, psychological naturalism, etc. [sic]," began Glass. "More often than not these isms are employed as a means of escape from contemporary reality, as escape from life. Hedgerow, in beautiful suburban Rose Valley, has not only physically escaped from the turbulant realities of the day, its repertoire is remarkable in its irrelevance to the problems of today."[81]

An "Open Letter to Jasper Deeter," from Curt Conway--an actor who had come to New York from Hedgerow Theatre, in order to act with the Workers Laboratory Theatre--appeared in the December 1934 New Theatre. In the letter, Conway told his former director that he, too, belonged in the struggle, and urged him to "use your theatre as an artistic force in the revolutionary movement instead of playing house in a vacuum."[82]

The year 1934, as we have seen, was a transitional and therefore a critical year for the American Communist Party, the left-wing theatre movement, and also for New Theatre magazine--as the Comintern shifted from its Third Period policy to that of the Popular Front. In keeping with this

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[81]Lester Glass, review of Winesburg, Ohio, New Theatre, October, 1934, p. 21.

[82]Curt Conway, "Open Letter to Jasper Deeter," New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 18.

shift and also with the relatively recent recognition that, as Nathaniel Buchwald had phrased it, "the play is the thing in the revolutionary theatre also,"[83] the editors of the magazine refrained from publishing the amateur and "schematic" workers' plays which had formerly accounted for the bul of its script material. Instead, while apparently waiting for better plays to become available to the movement, the editors of New Theatre chose to publish only two short plays--both by well-known left-wing theatre professionals--during 1934.

"Dimitroff--A Play of Mass Pressure," by Art Smith and Elia Kazan, members of the Group Theatre, was included in the July-August 1934 New Theatre. This play about the Reichstag fire, shows Nazism as the logical outgrowth of capitalism--which, of course, was the Communists' interpretation of what had recently been happening in Germany. The hero of "Dimitroff," as the editors of New Theatre pointed out in a footnote to the play, is not the protagonist of its title, but rather mass pressure.

"The Snickering Horses"--a scene from the play Thunderclock, by Em Jo Basshe, was the second script to appear in the magazine during 1934, in the December issue. The play by Basshe, who had been one of the members of the New Playwrights, in the late 1920's, was an expressionistic anti-war satire. In this scene, a Bartender (who is an amputee-veteran)

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[83] See above, p. 369.

at a private veterans' club, "The Trench Rat," fantasizes being back in battle. At the height of the slaughter, the horses of both armies begin to laugh at the spectacle of the soldiers killing each other. An editor's note following the published excerpt from Thunderclock explained that, "This scene was successfully produced by a workers' theatre on the open Plaza in Hollywood as a part of the August 1st Anti-War demonstration this year. The author here offers it for the use of other workers' theatres or any non-profit making group."[84]

An article by the Theatre Union playwright George Sklar, in the September 1934 New Theatre, summed up the progress that many felt had been made in the left-wing theatre movement during the past year. Entitling his piece, "Workers' Theatre Advances," Sklar wrote that,

> The past eight months have seen a tremedoous burst of vitality in workers' theatres throughout the country. Its main impetus has come from three very definite theatrical developments. The first of these was, of course, the successful demonstration by the Theatre Union that a workers theatre could function professionally, attract large audiences and maintain itself financially. The second was the Workers Laboratory Theatre production of Newsboy. . . . And the third was the reorganization under new editorship of New Theatre and its increasingly important role in stimulating these groups with news and guidance. The result has been an unprecedented acceleration in the growth and development, not only in

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[84]Editor's note to Em Jo Basshe's "'The Snickering Horses': a scene from the play Thunderclock," New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 8.

terms of numbers but also in the level of its technical and artistic expression.[85]

There were still many individuals, however, who maintained that both the workers' theatre and New Theatre magazine had a long way to go before "the movement" could afford to sit back and admire its accomplishments. And the editors of the magazine were obviously more than willing to acknowledge this as fact. A column headed, "The Voice of the Audience--We Take It on the Chin," was included in the December 1934 New Theatre and had the effect of warning the magazine's readers against any unjustified complacency. The column consisted of a letter to New Theatre from a co-worker in the left-wing theatre, and a frequent contributor to the magazine, Harold Edgar. In his letter, Edgar stated that although the magazine had improved greatly in the most recent four issues (under the editorship of Herbert Kline), he felt that there were still areas in which improvement was clearly needed.

One of Edgar's major objections was to the repeated us of the term "revolutionary" in articles where the usage of the word was often unclear: "What is a 'revolutionary' dance?' he asked.[86] Edgar suggested that statements of ideology should be left to those who are qualified to make

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[85]George Sklar, "Workers Theatre Advances," New Theatre, September, 1934, p. 8.

[86]Harold Edgar, "The Voice of the Audience--We Take it on the Chin," New Theatre, December, 1934, p. 26.

them and he said that for theatre people, such as Lawson, to speak of ideology, was poor practice. These people should only do what they know best--in Lawson's case, playwrighting.

Finally, Edgar objected to the self-congratulatory joy evident in the frequent comparisons made between the revolutionary theatre's growth and Broadway's decline. "To sum up," he wrote, "in the use of words, in choice of themes, and in our whole approach to matters of new theatre I would like to see a more workmanlike attitude. We have our job to do, an arduous, crucial, magnificent job. Let us get busy in study and work to increase our knowledge and to assist in the building of that theatre and that society which so many desire and everybody needs."[87]

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[87]Ibid.

CHAPTER VII

AESTHETICS AND CRITICAL POSITION: THE POPULAR FRONT ERA

Essays and Treatises on Aesthetics for the Revolutionary Theatre

The Popular Front period was not formally initiated until the summer of 1935, but the policy changes--in the growing left-wing movement, the arts included--that were prompted by this new era in the Comintern's approach to international politics, were almost completely accomplished nearly a year before the official pronouncement was made. Once Herbert Kline had assumed the editorship of New Theatre, for example--as of the July-August 1934 issue--the magazine was well on its way to becoming a Popular Front publication. And this trend suggested by Kline's appointment became more institutionalized with the announcement, in the February 1935 New Theatre, that the League of Workers Theatres was being succeeded by the New Theatre League, and an editorial calling for "Footlights across America for a united theatrical front against censorship, against fascism, against all imperialist drives for war!"[1]

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[1] New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 3. See Chapter I, pp. 64-66 for a discussion of the changeover to the New Theatre League from the League of Workers Theatres.

By 1935, New Theatre had taken on the demeanor of a left-wing theatre journal, replacing its former image as a party cultural organ. And, in accordance with this new approach, the aesthetic questions to which the magazine now addressed itself were of a more general and theoretical nature than had formerly been the case. In an August 1935 New Theatre article entitled, "The Drama in Transition--A Book Review of the Season," John Gassner wrote, "There is a definite need for the new theatre movement to supplement its achievements in playwrighting and production with criticism which will interpret the theatre as a whole and give it the guidance it so badly needs in this period of shifting allegiances and conflicting interests."[2]

It was to this need for a comprehensive aesthetic for the social theatre--rather than to the specific questions of dramatic form and technique--that the more significant theoretical discussion in New Theatre was addressed, during the remaining Popular Front years of the magazine's publication: 1935, 1936 and early 1937.

Two important essays from John Howard Lawson's critical treatise, The Theory and Technique of Playwrighting--"The Law of Conflict" and "The Obligatory Scene"--appeared in New Theatre, the former essay prior to, and the latter just following the book's publication, in February 1936.

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[2]John W. Gassner, "The Drama in Transition--A Book Review of the Season," New Theatre, August, 1935, p. 30.

The first essay, Lawson's Marxist interpretation of both Brunetière's "Law of the Drama" and William Archer's version of the Law, was included in the June 1935 New Theatre. In "The Law of Conflict," an essay which, since its initial publication in New Theatre, has become widely known, Lawson's major point was that, "The essential character of drama is social conflict--persons against other persons, or individuals against groups, or individuals or groups against social or natural forces--in which the exercise of conscious will is sufficiently strong to bring the conflict to a point of crisis."[3]

The second essay from The Theory and Technique of Playwrighting, "The Obligatory Scene," appeared in the March 1936 New Theatre. In this piece, Lawson dealt with the concept of the scene à faire, as it had been developed by the French critic of the "well-made play," Francisque Sarcey, and subsequently interpreted by William Archer. While Archer had held that an obligatory scene was not necessary to the plot development of every play, Lawson maintained that if this clash of opposing forces for which the audience has been prepared is omitted, then the logic of the play will be destroyed and the bond which has been forged between the audience and the play will be shattered. It is most essential, moreover, that there be a strong link between the obligatory

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[3]John Howard Lawson, "The Law of Conflict," New Theatre, June, 1935, p. 27.

scene and the climax of the play, for, "The forward drive and the arousing of expectation are a vital factor in the dramatic writing. But the concentration of interest on an expected event cannot serve as a substitute for the thematic clarity which is embodied in the climax and which gives the play its unity."[4]

The Theory and Technique of Playwrighting was generally well received by the Left, and with its publication, Lawson seems to have finally found a workable position with the Party. Charmion Von Wiegand, reviewing the book for the April 1936 New Theatre, in an article entitled, "Playwright Into Critic," wrote that he could,

> . . . think of no manual of playwrighting in English which attacks the problems of drama so basically at their root and relates so conclusively the social, economic, and philosophical thought of a given era to the specific field of drama. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . . With his Marxist searchlight, Lawson has lit up many dark corners in the history of dramatic criticism and has shown the underlying connections between the drama, criticism, philosophy and history of a given period. This is an indispensable contribution to the critical thought of the drama.[5]

Archibald MacLeish was one of the many artists whose growing social consciousness had prompted him to reorient some of his aesthetic convictions to the exigencies of the day. Some excerpts from a speech entitled "The Hope for Poetry

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[4]John Howard Lawson, "The Obligatory Scene," New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 19.

[5]Charmion Von Wiegand, "Playwright Into Critic," New Theatre, April, 1936, p. 35.

in the Theatre"--which MacLeish had delivered at a New Theatre dinner--were published in the December 1935 New Theatre and testified to the poet's recently adopted position as a fellow-traveler.

At the outset of his speech, MacLeish had stipulated that he was not interested in poetic language in the theatre, but rather in a theatre where the experience of poetry, as a whole, could be presented. "A true poetic theatre," MacLeish pointed out, "requires for its success a community of emotional understanding between audience and stage."[6] Such an area of shared beliefs and assumptions between the audience and the poet was lacking, said MacLeish, except in the audience drawn from the community that was developing in an alignment against social injustice. MacLeish concluded his speech by stating that, because the common experience of facts, opinions and outrage was held only by the audiences of the political Left, poetry in the theatre, at the present time, was possible only when written for the left-wing audience.

In addition to the play reviews which he wrote for the magazine, John Gassner, during 1936 and 1937, wrote a series of nine essays for New Theatre (and subsequently New Theatre and Film) which dealt with various broader aspects of the modern social theatre. Although Gassner discussed many contemporary plays, in the course of the essays, the underlying

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[6]Archibald MacLeish, "The Hope for Poetry in the Theatre," New Theatre, December, 1935, p. 9.

aesthetic concepts considered in these pieces are of far greater significance than his individual judgments of the plays on which they were based. Taken as a group, the essays constitute Gassner's then-evolving aesthetic for the social theatre.

"'Paradise Lost' and the Theatre of Frustration" was, in the January 1936 New Theatre, the first in the series of theoretical essays by Gassner. Although Gassner's assessment of Pardise Lost at the time the most recent of Clifford Odets' plays, is central to the essay, some of his statements about the nature of the protest voiced by Odets in the play are of a more general interest.

"It should be noted," wrote Gassner, "that, in general, the theatre of frustration is also a theatre of protest."[7] Often the theatre of frustration finds its plays resolved in one of three possible ways. One method, found in plays like Beyond the Horizon and Juno and the Paycock is to have the play end on a note of passivity and pessimism; there is nothing to be done to alleviate the situation that has been depicted. In other dramas of frustration, such as Ghosts, an act of open and active revolt is the solution. Another type of resolution for plays that fall into this category, is to show no particular resolution at all, at the play's conclusion; but to show, clearly and definitively, that the status quo is unacceptable

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[7]John W. Gassner, "Paradise Lost and the Theatre of Frustration," New Theatre, January, 1936, p. 9.

and is not possible any longer. The Cherry Orchard and Paradise Lost are "resolved" in this manner.

Gassner observed that dramas such as Paradise Lost are apt to be condemned as confused. In the Odets play, for example, there are several sub-plots, with many characters facing diverse and seemingly insurmountable problems. But no solution--except for a vague hint at the need for revolutionary change--is spelled out, either for the play's helpless characters or for the audience. Nonetheless, ". . . the dramatic complications of this drama represent the quintessence of a social tragedy--that of the disintegration of the middle class in our self-confessedly stalled social order," wrote Gassner, who saw Paradise Lost as a "condensation of a historic process."[8]

In "The Person in the Play," written for the February 1936 New Theatre, Gassner considered the question of how much emphasis the modern social drama should place on the individual. He began his discussion by observing that, in the modern social theatre, plays were no longer written purely about individuals; and it had become accepted as a necessity for a balance to be achieved between the personal and the social elements in a play. This recent development was a significant change from the early social dramas, in which it had seemed that individuality had been legislated out of existence.

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[8]Ibid.

Gassner said that it appeared that the contemporary playwrights had realized that there didn't have to be a conflict between the dramatization of individuality and that of social conflict. "People have not been known to live in a vacuum," he emphasized, "a man's occupation is a major factor in the formation and exhibition of his character, and the prevailing economic or political situation is a basic condition of his existence."[9]

Gassner felt that social drama should help to interpret the individual. He suggested that the recent trend had been towards greater individualization and towards an integration of the individual into the social context of the play. He pointed to Sidney Kingsley's Dead End and Odets' Paradise Lost as examples of plays in which the individualized characters and the playwrights' social statements and points of view are almost completely integrated. Gassner said that two other plays that used characterization to get their social messages across were Private Hicks by Albert Maltz, and Paul Green's Hymn to the Rising Sun. Both of these one-act plays had recently been published in New Theatre.

Gassner's contribution to the March 1936 New Theatre was an essay entitled, "Ethan Frome and the Theatre of Fate." In reviewing the Broadway production of Owen and Donald Davis' adaptation of the Edith Wharton novel, Gassner considered

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[9]John W. Gassner, "The Person in the Play, New Theatre, February, 1936, p. 15.

the broader and more interesting subject of the changing approach to the concept of fate in the theatre. The discussion began with Gassner outlining his premise that the concept of fate is basic to dramatic writing--much more so than to the novel or to the epic. He explained that Fatalism as, "defined by the Greeks, was originally a revolt against the naive anthromorphic philosophy which made human destiny dependent upon the whim or law of some deity or spirit. Fatalism, instead, assigned tragic events to inexplicable chance or destiny and eliminated the gods as causative factors in human life."[10]

The fatalism of the Greeks inspired Aeschylus, "to formulate a rational theory of heredity and morality and led Sophocles to focus attention on human responsibility and reason," Gassner explained.[11] By the renaissance, however, the original respect for fate had become reactionary: man was depicted as being completely unable to avoid his destiny. "Destiny became 'self-made' and tragic fate, though never eliminated from the theatre, ceased to be a major dramatic factor."[12]

The acceptance of Fate, in many modern dramas, is even more backward than the approaches taken to the subject during earlier periods, Gassner declared. In plays such as

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[10]John W. Gassner, "Ethan Frome and the Theatre of Fate," New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 13.

[11]Ibid. [12]Ibid.

Ethan Frome, for example, the most miserable conditions and turns of events are accepted without any significant criticism or protest. Gassner chided Owen and Donald Davis for depriving themselves of the high art of tragic evaluation in their play. There are certain social deductions to be made from the circumstances of Ethan Frome, but the authors of the play simply don't make them.

"Tragedy, rightly understood, is release not merely through the catharsis of watching someone suffer but through creative judgement," wrote Gassner.[13] Referring to the Marxist interpretation of the historic process, Gassner said that, in the social drama, determinism bears the greatest weight, because of the dynamic theory of history, in which social forces are seen as being in perpetual conflict. There is no resigned acceptance of Fate or the status quo, because everything is capable of change or of being changed; the world can be righted.

Often, when the issues in the plays are broad and striking, the revolt and restlessness of the social theatre become heroic, "almost epic" in scope. The " . . . dynamic change in man's thinking and behavior constitutes the lifeblood of the militant social drama," Gassner contended.[14] And the determinism that is basic to the thinking of the modern social playwrights, encourages the resolve and self-assertion of the

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[13]Ibid.

[14]Ibid., p. 34.

characters that are frequently found in their plays.

In his April 1936 essay for New Theatre, Gassner wrote about "Drama Versus Melodrama." Noting that most of the recent "substantial" plays of the last month had been written around melodramatic stories, Gassner said that, " . . . it is pleasant to reflect that plays that would have sobbed and wept themselves to a consistently melodramatic finish now give a new significance to stock situations and order them into a meaningful design."[15]

Gassner used The Case of Clyde Griffiths--adapted by Erwin Piscator from the Dreiser novel, An American Tragedy--as an example of a modern social drama that has escaped being a standard melodrama because the tragic elements in its story have been held up for careful examination, in a social light. The situation in The Case of Clyde Griffiths is one that is totally familiar: a poor young man leads a poor young girl astray. He then has the opportunity for success and happiness in a relationship with a wealthy girl. In order to free himself for this new relationship, he murders the innocent, now unwanted (and pregnant) girl who is trying to hold him back. In the Piscator version of the story, as in the novel, Clyde is convicted of murder; but in the play, the cause and effect relationship between the social system and the tragedy in the story is made explicit for the audience and, "The Case

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[15]John W. Gassner, "Drama versus Melodrama," New Theatre, April, 1936, p. 8.

of Clyde Griffiths is one of the most stirring as well as unique plays of the season."[16]

Gassner said that the style of the play is its most difficult aspect, and he continued his essay as a discussion of this style The play, an example of epic theatre, is written as a series of scene fragments--like "brilliant cinematic flashes"--which are united by a commentator addressing the audience and actors. Gassner said that the play's style is expressionism, complicated by didacticism, and he compared it to Brecht's Mother which had been recently produced--unsuccessfully--by the Theatre Union. "To a great extent then," continued Gassner, "'learning-play' expressionism is the technical device that transforms [The Case of Clyde Griffiths'] potential meodrama into social tragedy."[17]

Brecht-Piscator expressionism repels as well as attracts said Gassner; and it is difficult for the audience to adjust to this style. For, " . . . the fact remains that harangues can be tiresome. The pre-convinced part of the audience finds much repetition in them, while the stiff-necked tribe of unbelievers is not apt to humble itself in dust and ashes before a direct assault."[18]

Gassner concluded this section of his essay on tragedy and melodrama by saying that stylization--particularly when it is very evident--is often disconcerting for an audience

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[16]Ibid [17]Ibid., p. 9. [18]Ibid.

which is unused to and unprepared for it.

Gassner's May 1936 contribution to New Theatre, entitled "Perspectives--Past and Present," began with his assertion that, "to choose a perspective is to determine the direction and meaning of a play. To discover the perspective is to understand the play."[19] The force of a play, said Gassner, depends on the relevance of the playwright's point of view. A good deal of the play's impact also has to do with the playgoer's perspective.

Pointing to three very divergent productions--the Theatre Union's production of Bitter Stream, by Victor Wolfson; Katherine Cornell's St. Joan, by Shaw; and the Mercury Theatre's presentation of T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral --Gassner said that these "provocative" plays only make sense when they are regarded in the light of their perspectives. Wolfson's perspective is sociological; Shaw's is socio-psychological; and Eliot's point of view is devotional.

If a playwright is divided against himself, insofar as his perspective is concerned, the effect will be a weakening of the play. Victor Wolfson, in his play about a group of peasant farmers in Mussolini's Italy, is not in the least bit uncertain: his viewpoint is definite and direct, and therein lies the impact of his play.

In St. Joan, wrote Gassner, Shaw is carrying on an

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[19]John W. Gassner, "Perspectives--Past and Present," New Theatre, May, 1936, p. 10.

investigation and his "analysis is a masterpiece of intellectual construction, in dramatic terms so powerful as to refute forever the notion that reasoning and argument are alien to drama."[20] The only weakness in the play is in the Epilogue. This section doesn't destroy the impact of the play, but it does betray Shaw's divided perspective: " . . . [the epilogue] shows a revealing light on Shaw, who is for socialism Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and for fascism on Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays. Worship of the superman, along with Fabianism, has left the grand old man of the theatre stranded in a world which mere intelligence has been unable to save."[21]

Concerning Eliot, Gassner commented that, "many a brilliant man has been propelled by intellectual confusion and disappointment into the bosom of the church."[22] Because Eliot's "devotional" perspective, in Murder in the Cathedral is anachronistic, the play is filled with many contradictions, said Gassner.

Gassner then turned to the general subject of poetic drama, which he said resolves itself into three basic questions: Does the poetry harmonize with the mood and theme of the play? Does it fit into the dramatic action? Is it understandable? Concluding his discussion of Eliot in an uncharacteristically acid manner, Gassner wrote, "The poets

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[20]Ibid., p. 12. [21]Ibid. [22]Ibid., p. 37.

in Westminster Abbey will not hail Mr. Eliot as a fellow-craftsman. Neither is it likely that the saints will rise up to call him blessed."[23]

In "Towards a One-Act Theatre," written for the July 1936 New Theatre, Gassner examined both the technique and the potential of the one-act form. The one-act play, he explained, has always been used during the early period of any theatre movement; and it has always been considered an experimental form, a practice step. The reasons for this being the case are obvious: one act plays are less expensive to produce and they require less expertise on the part of the actors who--at the beginning of a new theatre movement--are frequently amateurs.

After briefly sketching the history of the one-act form and the various periods in which it has been used, Gassner turned to a consideration of the contemporary one-act theatre which "was born kicking; it was topical, haranguing, stident--agitation first, drama only secondarily."[24] The plays have now become more expert and finished, Gassner said, and he hoped that the return to the one-act form was permanent.

Gassner felt that there are many advantages to the one act play, which make it important as more than just a stop-gap measure. The one-act form adds variety to the

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[23]Ibid.

[24]John W. Gassner, "Towards a One-Act Theatre," New Theatre, July, 1936, p. 20.

theatre. And, of no little consequence, the one-act play can be used to express ideas and situations that don't require three acts. "The theatre as a whole stands to gain when playwrights no longer feel compelled to write full-length plays when the subject range calls for only one act."[25]

There was, however, much room for improvement in the one-act theatre, Gassner contended. Although several recent one-act plays had been striking and important--Waiting for Lefty and Bury the Dead, to name the two most successful short plays of the period--many of the plays which were written as one-acts suffered from the same weaknesses that are found in plays of the standard three-act length. Gassner suggested several principles of which the writer of one-act plays might do well to be aware: First of all, the one-act play should concentrate on achieving a single strong effect. Characters must be established quickly. The one-act play may be comprised of many scenes, but the scenes must be closely connected.

Gassner said that there are many dramaturgic styles--satire, humor and fantasy; even poetic drama--outside of realism, which can be used effectively in the one-act theatre, but which have been used very infrequently thus far. "Without greater variety of situation, tone and character, the wellsprings of the one-act theatre may dry up sooner than its

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[25]Ibid.

adherents imagine," Gassner warned. "And this would be a pity for the possibilities are almost infinite and close at hand."[26]

Gassner lamented the decline of "Heroism in the Theatre," in his essay of that title, written for the November 1936 New Theatre. He initiated this discussion by pointing out that for nearly twenty-three centuries all serious drama was conceived on a heroic scale. The contemporary realistic theatre, however, catering to a predominantly middle-class audience, had become stuffy and stultifying.

Gassner said that one of the most important productions of the season was John Gielgud's Hamlet, and, "it is significant that an Elizabethan play regarded for over three centuries as a drama par excellence of indecision and passiveness is nevertheless closer to the conventional heroism of the older theatre than products of the contemporary stage."[27] And, "even an Elizabethan dawdler is strikingly a man of action compared with the average heroes of our stage."[28] Furthermore, Gielgud's Hamlet had been affected by the contemporary malaise, said Gassner, who found the character subdued to a "pathetic portrait" of a morbid, depressed, mother-fixated youth. Even the great speeches had been subdued, by Gielgud, to normal conversational tones. "All things considered,"

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[26]Ibid., p. 22.

[27]John W. Gassner, "Heroism in the Theatre," New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 29.

[28]Ibid.

Gassner wrote, "the play is produced as though Shakespeare had written a post-Ibsen psychological melodrama."[29] And although he allowed that this production of Hamlet was the best that he had seen, "it is an incomplete and sometimes piddling interpretation."[30]

Gassner declared that he would like to see more high emotion and heroism in the social theatre, for, "Social drama is still a combat of will and desire. Both the proponents and opponents of the new theatre tend to elide this fact. The 'agon' or struggle inherent in the older drama has merely assumed a different shape. If it can glow and crackle sufficiently we shall have an answer to the Cassandras who have predicted a quick end for the theatre dying of pernicious anemia."[31]

Gassner's complaint, in his essay for the March 1937 New Theatre and Film, "The Diluted Theatre," was similar to the criticism of the contemporary theatre that he had voiced in several earlier essays: that the theatre had lost its ability to elevate and inspire, and had become a place of diminished emotions and reduced gestures. " . . . The latest tendency in the theatre has been in favor of dilution," he declared. "This has been in evidence not merely in the preponderance of light drama, but in the nature of our social treatments. Playwrights, reflecting perhaps a temporary

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[30]Ibid.

[31]Ibid., p. 30

easement of economic and political tensions, have been in a relaxed mood. The results have been variously interesting, but they have not been particularly heady."[32]

Gassner discussed the Group Theatre production of Paul Green's Johnny Johnson as an example of a play which suffers from this "dilution of effect." Green's play, an expressionistic anti-war play with music, seemed to Gassner to be watered down, stripped of its intensity and purpose. The stupidity of war is shown, but the horror of war is not communicated, nor is the blame for wars firmly placed. "As social analysis the play is glib rather than incisive. For protest it is too general and too genial; even a popular success like Idiot's Delight is more specific and impassioned. All told the playgoer is left in the limbo of ineffectual pacifism."[33]

"A play must have point or direction," wrote Gassner.

> The early pieces of the 'thirties had point, as well as passion, but were often deficient in the actual substance of life. The pendulum is swinging in the opposite direction, and now point is being increasingly blunted by a creditable desire to capture many-dimensional character and multiple motivation. A balance must be struck. The earlier type may have suffered from inanition, but the newer type risks both confusion and congestion. In both instances, the dilution of effect is considerable.[34]

When Gassner wrote his next and, as it happened, final

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[32]John W. Gassner, "The Diluted Theatre," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 30.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid., p. 31

essay for what turned out to be the final issue of New Theatre and Film--the April 1937 number--his spirits had lifted. Entitling his article "Wings Over Broadway," Gassner reported that the situation in the theatre had somewhat improved. One play that was responsible, in part, for Gassner's new mood, was John Howard Lawson's Marching Song, produced by the Theatre Union, which Gassner said had brought "passion and resilience to the torpid social stage."[35]

Marching Song is the story of politicization and change in a small factory town--Brimmerton, U.S.A. A worker has been fired and blacklisted and he and his small family are out on the streets, with the rest of the victims of the system. Using this worker's plight as a catalyst, a union leader organizes his formerly reluctant co-workers into an effective strike force. There are numerous other characers in the play, who represent various aspects of the American predicament and the class struggle, as seen by Lawson. The stories of these many characters are woven together, in a style that Gassner calls "telescopic";

> It reflects, . . . a viewpoint that finds major drama not in isolated events but in the massing of people and forces in conflict that is collective rather than private. In Marching Song Lawson has at last achieved the synthesis toward which his work was tending, the accord that seems most in harmony with his spirit and outlook. The play combines the telescopic technique with the realistic. It is a panorama. . . .

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[35]John W. Gassner, "Wings Over Broadway," New Theatre and Film, April, 1937, p. 19.

> Moreover, this is no jumble of mere detail; there is the march of history in it, the facts following an inner and out logic.[36]

Gassner said that the effect of Marching Song, "is that of a pillar of fire. Lawson has written a stormy dramatic poem, throbbing with anguished excitement."[37]

The other plays which Gassner acknowledged as having added to his good spirits that month were Maxwell Anderson's Wingless Victory, High Tor and Masque of Kings; as well as two revivals: King Richard II, and the Mercury Theatre-Orson Welles production of Dr. Faustus.

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Although the Gassner essays were conceived over a three year period, the aesthetic which they express is consistent and not at all self-contradictory or paradoxical. Gassner longed for a theatre that inspires and elevates. He favored plays written with broad strokes; and including heroic acts, striking characters and high emotions. Equally important, however, are moderation, subtlety and balance.

Unity--of character, plot, style and the playwright's perspective--is essential to the drama of Gassner's ideals. All of the elements in a production must compliment each other; no one aspect of a play should overshadow the others. In this regard, Gassner made it clear that, although he liked the theatre to challenge and involve the audience's intellect

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[36]Ibid.

[37]Ibid., p. 20.

and abilities to evaluate, he did not think the theatre should be solely a place of thinking and didacticism. Gassner preferred stylization to bland realism, in the theatre, but stylization too must be approached with moderation; style and form should not be allowed to overwhelm content and characterization.

Broad powerful strokes tempered by moderation in all aspects of the theatre art--these are the major standards of Gassner's aesthetic for the social theatre, as presented in his nine essays for New Theatre and New Theatre and Film.

Articles on Theatre Technique

It is obvious from both the tone and content of the Lawson, MacLeish and Gassner essays which I have just discussed, that the editors of New Theatre and New Theatre and Film were no longer planning their publication primarily to fit the needs or the intellectual capabilities of the average non-educated proletarian reader. For the magazine, along with adopting its new united or Popular Front approach, had also changed its focus, insofar as its intended audience was concerned. And although the articles which appeared in the magazine during 1935, 1936, and early 1937 were still aimed at amateur as well as professional theatre workers, in addition to individuals who were interested in the "revolutionary" theatres as audience members, the intellectual level of New Theatre had become considerably more sophisticated and was

suitable for a more knowledgeable and worldly readership than had formerly supported the magazine. All of these changes undoubtedly reflected--along with the Popular Front policy that demanded the wooing of a broader audience--the realization on the part of the magazine's management that neither the new theatre movement, nor their publication could survive without the economic support of the sympathetic, educated middle-class liberals whom they had earlier--in more doctrinaire and naive times--shunned and condemned.

The articles on the various theatre techniques which appeared in the magazine during the final phase of its development, were still written on an instructive as well as a descriptive and analytical level. But the authors of these pieces seem to have assumed a certain basic competence, in the areas that the articles examined, on the part of their anticipated readers. An example of this is an essay entitled, "Can We Use Stanislavsky's Method?" by V. Zakhava, the director of the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow.

Although, in an introductory note to the article, the magazine's readers are referred to two earlier New Theatre pieces on the Stanislavsky System, the essay--a Marxist analysis of the System and a description of the methodology of the Vakhtangov Theatre--assumes a working understanding of the problems of characterization, as well as of the concept of dialectical materialism.

The basic approach of the Vakhtangov Theatre, as

described by Zakhava, was to adapt the methods of the Moscow Art Theatre to the needs of the new socialist theatre. The form of any given production at the Vakhtangov Theatre, wrote Zakhava, was to be determined by three factors:

1. the play--its content and the author's treatment of that content;
2. the social and historical surroundings in which the play is produced: this links the play to its contemporary production; and
3. the class and ideological orientation of the theatre collective, as well as their artistic experience and capabilities.

As opposed to the Stanislavsky system of production, in which psychological realism was the predominently used style, what was considered the right form for one production at the Vakhtangov Theatre, might be completely wrong for another.

The roots of the creative method at the Vakhtangov Theatre were completely imbedded in the Stanislavsky System, but there were several striking differences between the two; Stanislavsky wanted his audience to completely forget that it was in a theatre; Vakhtangov wanted the audience never to lose sight of that fact. Stanislavsky's approach to character had to do with the individual in relation to himself; Vakhtangov was always concerned, above all, with the character in relation to his social and historical context, and approached the expression and interpretation of character with a socio-political orientation.

The Stanislavsky System has many aspects which are

of value to the actor and which have taken the art of acting out of the middle ages, wrote Zakhava. But the system needed to be re-evaluated and saturated with a new socio-philosophical meaning:

> Thus if we subject Stanislavsky's system to a thorough criticism, using the methods of dialectical materialism; if we examine it attentively in the light of modern scientific data; if we force out of it the idealistic world view which creates contradictions within the system itself; if we select whatever is necessary and sound in it (which, essentially, is the materialistic parts), and translate it from the language of idealistic philosophy and subjective psychology into modern scientific terms--we shall then have the A.B.C. of the actor's art. It will be rooted in the biologic bases of the actor's creative work. We will then apply this alphabet for other purposes, and in a different manner.[38]

Far fewer articles devoted to theatre technique were published in New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, during the Popular Front period, than had appeared in Workers Theatre and New Theatre in previous years. This was mainly because of the New Theatre League's plans for Theatre Workshop, a non-political quarterly that was completely devoted to the various arts of the theatre. Most of the articles on theatre technique that did appear in New Theatre were about acting, and were based on the contemporary understanding of the Stanislavsky System: "Stanislavsky's Method--Part II; From Notes," by M. A. Chekhov, in the February 1935 New Theatre; "Why Improvise?" by Molly Day Thatcher, in the March 1935 issue; and "Five Finger Exercise for the Actor," in two

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[38] V. Zakhava, "Can We Use Stanislavsky's Method?" New Theatre, August, 1935, p. 18.

installments--March and April 1936--by Robert Lewis of the Group Theatre.

An article on acting technique, by Tamaris, "The Dance and Acting," in the March 1935 New Theatre was centered around a quotation of Vsevolod Meyerhold: "Words are the design upon the outline of movement. We must put the body back."[39] "Interpretation and Characterization--A Theatre Workshop Discussion," by Harold Clurman, was published in the January 1936 New Theatre. In this piece, the Group Theatre director explained his approach to the direction of Paradise Lost which had recently opened on Broadway and which was reviewed and analyzed by John Gassner in the same issue of the magazine.

Appraisals of Theatre in the Soviet Union

The theatre and theatre artists of the USSR continued to be used as a critical yardstick by many of the practitioners and theorists who were involved in the left-wing theatre movement, during the Popular Front period of New Theatre and New Theatre and Film's publication. Many articles about the Soviet theatre were therefore included in the magazine. With the reorganization of the International Workers Dramatic Union into the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres, in 1933, the Soviets had shifted their emphasis and support away from the work of the amateur workers' theatres. The articles on Soviet Theatre that appeared in New Theatre and New Theatre

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[39] Tamiris, "The Dance and Acting," New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 21.

and Film, therefore, were mainly concerned with the work of various important professional theatres and theatre artists.

Socialist Realism had become part of the way of life in the Soviet theatres, and no particular attention was drawn to the fact that the entire texture of theatre in the USSR had been changing considerably over the past few years. Articles on the contemporary Soviet productions were written as if the work of the theatres that they described had evolved as naturally as one theatre season evolves into another in this country. And yet the effect of Socialist Realism on the Soviet theatre was apparent in every New Theatre article describing that theatre.

"Dramatizing Our Times," by Friedrich Wolf--a German expatriot dramatist and communist--was published in the February 1935 New Theatre. Discussing contemporary Soviet playwrighting, Wolf said that the drama being written in the USSR focused on present-day, post-revolutionary problems: " . . . the fight waged for the creation of a personal life on the basis of Soviet realities. These realities are the problems of the inventor, the problems of intellectuals, and of the new youth. These subjects, in relation to the Second Five Year Plan which emphasizes the change in the 'consciousness of man' and changed personalities, are truly adequate ones for the dramatist.[40]

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[40]Friedrich Wolf, "Dramatizing Our Times," New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 24.

Wolf declared that it was important for the dramatist to write about events and issues which were likely to become historically significant. And the fact that the dramatist lacked the perspective that later times would give to the issue or event treated in his play, should not inhibit him from making his interpretation of the moment.

The historical dramatist presents facts which he selects and arranges to make his play most effectively dramatic, wrote Wolf. Although historical situations should never be falsified by the dramatist, Wolf contended that what is most important is that the spirit of the actual event be truly presented. It is difficult for the contemporary dramatist to know just what the historic perspective on the event or issue which he depicts in his play will be, but he must, nonetheless, provide a conclusion to this event as he has treated it, in his play.

> We know that history in its evolutionary process can have no conclusion. But the stage drama must end. It ends where there is no ending. An historical drama, then, must prolong the end, must open perspective. . . . At no time must the dramatist surrender to this difficulty [of lacking the perspective to provide an accurate conclusion], especially now when the historical present is pregnant with the upheavals of tomorrow.[41]

Another New Theatre article about theatre in the Soviet Union, was "Soviet Diary," some excerpts from a journal which Harold Clurman had kept during a recent five week trip to the USSR. In this August 1935 piece, Clurman described a produc-

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[41] Ibid.

tion of a play entitled The Sorceress, at one of the many theatres that he had visited during his trip: The Jewish Theatre, in Moscow. In addition to describing a production at that theatre which he had greatly admired, Clurman also wrote appreciatively about the excellent conditions enjoyed by all actors in the Soviet Union. One practice of the Jewish Theatre that particularly impressed him was the use of a centralized call-board, on which the actors, directors and technicians of the theatre--in the spirit of friendly, mutual, constructive self-criticism--could leave notes for each other, pointing out the weaknesses in the performance of their respective tasks.[42]

"A Letter from H. W. L. Dana," in the November 1935 New Theatre, about the Third Moscow Theatre Festival, judged that year's event to be better than those of the previous two years. This improvement, according to Dana, was attributable to the many productions which drew upon the cultures of the national minorities; and also because the plays presented were not all proletarian propaganda. "The Soviet Theatres know that only good art is good propaganda," wrote Dana. "In place of any bitter propaganda or the inculcation of race or class hatred, the newer Soviet plays seemed permeated with the spirit of sweet reasonableness and healthy optimism."[43]

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[42]Harold Clurman, "Soviet Diary," New Theatre, August, 1935, pp. 11-12.

[43]H. W. L. Dana, "A Letter from H. W. L. Dana," New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 8.

Another H. W. L. Dana article on the Soviet theatre, "Maxim Gorki--Dramatist of the Lower Depths," written on the occasion of Gorki's death, was published in the August 1936 New Theatre. In this essay, Dana traced Gorki's development as a writer and a revolutionary, from his birth as a member of the lower classes, to his rise to fame as an internationally acclaimed playwright.[44]

There were Americans who visited the theatres of the USSR during the Popular Front years and had reservations about the quality of the contemporary Soviet playwriting. The New York Times drama critic, Brooks Atkinson, attended the Fourth Moscow Drama Festival, in September 1936, and was disappointed with much of the work that he saw there. In a Sunday Times article headlined, "Drama in Moscow Fails to Impress," Atkinson claimed that there was "not a single example of finely written drama," and that, "only a Communist or social revolutionary can wax fat on the diet of proletarian heroism that was served up night after night at the festival."[45]

Atkinson said that, among the non-left-wing sympathizers, " . . . the impression is growing that the drama of the Soviets has been over estimated by enthusiasts from America."[46] He was, however, very taken with the level of the other theatre arts in Russia. "The strength of the Moscow theatre lies in

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[44]H. W. L. Dana, "Maxim Gorki--Dramatist of the Lower Depths," New Theatre, August, 1936, pp. 10-11; 23.

[45]Brooks Atkinson, "Drama in Moscow Fails to Impress," New York Times, September 13, 1936, II, 3.

[46]Ibid.

the actors, directors and designers," he wrote. "If the festival has been composed of a representative collection of Soviet drama, the stage people are wasting their genius on stuff that from the artistic viewpoint is scarcely worth producing."[47] The theatre that Akinson had seen at the festival only served to support his belief that, "there can never be genuine creative art under a dictatorship."[48]

A New Masses columnist, James Burke, wrote an article, "Atkinson on the Soviet Theatre," for the October 1936 New Theatre as a reaction to what he termed Atkinson's "mixed" reaction to the festival. Burke said that Atkinson seemed not to have been aware that he had seen an eclectic festival, rather than a true picture of the work of the individual theatres in the USSR. Furthermore, wrote Burke, Atkinson was misinformed as to the degree of freedom enjoyed by the Soviet theatres. Their cardinal feature, he said, is the freedom with which they operate, with the financial support from the government.[49]

Herbert Kline's response, in the November 1936 New Theatre, to the Fourth Moscow Theatre Festival--which he also visited--was not in the least bit "mixed." Entitling his account of the event, "A Festival of People's Art," Kline wrote about his impressions of the performances by the amateur artists from throughout the Soviet Union. "The Festival

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid.

[49] James Burke, "Atkinson on the Soviet Theatre," New Theatre, October, 1936, p. 24.

managers could not have chosen a more compelling example of the fundamental humanity of socialism than this art of, by, and for the people," wrote Kline.[50]

Calling for the creation of "an American people's dramatic art," Kline declared:

> In America, we too have a rich folk heritage, that has always been neglected or perverted, into ridicule of the peoples in our own 'melting pot.' Let us explore that heritage of native American dances, songs and legends and, at the same time, bring out the riches inherent in the 'old country life' still treasured, as it should be, by the great percentage of our population that is foreign born or first generation American stock. . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . The material is there--rich, exciting, meaningful--let the artists of our people plunge into the work as these Soviet artists have already done.[51]

It seems that many of the American theatre artists who visited the Soviet Union during the 1930's could not avoid making the distressing comparison between the working conditions that they endured here, and those conditions (as they perceived them, however naïvely) that their counterparts in the Soviet Union enjoyed. Mordecai Gorelik, in an article on "Soviet Scene Design," for the April 1937 New Theatre and Film, described some of the scenic techniques employed in the Soviet theatres, and then wrote,

> In spite of its temporary comeback, the Broadway theatre with its unemployment, its diminished audience, forms a somber picture compared with the tremendous development of the Soviet theatre. . . . The Soviet public, over-

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[50]Herbert Kline, "A Festival of People's Art," New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 10.

[51]Ibid.

> whelmingly working class in composition, brings to the theatre freshness, enthusiasm, and a serious, critical appreciation. This public wants to see plays which not only reflect life but which show how life can be changed for the better!
>
> And this is the viewpoint also of the Soviet scene designers, who are given, in their theatres, almost unlimited resources, who are loved and publicly honored as creative workers, and who are proud of their particular task in the creation of a new society.[52]

The Commercial Stage: 1935-1937

A short note in the editorial column of the February 1935 New Theatre mentioned that a new collective theatre group--The Stage Associates--had been formed. When they had announced their organization, the editors reported, the members of the group (which included, among others: Mildred Natwick, Burgess Meredith, James Stewart and Henry Fonda), had made it clear that "they have no messages, no programs of propaganda; all they want to do is present themselves in some plays."[53] But this type of neutrality is impossible, the editors of New Theatre declared. At the present time, taking sides cannot be avoided. No play or production exists in a void; all plays have social implications of one type or another.

This assertion by the magazine's management, exemplifies the aesthetic and critical perspective from which the contributors and staff of New Theatre regarded and evaluated

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[52]Mordecai Gorelik, "Soviet Scene Design," New Theatre and Film, April, 1937, p. 45.

[53]Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 4.

the contemporary theatrical productions and theatre artists, during the final, Popular Front phase of the magazine. But this socio-political perspective was not particular only to those individuals who were committed to and active in the recently expanded left-wing or "progressive" movement. There was, during the period, a generalized spirit of awareness and reform that had been generated by many of the government's social programs--such as the WPA--which had been instituted to combat the widespread debilitating effects of the Depression.

Plays with messages of protest and the need for change became both more acceptable and more fashionable to the middle-class audience that supported the theatre; and more commercial playwrights were showing signs of social consciousness, in their plays. For the most part, because of the Popular Front policy of extending a welcoming attitude to those professionals who were on the outskirts of "the movement," the New Theatre reviews of the commercial Broadway plays which attempted some social statement were less critical than they had formerly been.

Occasionally, however, a reviewer did not refrain from taking a playwright to task for being half-hearted in his or her analysis of a situation, in a play, which seemed to demand a firmer political interpretation. This was the case in the New Theatre review of Melvin Levy's Gold Eagle Guy which was produced by the Group Theatre, and opened on

Broadway on November 28, 1934 Levy's play is about the rise of a ruthless, practically inhuman individual--Guy Button--to a position of almost limitless power, in the San Francisco of the late 1800's and early 1900's.

Gold Eagle Guy is a cynical and pessimistic play, in its treatment of the super-capitalist and his potential for control. Although Button is clearly depicted as being villainous, there is a certain fascination in his amorality, and there is no character in the play who is capable of opposing him. Only the San Francisco earthquake, at the end of the play, is able to stop Guy Button.

When Leon Alexander reviewed Gold Eagle Guy, for the January 1935 New Theatre, he objected to the fact that Button seems, in the play, to exist in a social vacuum. He wrote that Gold Eagle Guy was, " . . . not only a bad play, but one that arries dangerous implications as well. It is romantic in the wildest sense of the word: in its use of far-fetched, violent episodes; in its isolation of a single individual's fate; in its growing removal from social realities with every scene; in its attitudes towards love; in its unnecessary distortion of history for the sake of melodrama.[54]

In "Shows for Sale," written for the February 1935 New Theatre, Harold Edgar castigated three playwrights with social consciences--Lillian Hellman, Robert Sherwood, and

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[54]Leon Alexander, review of Gold Eagle Guy, New Theatre, January, 1935, p. 24.

S. N. Behrman--for evading the issues raised in their plays. Of Hellman's The Children's Hour, Edgar wrote that, "the author holds the audience's attention by a series of shock-surprises without ever coming to grips with any single element in her story."[55] This play, and Sherwood's The Petrified Forest, as well as Behrman's Rain From Heaven, said Edgar, had been written to sell, as popular entertainments. In The Petrified Forest, which Edgar preferred to The Children's Hour, but found just as empty as the latter play:

> [Robert Sherwood] just cracks a few jokes, makes popular coin of a few half-digested ideas, makes senseless killing and dying seem easy and almost romantically desireable, and then goes out and collects the shekels that such a stew of stale ingredients is sure to bring on Broadway. The only thing that might convince us at least of the author's sincerity is his own suicide. But that is too much to ask! Even disillusion is a fake. And all we have is what one reviewer calls 'a peach of a show.'[56]

Writing about S. N. Behrman, Edgar said that the playwright showed an awareness of the problems confronting thinking people, but that he showed no commitment of his own. "Social drama is thus transformed into a conversation piece, life and death matters become subjects for sophisticated parlor chatter."[57] Molly Day Thatcher also pointed to Behrman's superficiality in dealing with social issues, in her review of his play, End of Summer, in the April 1936 New Theatre. Thatcher complained that Behrman "records meticu-

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[55]Harold Edgar, "Shows For Sale," New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 21.

[56]Ibid.

[57]Ibid.

lously and amusingly the noise of social controversy as it echoes, no louder than the clink of cocktail glasses, through the graciously curtained living rooms of the medium rich."[58]

When Thatcher reviewed the Lunts' interpretation of The Taming of the Shrew, as produced by the Theatre Guild, it was the Guild's audience and its dependency on that audience with which she took issue.

> That those actors and managers of the Guild who have some love of the theatre do not boot their subscription audience out the door some night is a courtesy only to be explained by the beacon light of Marxism. Further, (by dialectics), the jewelled hand that feeds this former First Theatre of America has come near turning it into a lapdog. Now and then it yaps (Parade) or worries (They Shall Not Die) at its mistresses, but it does not strain the leash too far.[59]

Thatcher said that if the Guild would lower its prices, it could have more stimulating audience; it was a shame to waste productions as good as the one under discussion on such appetiteless theatregoers.

By the Spring of 1935, the left-wing theatre movement, or the "Theatre of the Left"--as Brooks Atkinson and Bosley Crowther had recently dubbed it--had been widely recognized and had completely come into its own as one of the most important forces in the contemporary theatre. Awake and Sing!, Waiting for Lefty, and Till the Day I Die--all by Clifford Odets--had been skillfully produced, on Broadway,

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[58]Molly Day Thatcher, review of End of Summer, New Theatre, April, 1936, p. 38.

[59]Molly Day Thatcher, review of Taming of the Shrew, New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 11.

by the Group Theatre, and with these plays, the Group had achieved critical acclaim as well as some financial stability. The Theatre Union had also presented some fine productions, such as Peace on Earth, Stevedore, Black Pit and Sailors of Cattaro, and had succeeded in organizing a subscription audience to help insure its future endeavors.

But in spite of the approbation which the important theatrical productions of the left-wing theatre had been accorded, the 1934-35 Pulitzer Prize--to the great outrage of the theatre workers of the Left--was awarded to a play that was completely irrelevant to both "the movement" and to the times: The Old Maid, adapted by Zoe Atkins, from an Edith Wharton novel. The action of The Old Maid takes place from 1833 to 1854, and involves a complicated and, in my opinion, overly contrived plot: In this play, a woman has a child by a man whom she had always loved, but who had turned to her, only briefly, after being rejected by her flirtatious cousin. In order to shield her child from this "disgrace," she agrees to live in the same household with her cousin who has adopted the child, and to pose as the child's spinster aunt. Having read The Old Maid, it is not at all surprising to me that Molly Day Thatcher wrote, in a June 1935 New Theatre article, that,

> As we go to press, Parade, Tide Rises and The Young Go First have just played their opening performances, and, though Black Pit is closing, Waiting for Lefty, Awake and Sing! and the Artef's new play are still going strong. Yes . . . the Left theatres are forging ahead, and

> intelligent audiences sensitive to exciting and significant drama will keep them going strong while fussy old judges and fussy young things flock to The Old Maid if only to be able to say that they've seen the latest Pulitzer Prize Winner.[60]

The 1935-36 Pulitzer Prize play was Robert Sherwood's Idiot's Delight--a superficial anti-war play about the machinations of cynical capitalist war-makers and promoters, and the ignorant people who allow these machinations to go on. Reviewing Idiot's Delight for the May 1936 New Theatre, in a piece entitled "'Idiot's Delight' The Anatomy of a Success," David Shepperd wrote, " . . . it's a smash. It is also a good show. It has color."[61] Shepperd said that it was important for the left-wing theatre movement to analyze and understand the broad appeal that a play such as Sherwood's had for the theatre-going public. Idiot's Delight has a minimum of plot and conflict; there is, as Shepperd pointed out, no real struggle of wills in the play. The structure of Idiot's Delight is very loose, and there is little real drama inherent in the play's story. Although the characters in the play are not well defined, their clever, sexy, cultured conversation--with a bit of social comment thrown in--seems to be the main source of entertainment for the play's audience, Shepperd observed. The play is basically entertainment

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[60]Molly Day Thatcher, "Plays of the Month," New Theatre, June, 1935, p. 15.

[61]David Shepperd, "'Idiot's Delight' The Anatomy of a Success," New Theatre, May, 1935, p. 9.

only. "There is no consistent intelligence, there is no justice, there are no heroes, no valid fighters. . . ." Shepperd concluded.[62]

A section of the June 1936 editorial column was devoted to a consideration of the general issue of "Prizes for Plays":

> The recent spring freshet of prize awards raises some familiar problems. Is a play to be judged for its entertainment value, for its technical merit, for the ideas which it presents, or for the combination of all these? Is it likely that each year one play will achieve excellence in all three categories, and if such a paragon fails to appear, should not the award for the best play temper its praise with a little criticism? Finally is it possible or even desireable to attempt to single out the best play of the season, with the blanket endorsement which such a selection involves?[63]

The editors continued with a brief discussion of the year's Pulitzer Prize winner, Idiot's Delight, as well as the Drama Critics' Circle Award for the 1935-36 season, Winterset, by Maxwell Anderson. While both plays are skillfully written, the editors suggested, neither play really comes to terms successfully with the social issues around which its plot centers. In the case of Idiot's Delight, "It seems . . . that the Pulitzer Prize has been awarded to a play in which integrity of thought has been sacrificed, almost to the point of cheapness, for the sake of that anomalous quality known as 'good theatre.'"[64] The editors declared

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[62]Ibid.

[63]Editorials, "Prizes for Plays," New Theatre, June, 1936, p. 4.

[64]Ibid.

that, "What is needed is a clear and rational system of critical evaluation which would require a dramatic critic to pay as much attention to what a play says as to how it says it. Due credit would then be given Winterset for its literary and dramatic qualities, along with an analysis of its defeatest philosophy and reactionary implications.[65]

The discussion was concluded with the nomination of the following plays to the 1935-36 New Theatre honor role, for plays which, although they had some shortcomings, "unite good theatre and fine craftsmanship with integrity and a stirring message": Paradise Lost, by Odets; Let Freedom Ring, by Albert Bein; Dead End, by Sidney Kingsley; Hymn to the Rising Sun, by Paul Green; and Bury the Dead, by Irwin Shaw.[66]

In a recapitulation of the strengths and weaknesses of the 1935-1936 season, "End of Season,"--John Gassner observed that,

> It is quite impossible to abide any longer by a neat little category of 'left' drama. The social orientation implicit in this classification constituted the lifeblood of scores of successful plays like Idiot's Delight, Dead End, If This Be Treason, Love on the Dole, End of Summer and Russet Mantle, generally accepted as the cream of the season's serious theatre, and Winterset, despite the falsifications and evasions which destroy its integrity and vision. . . . If the season was a noteworthy one, this was due preponderantly to its more or less definite grappling with contemporary problems of war, dictatorship, economic collapse, and the struggle for life, liberty and humanity in a transitional world.[67]

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid.

[67] John W. Gassner, "End of Season," New Theatre, June, 1936, p. 9.

By the 1935-36 season, the left-wing theatre movement, as we have already noted, had both broadened its horizons and extended its influence. And, at the same time, because of the current social, economic and political situation in the country, Broadway and the commercial theatre establishment had likewise expended its scope, and the two--formerly very disparate camps--found reason to look at each other more directly and with more open interest. A note in the "Backstage" section, of the October 1936 New Theatre, listed the following plays as "worth seeing": Boy Meets Girl, Horse Eats Hat (a Federal Theatre Project play), Idiot's Delight, Injunction Granted! (a Living Newspaper production), On Your Toes, Path of Flowers, So Proudly We Hail, Three Men on a Horse and Tobacco Road.[68]

Approaching Prominent Theatre People--Popular Front Style

By 1935, a substantial number of well-known and important theatre professionals had begun to demonstrate an active interest and to participate in the work of the left-wing theatre movement. And although the editors and contributors to New Theatre could have been satisfied with the rapidly developing movement and the ever-growing list of partisans and fellow-travelers that their work had helped to bring about, the lack of interest in the social theatre by

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[68]"Backstage," New Theatre, October, 1936, p. 30.

certain individuals from whom the movement somehow expected cooperation, continued to be of obvious concern to them. Articles on Paul Muni, Eugene O'Neill and Eva Le Gallienne--three artists who were of considerable disappointment to the movement, because of the fact that, from their work, it seemed appropriate that they should share the movement's concerns--appeared in New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, during the magazine's Popular Front era.

Since Paul Muni had often played socially crusading roles and possibly also because he had begun his career as an actor in the traditionally socially aware Yiddish Theatre, Muni's public disclaimer, in a New York Times interview, of any social concern, had particularly offended and shocked the Left. In a March 1935 New Theatre Article, "Paul Muni Denies All--And J. Edward Bromberg Makes a Comment or Two," Emanuel Eisenberg quoted from the Times interview, in which Muni had said:

> . . . I have always avoided being brought in as a crusader. My politics is the business of acting. Nothing else matters. It may sound dull, but I really am not concerned with the depression, or with communism or capitalism. If communism comes along, swell! If fascism, it's all right with me. I'll take my chances with the other fellow. My work is the theatre. I work in it like a scientist who works on an invention, not knowing whether his discovery will be constructive or destructive. That's my feeling about a picture.[69]

Eisenberg had asked a number of other well-known theatre artists about their reactions to Muni's statement

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[69]Emanuel Eisenberg, "Paul Muni Denies All--And J. Edward Bromberg Makes a Comment or Two," New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 5.

and he had been dismayed to discover that many of those whom he questioned were in general agreement with Muni's position. The Group Theatre actor, J. Edward Bromberg, however, had tried to understand Muni's statement and the great contradiction between what the actor had said and the roles with which he had been associated. Bromberg felt that subconsciously Muni was on the right side, because he had always chosen to play roles with social implications. There was, naturally, no way from Bromberg to prove this contention, to anyone's satisfaction.

In an early Workers Theatre essay about the plays of Eugene O'Neill--"Mourning Becomes Eugene O'Neill"--Albert Prentis and regretted O'Neill's abandonment of the workers whose plight had originally moved him.[70] But in a September 1935 essay for New Theatre, "The Quest of Eugene O'Neill," Charmion Von Wiegand denied that O'Neill had ever demonstrated any genuine social concerns in his plays. Von Viegand contended that the radical intellectuals who had been disappointed by O'Neill were mistaken in their disappointment; and he quoted O'Neill as having written, in 1924, that The Hairy Ape's subject, "is the same ancient one that always was and always will be the subject for drama and that is man and his struggle with his own fate. The struggle used to be with the Gods, but now [it is] with himself, his own past, his attempt to

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[70]See Chapter V, p. 277.

belong."[71]

The main point of Von Wiegand's long essay (in which he also analyzed the development of O'Neill's dramaturgy) was that the playwright's revolt as well as his search for the answers to life's mysteries, had always been completely individualistic and had had nothing to do with the social struggle or contemporary problems. The intellectual today must choose between the ivory tower (and decaying capitalism) and the fight for democracy and freedom, said Von Wiegand. By hiding in the church--in his latest play, Days Without End --O'Neill had joined with the forces of reaction. "Today," wrote Von Wiegand,

> the petty bourgeoisie is making its choice between the capitalistic mirages of the moment and the camp of the proletariat. There is a great living, grateful and thrilling audience awaiting those creative artists who choose to stake all for a new creative world. Out of the struggle for that world must necessarily stem a new and vital art, such as America has not yet dreamed of, but this art will move in a direction opposite to O'Neill's hopeless quest for mystical peace.[72]

Eva Le Gallienne was another important theatre professional whose lack of commitment to the cause of social change was noted and criticized in New Theatre. An article entitled, "Eva Le Gallienne--Ten Years," by Walter Pell, in the March 1936 issue, traced the development--or, as he saw it, the lack of significant development--of the Civic Repertory

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[71]Charmion Von Wiegand, "The Quest of Eugene O'Neill," New Theatre, September, 1935, p. 12.

[72]Ibid., p. 32.

Company which had been founded by Miss Le Gallienne, in 1926. Pell pointed out that, when the company was formed, it was dedicated to "the great plays of the world"; and that this had been the only factor guiding the company's choice of plays over the years. Furthermore, Pell said that, in directing these classics of the theatre, Miss Le Gallienne had used no creative interpretation to give them contemporary relevance, or even a point of view.

Pell acknowledged that Le Gallienne had provided a service through her theatre, when she had proved that there was an audience for theatre among people of low incomes. Unfortunately, however, she had never considered what type of play this audience would prefer. Even after the Group Theatre and the Theatre Union had successfully produced and thereby proven what type of play was satisfying to this audience, Miss Le Gallienne still refused to do plays with social messages.

Le Gallienne continued to speak about the necessity for a social theatre, Pell said, but if such a theatre were founded under her leadership, it would quickly become a mausoleum for the European classics. Pell called for Eva Le Gallienne to emerge from her ivory tower and to join in the movement toward the theatre of the future. And he seconded this call by quoting from an earlier New York Sun article by the drama critic of that paper, Richard Lockridge: "Instead of producing rather dull plays by Ibsen because they are by

Ibsen, it would be heartening if Miss Le Gallienne would join the theatre of 1935. It is rough and uncouth; the years have not polished or sanctified its plays. But it does matter to those who happen to be living now. And she is too important a person to be left out of it."[73]

The editors and contributors to New Theatre--New Theatre and Film extended their attitude of critical but benevolent paternalism to the theatre professionals who were either partisans or who were hovering just on the outskirts of the left-wing theatre movement, during the Popular Front period of the magazine's publication. In the years 1935, 1936 and early-1937, therefore, when the work of Archibald MacLeish, Maxwell Anderson, Ernst Toller and Lillian Hellman was analyzed in New Theatre, it was criticized objectively, but with care not to alienate the latter artists whom the magazine's editors recognized as being important to "the movement."

An article about Archibald MacLeish, by Steve Foster, appeared in the April 1935 New Theatre--one month after the magazine's publication of "Some Fragments from 'Panic,'" MacLeish's most recent play. Foster entitled his piece--a discussion of Panic--"New Found Land," because he felt that, "In 'Panic,' MacLeish is aware that America is no longer the wasteland of capitalism but the new found land of America's toiling masses."[74]

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[73]Walter Pell, quoting Richard Lockridge, in "Eva Le Gallienne--Ten Years," New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 20.

[74]Steve Foster, "New Found Land," New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 21.

In his introduction to the "Fragments from 'Panic,'" for its publication in New Theatre, MacLeish wrote that the play's theme, "is the conflict between the individualism of the protagonist and the sense of inevitable extinction of the existing economic order which is one of the deepest, if not always the most commonly recognized convictions of our generation."[75] MacLeish's depiction of this conflict, however, is considerably more abstract--perhaps because of the verse form in which the play is written--than seems, to me, to be appropriate. Much of the impact of the conflict is lost because there is never any real exchange or struggle between the two forces in the play, represented by McGafferty, the protagonist--"a sort of composite, non-historical Ford-Morgan-Carnegie industrialist and banker, the most powerful figure of his time"[76]--and the chorus, or street crowd--"the external world against which the action of the play takes place."[77] The only confrontation between McGafferty and the masses, is when a group of workers force themselves into his office, and one of their number--a blind man--shouts warnings to him about the social and economic apocolypse that will soon come. At the end of the play, when McGafferty is convinced that there is no possible solution to his economic

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[75]Archibald MacLeish, "Fragments from 'Panic,'" New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 10.

[76]Ibid. [77]Ibid.

crisis, he commits suicide. Hearing of his death, the crowd looks expectantly to the future, but not with any certainty or resolution.

In his appraisal of Panic, Foster said that MacLeish was still not aware of the true nature of the conflict (class conflict) which he represented in his play. He felt that MacLeish did not realize the humanity of the crowd in his play--which he depicted as having no will or motive system. But Foster did see Panic as a positive step in the right direction for MacLeish.

> Panic has . . . significance because it is the personal statement of MacLeish in artistic form, objectified on the stage. The hero McGafferty is a picture of MacLeish's transition from the arch-industrialist to the man who realizes that individualism is a myth and envisions the triumph of collectivism. The poet is at one removed from his character and he is therefore able to project him upon the stage. MacLeish is master of McGafferty because MacLeish has become master of his former self.[78]

Foster said that Panic was not a great drama, but that it has helped to prove that poetic drama has a place on the stage. "When MacLeish solves the problems of poetic dramaturgy and clarifies fundamental social issues for himself," Foster concluded, "he will succeed."[79]

Another contemporary dramatist who used poetry in his playwriting was Maxwell Anderson. Anderson's play Winterset which was--rather obliquely--about the Sacco-Vanzetti case

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[78]Steve Foster, "New Found Land," New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 21

[79]Ibid.

of the 1920's, was the winner of the 1935-36 Drama Critics' Circle Awared, but was nonetheless, judged by John Gassner to be a play that had many weaknesses. Gassner discussed Winterset in his November 1935 New Theatre article, "Broadway Tries Again," and said that it is a play that is "defeated by its inconclusiveness."[80] In the play, Anderson attempted to, "try to fuse the separate facets of his playwrighting, to amalgamate the poet and the prose writer, the romanticist and the realist."[81] The attempt, said Gassner, failed.

Gassner maintained that Anderson was indignant about the situation that he treated in his play, but that he was also confused. Instead of just staying with the contemporary theme of his play, he got mixed up in trying to deal with eternal verities: love, truth, justice, duty. In the end, the social aspects of the play were absorbed into the Romeo and Juliet aspects of its plot. Anderson shows an ignorance of workingclass people, in his play, said Gassner; and he refuses to get really involved in the social struggle. Winterset is part of Anderson's search for meaning in the world, and it is, "half masterpiece, half pretentious melodrama and romance."[82]

A more thorough study of Maxwell Anderson, entitled "Maxwell Anderson: Thursday's Child," was published in the

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[80]John Gassner, "Broadway Tries Again," New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 10.

[81]Ibid.

[82]Ibid.

September 1936 New Theatre. Phillip Stevenson began this essay by pointing out that when Maxwell Anderson won the Drama Critics' Circle Aware the previous season, he had reached a degree of critical recognition that no American dramatist, except O'Neill, had ever reached. Discussing Anderson's plays in their chronological order, Stevenson pointed out that there were several areas in which the plays are all very similar. For example in all of Anderson's plays there is a series of rebel-heroes, "whose contempt for authority is their outstanding trait."[83] The plays also have in common the negative quality of dodging the most insistent questions which are natural outgrowths of their basic themes and stories.

In many ways, according to Stevenson, an earlier play about the Sacco-Vanzetti case (which Anderson wrote in collaboration with Harold Hickerson), Gods of Lightening, is the playwright's most satisfactory work. Unfortunately, however, the impact of the play is blunted by the conflict which exists between the viewpoint of the playwright--an individualist-ist-anarchist--and the viewpoint of his subjects in the play: class conscious anarchists who understood the far-reaching implications of their case. Gods of Lightening ends on a personal cry of grief, instead of with the triumph of understanding the implications of the deaths of the two men. But

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[83]Phillip Stevenson, "Maxwell Anderson: Thursday's Child," New Theatre, September, 1936, p. 7.

on the whole, said Stevenson, Gods of Lightening deals courageously with highly socially significant material.

In 1930 Anderson returned to the past for his material, and turned to poetry as his medium. Stevenson observed that Anderson's poetic dramas don't just use poetic language, but fulfills MacLeish's test of a poetic conception: the use of poetry permits the poet to seize directly upon the emotional crisis in the play and come together with the audience, "in a community of assumption and understanding."[84] The early subjects of Andersons' poetic dramas were members of royalty. In Night Over Taos, Anderson turned away from writing about royal subjects; and in Both Your Houses, he went back to using prose. In the latter play, as in his earlier works, Anderson does not really come to terms with the social issues raised by his material; he, "glosses over the source of corruption, the ethically insulting principles perpetuated by the masters in order to cry out against the dishonesty and insincerity of their servants."[85]

Stevenson said that it looked, at first view, like Anderson would finally be combining poetry and revolutionary material, in Valley Forge. And although Anderson's Washington is far from being the ideal rebel-hero, the playwright has done well with both his protagonist and with the rank-and-file soldiers in the play. There was, however, still too

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[84]Ibid.

much romanticism in Valley Forge for Stevenson.

Winterset was the chance for Anderson to do what he had been wanting to do all along: to treat modern socially significant material as poetry and to appeal to the social consciences of his contemporaries. Stevenson believed that there is much strength but also some weakness in Winterset. In the end, however, this play about truth as a social weapon, all but disappears and becomes "a second-hand imitation of Romeo and Juliet."[86]

"We have the right to demand of Anderson that he think straight and write clearly about the social themes that instinctively engage his attention--that he have the courage to face the facts and tell the truth," wrote Stevenson. The playwright had a great journey to make, "from the refuge of the abstract to the battleground of the real." But if he did make the journey, "he [would] speak as he was born to speak, with the individual passion of a poet who loves his fellow-man."[87]

In the introductory paragraph to his essay, "Ernst Toller--The Playwright of Expressionism," in the August 1936 New Theatre, Charmion Von Wiegand wrote, "The publication in English of seven plays by Ernst Toller, the revolutionary German playwright, now in exile in England is of particular moment in America today. Both in form and content, these

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[86]Ibid., p. 26.

[87]Ibid., p. 27.

plays are bound to exert an influence on the American theatre, particularly the new theatre."[88]

After discussing Toller's background and some of his early plays, Von Wiegand turned to a brief general consideration of expressionism which he said " . . . appears always in a period of social change and break-up during the transition from an old form of society to a new one."[89] No expressionist art is possible in Germany today, said Von Wiegand, because one viewpoint representing one political party is in power. And there is no expressionist art at present in Russia either, he explained, because Soviet society has already gone through a great social change and the conditions have been prepared for the development of a great classic art.

Von Wiegand continued his discussion of Toller by turning to a consideration of some of the playwright's works, in which he tried to deal more directly with the class struggle. Man and Masses (1919) was the most important of these plays, a historical landmark in the German theatre, which dramatized the class struggle, in dream form, on stage.

There are still barriers between Toller and the workingclass which Toller fails to understand, said Wiegand. And he "remains the poet of no man's land in the class battle."[90]

> Since his early impetuous and romantic espousal of the revolutionary cause, Toller has moved steadily toward

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[88]Charmion Von Wiegand, "Ernst Toller--the Playwright of Expressionism," New Theatre, August, 1936, p. 13.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Ibid., p. 25.

> a more realistic attitude both in his work and his revolutionary activities. With America standing on the threshold of the struggle which has wracked Germany for a decade, his example as a writer and as an intellectual leader, should have a stimulating effect on the left-ward moving intelligentsia in the United States today.[91]

By 1937, John Howard Lawson was a member of the Executive Board of the New Theatre League, and he was also one of the most important artistic mentors of the American Communist Party. His article, in the March 1937 New Theatre and Film, "Lillian Hellman--A Comparative Study of 'The Children's Hour' and 'Days to Come'"--was no doubt read with great interest by the artists and sympathizers in the left-wing theatre movement.

Days to Come is about a labor struggle in a small Ohio town. The workers in a brush factory, who have always gotten along with the factory owners--the Rodman family--have attempted to organize a union and have gone on strike to demand that right. The Rodmans' lawyer convinces them that they must hire strike-breakers or face bankruptcy (it is later learned that the lawyer owns a great deal of stock in the factory). The strike-breakers arrive, violence follows; and a child is accidentally killed. The workers give in and return to work, but the victory is a bitter one for Andrew Rodman, the play's protagonist, who--all at once--recognizes just what is meant by the class struggle and that he must face the fact that for "days to come" he will never be able

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[91] Ibid.

to move freely among the townspeople who are on his payroll and who are, therefore, his adversaries.

Days to Come, by Hellman, "illustrates . . the difficulties encountered by the playwright who is intent on deepening the social and aesthetic scope of his work," Lawson wrote.[92] The critics compared this recent play to the Children's Hour, he continued, and in doing so, found it inept and amateurish, and said that there was no continuity in the playwright's development. "Indeed, the faults in the later play are due to the intensity of the author's growth," said Lawson. "Her search for dramatic truth leads her beyond her present ability to organize and unify her material."[93]

Lawson said that Days to Come is really about the class struggle; but that Hellman didn't truly understand the nature of that struggle. "She does not see it as a dynamic process."[94] Hellman uses Andrew Rodman's recognition of the class struggle, at the end of the play, as an ethical act, which it is not. Odets made a similar mistake in his ending of Paradise Lost, Lawson believed, when he uses recognition as a substitute for action. The sum total of Days to Come is a passive ethical statement. The futile atmosphere at the end of the play comes from Hellman's assumption that no choice is possible for the play's characters. "This assump-

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[92]John Howard Lawson, "Lillian Hellman--A Comparative Study of 'The Children's Hour' and 'Days to Come,'" New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 15.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Ibid., p. 16.

tion can only lead the dramatist into a fog which enshrouds Ibsen's last plays," Lawson warned; and he continued, "Miss Hellman's career as a playwright also depends on a choice which is reflected in her plays. This choice requires courage and rigorous discipline. Art cannot be created out of the shreds and patches of beliefs and sentiments. One cannot interpret a living social process without a living social philosophy."[95]

Lawson had certainly come a great distance--both aesthetically and politically--as he now took on the role which Michael Gold had earlier assumed with him, and urged Hellman and, by implication, all the other indecisive and undeclared sympathizers and fellow-travelers to make a more definite commitment to "the movement."

"The Case of the Group Theatre"

Waiting for Lefty, by Clifford Odets had its premier presentation at the Civic Repertory Theatre, as part of a New Theatre Night, on January 6, 1935; and was, to a great extent, responsible for the stabilization and professionalization of the left-wing theatre movement. According to an editorial in the February 1935 New Theatre,

> . . . in Waiting for Lefty, for the first time in the whole collective of the theatre, there is a clear, strong, zestful and human affirmation blended with social understanding and professional dramatic competence. The playwright, the actors, the director, know what they

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[95]Ibid., p. 61.

> are saying and how to say it: The Group is emerging from its period of groping artistic introspection. The result of four years' collective work in a sound theatrical method are here applied to express their continually maturing revolutionary convictions.[96]

Discussing the impact of Waiting for Lefty one month later, in the March 1935 New Theatre, Herbert Kline wrote that Odets,

> . . . has made such an important contribution that his entry in the New Theatre--New Masses Prize Play Contest has set a new standard of theatrical effectiveness for the short revolutionary play. He has succeeded in dramatizing the New York taxi strike of 1935 in terms of readily recognizeable human characters and in a theatrical style that involves the audience so completely that 'we the people' in the audience are no longer spectators but participants.[97]

Odets, Kline declared, had the ability to achieve and maintain "absolute audience identification," by combining the direct appeal of the agit-prop form, with realism. Although the play does have some weakness--sometimes there is too much stage ingenuity, and more often audience identification arises from poignant situations rather than from fully realized characters--"Waiting for Lefty realized the slogan of the revolutionary theatres that 'theatre is a weapon in the class struggle' more completely than any play we have seen yet in America."[98]

Awake and Sing!, also by Odets, had been in preparation

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[96] Editorial, New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 4.

[97] Herbert Kline, "The New Plays--New Masses and New Theatre Prize Winners," New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 22.

[98] Ibid.

for a February 1935 opening when Waiting for Lefty took "the movement" by storm. The response by the Left to the longer and more complex Odets' play was not as unanimously enthusiastic as had been the case with "Lefty." Mary Virginia Farmer--a former Group Theatre member; then the director of the Theatre Collective--reviewed Awake and Sing! for the March 1935 New Theatre, and suggested that the play was not without substantial flaws. Farmer felt, for example, that the play's ending--in which Ralphie, after his grandfather's suicide-death and the subsequent internal family struggle over the insurance money, decides that he will organize a strike for better working conditions at his factory because he's learned that there are more important things in life than money--is too weak and non-specific. Her major complaint with the play, in fact, was that too much about its wider context has been left for the audience to fill in for itself. "We have only the merest hint of the forecast in the play . . . the line beyond the curtain is not very strong or clear, but it is there for us to build on for ourselves and for the playwright to build his play upon in more unmistakeable terms. For I believe that in his next play we will recognize Clifford Odets as the leading revolutionary playwright in America."[99]

Herbert Kline responded more positively to Awake and

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[99]Mary Virginia Farmer, review of Awake and Sing!, New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 20.

Sing! than Mary Virginia Farmer had. He discussed the play briefly in the May 1935 New Theatre and said that,

> This vivid portrayal of the crushing effects of the vice-like middle-class homes that generate so many revolutionaries who learn to 'awake and sing' in the class struggle, only after they have rebelled first of all against their constricting home life has been generally underestimated. In its sparkling dialogue, its sharp characterization, its sure dramatic drive Awake and Sing is a play that should interest left theatre goers.[100]

A double bill of Waiting for Lefty and Till the Day I Die--"The Group Theatre's contribution to the fight against Fascism," as it was labeled by the editors of New Theatre[101]--opened at the Ambassador Theatre, on March 26, 1935. According to Odets, Till The Day I Die had been written in five days, and was based on a letter that had been published in The New Masses. The play is about a communist who, having been captured by the Nazis, is tortured almost to the point of betraying his comrades. He is released, but he knows that he will be picked up again and he cannot be certain that his will to remain silent will withstand further physical torture. He goes to his brother--also a communist--and, in order to protect the struggle, convinces his brother to execute him as a potential traitor.

Rudolf Wittenberg, a communist German émigré, reviewed Till the Day I Die, in the May 1935 New Theatre, and said

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[100]Herbert Kline, New Theatre, May, 1935, p. 26.

[101]Editorial, New Theatre, April, 1936, p. 3.

that the play was weak, possibly because it had been written too quickly. Wittenberg felt that Odets had failed to provide the background that his play requires. He also thought that the plot was too sketchy and that none of the characters seemed really human. Wittenberg said that the subjects treated in Till the Day I Die are too frightening and repelling for a bourgeois audience. "The social realism that is the strength of Waiting for Lefty," wrote Wittenberg, "is replaced in this piece by a half-naturalist, half-fantastic style."[102] But Wittenberg still felt optimistic about the work of the Group Theatre:

> The close ensemble spirit of all the members of the Group shows us a real collective spirit which will not be misled by applause and will help the author to bring us even greater plays. Their competence and collective spirit will surely demand of an author of the ability of Clifford Odets that he help conquer the moment of danger and resist the temptation of bringing the Broadway audience the sensationalism they wish to see. This is the temptation which defeated similar theatres in other countries as fascism approached, and the Group must learn from them. While it is important to reach this audience it is their contact with the workers' theatre which will give them a basis for stability, clear work, and permanence.[103]

A short section about the Group Theatre, in the editorial column of the June 1935 New Theatre was, for the first time, an unqualified endorsement of the Group's work, by the magazine. Noting that the Group Theatre had been

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[102] Rudolph Wittenberg, review of Till the Day I Die, New Theatre, May, 1935, p. 16.

[103] Ibid., p. 17.

"going strong" for five years, the New Theatre editors wrote that, "Their serious collective study of theatre craft and theory based on the Stanislavsky Method, together with their recent concentration on strong plays of social protest, have made possible the Group's swift development into America's leading professional theatre company."[104] The editors stated that the New Theatre readers must continue to support the Group Theatre productions during the summer months because, "their importance to the New Theatre Movement cannot be overestimated."[105]

An article entitled "The Case of the Group Theatre," by Norman Stevens, appeared in the July 1936 New Theatre--one year after the magazine had declared its complete support for the work of the Group. Stevens began his discussion by stating that the Group Theatre "is today the foremost professional permanent company in America, the most advanced technically, the most progressive in its aims and social orientation. . . ."[106] Because the Group had accomplished so much in revitalizing the life of the American theatre and also because of the values it represented, Stevens said that its problems should be viewed objectively and with understanding.

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[104]Editorial, New Theatre, June, 1935, p. 3.

[105]Ibid.

[106]Norman Stevens, "The Case of the Group Theatre," New Theatre, July, 1936, p. 5.

Stevens continued by explaining that, recently, the Group had run into problems of internal governance. An actors' committee--composed of Group members who tended to be more radical than the three directors of the company--had been attempting to get a greater voice in the important decisions affecting the Group. One area in which the actors wished to have more control was in the choice of the plays for production: the actors wanted to do more progressive plays; but the directors, said Stevens, were interested in remaining a commercial middle-of-the road theatre.

The Group Theatre had been confused in its approach to various issues--particularly in its dealing with trade unions and in its reaction to well-meant criticism--said Stevens. The 1935-36 season: Weep for the Virgins, Paradise Lost, and the Case of Clyde Griffiths, was a reflection of the Group's present confused state.

Stevens said that the Group Theatre should become a democratic collective. Its organization should be broadened to include other interested creative workers. Also, the Group needed to concentrate on building audience support, thus freeing itself from commercial interests. To accomplish all this, Stevens said that the members of the Group--actors and directors--should meet together and bring everything out into the light. Stevens further suggested the necessity for a greater politicization of the Group Theatre:

> The Group has a magnificent task to perform. It is possible that the richest art of our time may be developed out of the conflicts of middle-class life--the attempt of the middle-class to free themselves from the fears and phobias of the past and to take their place with the workers in the struggle for a better world. If the Group is to fulfill this task, it must become a Marxist theatre.[107]

The Group Theatre never became a Marxist theatre, of course, and the type of reorganization which Stevens suggested in his article also never took place. A section of the editorial column of the March 1937 New Theatre and Film, headed "The Case of the Group Theatre," discussed the fact that, in January 1937, the Group had temporarily suspended production for a while: "to take stock in its past and examine its future."[108] The magazine's editorial board stated that they were not at all surprised by the present impasse which the Group had reached. They referred their readers to Norman Stevens' July 1936 analysis of the Group's problems and stated that none of the problems which Stevens had discussed in his article had ever been resolved by the Group. The editors asserted that the directors of the Group Theatre had to realize the vast difference between what the Group had done --the plays it had chosen to produce; and the performance methods used--and the social function that the Group had supposedly set out to perform.

If the Group Theatre is ever to succeed, the editorial

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[107] Ibid., p. 26.

[108] Editorial, New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 51.

continued, then it must do plays that will satisfy the audience which it supposedly took as its own, and it must stop attempting to compete with Broadway. "It is to be hoped that the soundest elements in the Group Theatre will struggle to achieve that unity in its program and purpose which alone can justify the financial independence it is now working for," the editors concluded.[109]

The "Theatre of the Left"--Commercial Productions

The major professional ensemble with a left-wing social and political orientation, that was active during the 1930's was the Theatre Union. The Theatre Union's united front policy had not changed since its organization, in 1933; and by 1935 the company's political approach was entirely in harmony with the Popular Front policy that was adopted by the left-wing movement as a whole, and by New Theatre magazine, in the second half of the decade.

The third Theatre Union production, Friedrich Wolf's Sailors of Cattaro, was reviewed by Leon Alexander, in the January 1935 New Theatre. Alexander felt that the play--about an attempted revolt that ended in a defeat which was turned into an affirmation of faith by the increased resolve of those rebelling to be successful the next time--was not only a great play, but a powerful revolutionary document as well. Wolf presents representatives from all classes, in his play,

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[109]Ibid.

and, letting them speak for themselves, shows that the members of all classes have weak as well as heroic qualities, said Alexander; and herein lies the strength of the play. Although Alexander did not agree with every aspect of the Theatre Union's production of Sailors of Cattaro he felt that it was the best of the group's productions to date; and he even went so far as to say that it was the best production that he had seen in New York in many years.[110] (This was, of course, written before Waiting for Lefty had been presented at the Civic Repertory Theatre.)

In its second season, the Theatre Union, like the rest of the left-wing theatre movement, was at the most successful stage of its relatively short-lived career. An announcement in the "Backstage" column of the March 1935 New Theatre stated that a new play by Albert Maltz, Black Pit, was in the final stages of rehearsal. Noting that the theme of Maltz's play was that of the worker's responsibility to his class, the unsigned writer of the notice continued,

> In the perennial 'propaganda and art' dispute, critiss of the propaganda theatre have argued that it could not continue to interest audiences since each play must necessarily be a monotonous repetition of the previous plays. The Theatre Union's program so far refutes this argument brilliantly. No permanent theatre could offer a greater variety than the themes, characters, moods, and dramatic treatment of its first four plays. The only element that has remained constant and must consistently remain, is that each play was written from the

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[110]Leon Alexander, review of Sailors of Cattaro, New Theatre, January, 1935, p. 24.

viewpoint of the working class.[111]

Black Pit opened at the Civic Repertory Theatre on March 20, 1935. The play is about a miner (Joe Kovarsky) who, having been blacklisted, and unable to get work to support his family, is pressured into becoming a company stool pigeon and thus betraying his fellow-workers' attempts at unionization. At the play's end, when Kovarsky's shameful role is revealed, he is forced to leave his family, having realized that he has committed the gravest crime possible.

When Herbert Kline reviewed Black Pit, for the April 1935 New Theatre, he astutely referred to the drama as a morality play for the proletariat. The story of Kovarsky's fatal error is simple and clear-cut, as is the moral that the playwright spells out for the play's intended audience. And although Kline felt that a little more naturalistic detail about the miners' lives would have given more impact to their betrayal by Kovarsky, he wrote that Black Pit's " . . . accomplishments are so high in quality of writing, in rich characterization, in sustained emotional intensity that I urge every reader of New Theatre not to miss this significant revolutionary tragedy."[112]

Looking back on the 1934-35 theatre season, in an August 1935 New Theatre article, John Gassner wrote that

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[111]"Backstage," New Theatre, March, 1936, p. 26.

[112]Herbert Kline, review of Black Pit, New Theatre, April, 1935, p. 33.

Black Pit was, possibly, the most moving drama of the season because it was based on one of the eternal themes of life and drama: the question of human dignity. "What indignities and self-betrayals can be forced upon the human spirit by a relentless profit-motivated system is a theme that would make powerful drama, even if the play did not succeed so well in recreating the life of the miners."[113]

The Theatre Union playwright Paul Peters translated and adapted Bertolt Brecht's play, The Mother for a November 1935 production by his group. Peters' version of the Brecht Lehrstück (learning play) eliminated some of the play's epic elements--such as the use of a chorus and a narrator. Moreover, when the Theatre Union produced Mother (as they called the play), several 'non-Brechtian" elements--realistic acting style, detailed settings and atmospheric lighting effects--were used. Brecht, who came to New York especially to assist in his play's production, was very displeased with the way that his play had been handled.

But it is doubtful that the modifications of Brecht's learning-play were responsible for Mother's critical and financial failure. John Gassner, reviewing this fifth Theatre Union production, for the December 1935 New Theatre, wrote that,

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[113]John Gassner, "The Drama in Transition," New Theatre, August, 1935, p. 29.

> These considerations must be clearly understood if the Brecht play is to justify itself in the theatre and to make sense. It is not a pedestrian exercise in realism; this is evident in the quickly changing scenes, augmented with moving picture slides, mass recitation, music and soliloquy. On the other hand, the play is not an exercise in sophisticated expressionism. Its deliberate simplifications and telescoping of events comprise a unique experimental attempt to create a legend in terms of theatre.[114]

Gassner said that because the production was, to a great extent, an experiment, both the production and the play itself left something to be desired. He found that the play lagged and that its writing was sometimes diffuse. He also thought that the ending of the play--when the mother gets up out of her sickbed to lead a revolutionary demonstration--was inconclusive. The development of the mother, from an ignorant peasant who naively fears but supports the government, to an active revolutionist, is too shadowy, said Gassner.

Finally, the effect of the production was almost completely ruined by its self-conscious, almost condescending simplification--using slides and explanatory passages--of the issues involved in the play's story. This was particularly the case, Gassner pointed out, when one considered that the Theatre Union's audience was not exactly an audience which was in need of such preachment. "Mother will unfortunately meet with a mixed response," concluded Gassner. "However, few experiments are so justifiable and are likely

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[114]John Gassner, "The Play's the Thing," New Theatre, December, 1935, p. 13.

to be as stimulating an influence on the theatre. Without Mother the season would definitely be the poorer."[115] Mother had the shortest run of all the Theatre Union productions; it closed after only thirty-six performances.[116]

The remaining two productions of the Theatre Union's 1935-36 season were Albert Bein's Let Freedom Ring--a production which had originally been opened on Broadway, by an independent company, and had then moved downtown, intact, to the then-vacant Civic Repertory Theatre, at the invitation of the Theatre Union--and Bitter Stream by Victor Wolfson.[117]

A note in the "The Curtain Rises" column of the November 1936 New Theatre explained that the Theatre Union would not begin its 1936-37 season until December, and that it was presently engaged in a subscription dirve, the goal of which was 10,000 members. The Theatre Union was now reaching for a middle-class Broadway audience, the column explained, but the organization also planned to have a mobile unit to perform short pieces in halls and union clubhouses

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[115] Ibid.

[116] For a more complete discussion of the Theatre Union production of Mother, see Lee Baxandall's introduction to Bertolt Brecht, The Mother, trans. Lee Baxandall (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), pp. 10-12; and Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans., John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964), pp. 81-84.

[117] See above p. 388, for a discussion of Bitter Stream. See below, p. 451, for a discussion of the production of Let Freedom Ring, by the Actors Repertory Company.

and to serve as a vital link with the trade unions. "In this new and broader program, the Theatre Union needs the support of NEW THEATRE readers, no less than those readers need the work of America's pioneer professional social theatre."[118] The next Theatre Union production--John Howard Lawson's Marching Song--would open on Broadway, in December, the column reported.

As it happened, both the Theatre Union and New Theatre magazine ran into financial and organizational difficulties in late 1936-early 1937. Marching Song did not open until February 1937, and New Theatre did not appear again (when the magazine did resume publication, it was as New Theatre and Film), until March 1937. An article by Albert Maltz about Lawson's Marching Song was included in the first issue of New Theatre and Film, and preceded, by one month, John Gassner's enthusiastic response to the play.[119]

"In the mythical town of Brimmerton," wrote Maltz,

> in the setting at once symbolic and highly dramatic of an abandoned factory left to rust, left for a hideout for broken men, Lawson has created the whole flow and heat and struggle of a town and its people. It is the play of a town, of the automobile industry, of a sitown strike--yet it is not a play about any one of these things but rather of the varied people and groups of a community who have been captured from a real world to

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[118] "The Curtain Rises," New Theatre, November, 1936, p. 4.

[119] See above, pp. 395-396, for John Gassner's discussion of Marching Song.

> live more fiercely, more vividly, in the two-hour world of a stage play.[120]

A section of the editorial column in the April 1937 New Theatre and Film was devoted to a discussion of the importance of Lawson's new play. So much trivial drama is being produced at a time when events of great consequence are taking place throughout America, the editors declared. In Marching Song, presented by the Theatre Union, the momentous struggle of the workers is shown clearly, in theatrical terms, and this is an event of no little importance. The production must be actively supported by the various socially-conscious organizations and the play should be included in the repertories of other U.S. groups. "The new theatre movement has acquired a new and vital addition to its literature"; the editorial continued, "its groups should make every effort to enlist union support and give it an early production."[121]

Marching Song was not particularly successful, however; it had a run of only sixty-one performances. It is unlikely also, that this "telescopic" play with its large cast and involved scenic requirements, was given many productions by the workers' groups to whom the above-quoted editorial was addressed. Marching Song was the last of the Theatre Union productions; and the April 1937 New Theatre and Film was--

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[120]Albert Maltz, "'Marching Song,' Flint Michigan and Brimmerton, U.S.A.," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 13.

[121]Editorials, New Theatre and Film, April, 1937, p. 18.

unexpectedly--the final issue of the magazine.

In "The Artef on Broadway," in the February 1935 New Theatre, Nathaniel Buchwald discussed the history and artistic develpment of this formerly amateur, now professional Yiddish-speaking theatre group. Buchwald began the article by saying that, recently, theatre professionals and Broadway theatre-goers had been delighted by the Artef production of Dostigayev--Gorky's sequel to Yegor Bulichev and Others. But neither of these groups had actually discovered anything new: the Artef had been in existence for six years and had finally become recognized as the most accomplished group in the revolutionary theatre.

Buchwald, a former member of the group, pointed out that the Artef was the pioneer of mobile playing, while it was also producing full-length "orthodox" plays. He said that the group was also the first to use the idea of benefit performances--now used by the Theatre Union--as a means of building its audience. The Artef had, to begin with, close ties with a whole network of workers' organizations, and bookings and subscriptions from these groups took up sixty percent of the capacity of its theatre.

Buchwald described the Artef as a well-trained acting collective. "The advantage of a permanent company plus an animating social purpose, lift the Artef artistically above all other so-called Art Theatres in this country," he

continued.[122] The quality of the Artef's work has improved tremendously over the years, said Buchwald. The actors have improved individually and the ensemble playing has also been strengthened. Buchwald attributed much of this improvement to Beno Schneider, the Artef's artistic director and regisseur--a pupil of Vakhtangov--who has, said Buchwald, always known how to use his actors to the best advantage. In the early days of the Artef, when the actors were inexperienced and weak, Schneider always used much scenic display in the productions to offset their amateurishness. Now, after six years, he relied less and less upon the settings, and expected more from the actors. Buchwald pointed out that Stanislavsky admitted to having done the same thing in his theatre, in My Life in Art.

After briefly discussing the Artef production of Dostigayev, which he said was "superb in its portrayal of solid, three-dimensional characters,"[123] and a fine example of socialist realism, Buchwald concluded his article, in the true revolutionary spirit of constructive criticism, by listing some of the shortcomings of the Artef. He regretted, for example, that lately the group had been neglecting its mobile work and had become too isolationist. Buchwald also felt that the Artef should have more worthwhile American plays in its repertory. He acknowledged the unfortunate lack of

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[122]Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Artef on Broadway," New Theatre, February, 1935, p. 8.

[123]Ibid.

cooperation between the Artef and the Jewish revolutionary organization, the Proletpen. And, finally, Buchwald said that there were many difficulties which stemmed from the group's operating on a volunteer basis and a part-time schedule; although there were also difficulties attending its imminent shift to being a full-time professional company.

The next reference to the work of the Artef, in New Theatre, was in the "Shifting Scenes" column, by Herbert Kline, in the January 1936 issue of the magazine, Kline declared that the group was to be congratulated on its choice of a stage version of Samuel Ornitz' Haunch, Paunch and Jowl for their next production; and he urged the support of this play, by the readers of New Theatre. A short review of the Artef production of Hirsch Lekert, in the April 1936 New Theatre, spoke of the latter production as having achieved miracles of characterization, in a play with a weak plot and with weak sets. No other discussion of the Artef's work--although there were frequent advertisements for its productions--appeared in New Theatre during the remaining period of the magazine's publication.

Let Freedom Ring, by Albert Bein--directed by Worthington Minor and with settings by Mordecai Gorelik--opened, on Broadway, in November 1935. After twenty-nine performances the play had exhausted its potential Broadway appeal, and the production was moved downtown into the Theatre Union's Civic Repertory Theatre, for an additional run of seventy-

nine performances.[124]

Based on a novel by Grace Lumpkin, entitled To Make My Bread, Let Freedom Ring is another play about the politicization of a group of unorganized workers. The workers, in this play, are Southern mill workers who have been lured out of their homes in the mountains by promises of a better life--to work in the mills under the most wretched conditions. The play is actually a more skillful version of what Michael Blankfort described as the "pendulum play" of the early workers' theatre movement.[125] Only Bein's ability at characterization, and the pathos that is inherent in the play's story, save Let Freedom Ring from being lost among the many pendulum plays of the period, in my opinion; although the play clearly belongs to the 'thirties and is too naive and simplistic to be read as anything but a period piece.

In the December 1935 New Theatre, John Gassner reviewed Let Freedom Ring and expressed mixed feelings about both the play itself and its production. He felt, for instance, that although the play suffered from being too diffuse in its structure, this was really unavoidable because the author had to deal with many characters over a long period of time, in his story. Gassner also thought that the acting in the play was uneven. But he was very impressed with Gorelik's sets--which he described as "incisive realism"--and he said

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[124]Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 223.

[125]See above, Chap. VI, pp. 329-330.

that the production's scenery projected the larger sense of the play, in addition to assisting the acting.[126]

The Let Freedom Ring Company, as the actors and Worthington Minor their director became known, remained together and toured with the production until April 1936, when they returned to Broadway, using a new name--the Actors' Repertory Company--and with a new play, Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead.[127]

The very successful Pins and Needles, a left-wing Popular Front revue which was produced by Labor Stage, Inc.--the theatrical arm of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union--did not open until November 27, 1937, several months after New Theatre and Film had suspended publication. But some studio performances of the revue were given in June 1936, and the latter version was reviewed, by Ben Irwin, in the July 1936 New Theatre.

Irwin found the preview performances of Pins and Needles to be "genuinely entertaining, if occasionally overambitious,"[128] but he did not particularly like a skit in the revue by Emanuel Eisenberg, entitled "Mother! Let Freedom Wrong,"

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[126]John Gassner, review of Let Freedom Ring, New Theatre, December, 1935, pp. 12-13.

[127]See above, pp. 232-234, for a discussion of this play and its production.

[128]Ben Irwin, review of Pins and Needles, New Theatre, July, 1936, p. 24.

> a good humored, if caustic bit of fun poking at the social theatre. . . . It was a particularly sophisticated piece of burlesque which apparently attempted to establish the fact that the labor theatre was healthy enough to laugh at itself.
>
> In general, however, Labor Stage has made a valuable excursion into the field of the social revue, and brought forth some really worthwhile material. The new theatres throughout the country, which are working closely with the Central Labor bodies in their communities, will do well to follow the example of Labor Stage and make further experiments with the vaudville form, a native and important theatre technique.[129]

An updated version of John Wexley's Steel was also produced by the ILGWU Players, and opened in January 1937. After fifty performances, this production was taken on a tour of several towns and cities, under the joint sponsorship of Labor Stage, Inc., the New Theatre League, the Theatre Union, the Artef, and the United Mine Workers.[130] Commenting on this venture, in the March 1937 New Theatre and Film, an anonymous columnist wrote, " . . . One of the most commendable things Labor Stage can do is to bring to union members not only a depiction of their problems, but a realization of the texture of their own lives."[131]

The Left-Wing Workers' Theatres: 1935, 1936 and Early-1937

In a March 1935 editorial comment, the New Theatre editors rebuked a New Masses drama critic for his wholly

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[129] Ibid.

[130] Malcolm Goldstein, The Political Stage, p. 266.

[131] Editorial, New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 63.

destructive review of a new play that had been presented at a recent New Theatre Night--God is in His Heaven, by Phillip Stevenson. The New Masses review, wrote the editors, had contained no suggestions for improvement, but only nagative criticism. "We do not favor coddling any effort because it expresses our social point of view," the editors declared, "but NEW THEATRE believes very strongly that theatre workers should be able to look to revolutionary publications for professionally competent and always constructive comment."[132]

This editorial statement epitomizes the paternalistic attitude that the magazine had developed, as its approach to the efforts of newcomers to the left-wing or "new" theatre movement (as it had recently come to be called), as well as to work of other individuals and workers' groups in the movement who were still producing plays on a part-time, non-professional basis. Some observations by Molly Day Thatcher--the Drama Editor of New Theatre--in her "Plays of the Month" column, are an illustration of the "professionally competent and always constructive comment" which the magazine now tried to offer to the amateur workers' theatres.

One exciting production which Thatcher singled out for praise, in her column, was a performance by the German New Theatre Group, of So Leben Wir--a revue with music, by Rudolph Wittenberg--directed by John Bonn, one of the original

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[132]Editorial, New Theatre, March, 1935, p. 26.

leaders in the workers' theatre movement. The revue, which traced the rise of German nazism was, according to Thatcher, the best workers' theatre production since Newsboy. "In [their] mastery of the limitations of the place and the company, as well as in reaching a real neighborhood audience, the Neue Deutsche Theatre Gruppe sets an example to the new theatres."[133]

Molly Day Thatcher was also pleased with a performance she had attended of a revue by four Vassar upperclassmen entitled, "My Country Right or Left," directed by Hallie Flanagan, at Vassar College. This production was, to the best of her knowledge, the first left-wing revue to be presented at an American college, wrote Thatcher--a Vassar graduate and former student of Flanagan--who found that the best moments in the production were those which were the closest to the experience of the college girls.

In the same June 1935 column, however, the New Theatre of Philadelphia was taken to task by Thatcher, for having elected to do a "careless and inept play," Too Late to Die, by Christopher Wood. Thatcher felt that, in this case, a good--if somewhat inexperienced--company had been held back by a poor playwright. "Good scripts exist," she wrote, "While it is important to develop new playwrights (the author Christopher Wood is a member of the Philadelphia Theatre) a whole theatre in an important town must not be held back

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[133]Molly Day Thatcher, "Plays of the Month," New Theatre, June, 1935, p. 15.

while the playwright learns his craft. Inexperienced actors more than any others need playable plays--and in this case the actors and the director proved themselves more competent than the playwright they selected. . . ."[134]

Several months later, in her February 1936 column, Thatcher expressed approval of the direction that the work of the Philadelphia New Theatre had taken. Having chosen to present Maltz's Black Pit, the amateur actors with their freshness of attack, sincerity and common understanding, had invested their production with a greater sense of importance, than had the Theatre Union, in the original production of the play, wrote Thatcher. She further said that the company was continuing to improve, as they worked with each other and with their audience. "It is interesting and collective and purposeful work which should be the envy of any professional not fortunate enough to be connected with a permanent theatre. And the whole picture should be considered by anyone who has not yet discovered for himself the discrepancy between 'Broadway' individualism and the aims of the social theatre."[135]

Another workers' theatre collective whose work was closely followed in New Theatre was the Theatre of Action--the new name taken by The Workers Laboratory Theatre. In a July 1935 New Theatre article, Herbert Kline discussed the

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[134]Ibid.

[135]Molly Day Thatcher, "New Theatre in Philadelphia," New Theatre, February, 1936, p. 30.

short history of the group and, specifically, the group's recent production of a play about the problems of the Civilian Conservation Corps--The Young Go First, by George Scudder, Peter Martin, and Charles Friedman.

In four months, according to Kline, the Theatre of Action had advanced from being an amateur agit-prop group to a "skilled professional company, worthy of taking its place beside the Group Theatre and the Theatre Union in the vanguard of the American Theatre movement."[136] Kline commented on the excellent acting in the production which had been directed by Alfred Saxe--the original director of the WLT-- and Elia Kazan. He also acknowledged the play's fine scenery, designed by Mordecai Gorelik. The play itself, said Kline, was fresh, vigorous and original, and he felt that it captured the spirit of the CCC boys, without reducing these characters to caricatures. He did, however, have some reservations about the treatment of the theme in The Young Go First. The play, Kline said, was supposed to be about the need to struggle against the militaristic tendencies of the Civilian Conservation Corps. But he felt that the anti-war message intended by the play's authors, was blunted and too reformist; and he suggested that there should be one boy who is politically aware, included as part of the group in the play.[137]

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[136]Herbert Kline, review of The Young Go First, New Theatre, July, 1935, p. 30.

[137]The script of The Young Go First is not, to my knowledge, available.

The progress of the other off-shoot group of the Workers Laboratory Theatre--the Theatre Collective--was also followed in New Theatre, during the magazine's Popular Front period. As of November 1935, the Theatre Collective had still not succeeded in fulfilling the promise which its organization had originally seemed to offer to the Left-wing theatre movement. In a short article in that month's New Theatre, "The Collective--A Review," Earl Cabot reported that the group was taking bookings for its productions of three short plays: Hunger Strike, For People Who Think and Till the Day I Die. "A studio air still lingers over all three productions," wrote Cabot who felt that a certain self-consciousness was apparent in the actors' performances, and that the group needed more experience in front of an audience.[138]

In the May 1936 New Theatre, John Gassner reviewed the Theatre Collective's repertory of three plays--Lope de Vega's The Pastry Baker, You Can't Change Human Nature, by Phillip Stevenson, and Albert Maltz' prize-winning play, Private Hicks--which the group had presented, for a two week run, at the Provincetown Playhouse. Gassner began his review by commenting that, after its two week engagement, " . . . one concludes that if [the Theatre Collective] doesn't watch itself it will become one of the most finished producing units of the new theatre circuit. . . . Private

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[138]Earl Cabot, "The Collective--A Review," New Theatre, November, 1935, p. 29.

Hicks, one expects, will long remain a staple of one-act production due to the immediacy of its subject."[139] Gassner felt, however, that the play did not have enough action or momentum and he said that although the tone of the ending of Private Hicks--in which the dissident guardsmen plan to distribute some leaflets explaining their position--was probably realistic, "the lifeblood of the theatre is excitement, and in this piece the excitement runs largely downhill."[140]

A production of Formation Left, by Jeff Kibre and Mildred Ashe, at the Contemporary Theatre of Los Angeles, was reviewed in the December 1935 New Theatre by John R. Chaplin. Chaplin wrote that Formation Left was the first full-length locally written and produced social play, outside of New York City. And although, according to Chaplin, the play suffered somewhat from an insufficient mastery of stage technique and there were also problems in the production's direction, he felt that the play had improved with each succeeding performance, and that it had an excellent balance of comedy and tragedy. Chaplin suggested that the play could be used successfully as a weapon in labor struggles and that, outside of Waiting for Lefty, the Pacific Coast had never seen such a vital theatre document.[141]

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[139]John Gassner, "The Theatre Collective," New Theatre, May, 1936, p. 27.

[140]Ibid.

[141]John R. Chaplin, "'Formation Left'--Los Angeles," New Theatre, December, 1935, p. 6.

The last production by a workers' theatre group to be reviewed in New Theatre, was the presentation of Claire and Paul Sifton's Blood on the Moon, by the Brooklyn Progressive Players. The short, unsigned, June 1936 New Theatre review reports that, with this production, the Brooklyn Progressive Players had set out to establish a permanent social theatre in Brooklyn. A weakness of Blood on the Moon, wrote the reviewer, is that it fails to explain the forces behind Nazism. But the play is a powerful exposition of the realities of fascism and some of the scenes in Blood of the Moon rise to a high level of dramatic writing. The reviewer called Blood on the Moon "gripping theatre," and said that the group--composed of amateur and professional actors--had produced a finished production.[142]

Plays Published in New Theatre and New Theatre and Film during the Popular Front Years

By 1935, New Theatre was no longer publishing plays primarily for the utilitarian purpose of providing new scripts to the various amateur workers' theatre groups that were affiliated with the New Theatre League. The magazine, as we have already noted, had changed its orientation from being the "organ" of the NTL, to being a professional publication of that organization. All of the scripts that were published in New Theatre and New Theatre and Film during its Popular

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[142]Review of Blood on the Moon, New Theatre, June, 1936, p. 24.

Front Years, were copyrighted, and most had been published elsewhere as well, and were included in the magazine because they were the best examples of the social plays that were being written and, of course, because they increased the magazine's appeal. Six complete (one-act) plays, and excerpts or scenes from five other plays, were published in New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, during 1935, 1936 and early 1937.

The two most important plays to appear in New Theatre were Waiting for Lefty by Clifford Odets--published, in full, with pictures from the Group Theatre production of the play--in the February 1935 issue; and Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead, in the April 1936 number of the magazine. A monologue by Clifford Odets, entitled "I Can't Sleep"--about a worker lying awake at night, feeling miserable and alone because he has lost touch with his ideals and with "the movement," and knowing that he should re-affiliate himself--was published in the February 1936 New Theatre.

Private Hicks, by Albert Maltz--"the prize-winning play of the New Theatre League--American League Against War and Fascism Contest for One-Act Anti-War and Anti-Fascist Plays"--appeared in the November 1935 New Theatre. And a play by an author named A. B. Shiffrin, entitled Kids Learn Fast was published in the final issue of New Theatre, in November 1936. Shiffrin's play is about the effects that reading about violence in the tabloid newspapers have on impressionable children. In the play, a gang of kids, after

reading about the lynching of blacks in the South, try this method out on a black member of their group--the child dies. When New Theatre was re-issued as New Theatre and Film, in March 1937, the magazine included a new play by Claire and Paul Sifton, Give All Thy Terrors to the Wind--about the mutiny of a crew on a ship that has been sabotaged for capitalistic gain.

Among the scenes or excerpts from plays that were published in New Theatre and New Theatre and Film, in the period under discussion, were "Fragments From 'Panic,'" by Archibald MacLeish, in March 1935; a trial scene from a play about an abortive revolutionary attempt, Florsidorf, by Friedrich Wolf, in May 1935; and some sketches from Parade--A Satirical Radical Revue that had been written for the Theatre Union, but produced--with not very satisfactory results--by the Theatre Guild, in the June 1935 issue. Also included in New Theatre during its Popular Front period, in October 1935, was a scene from Let Freedom Ring by Albert Bein. And, finally, a scene from a play by Clifford Odets which, for reasons which are most easily apparent with its reading, never became widely known--The Silent Partner--appeared in the March 1937 New Theatre and Film.

The scene from The Silent Partner is closer to the primitive agit-prop strike plays than to any of Odets' previous work. The style of the scene is simple realism, rendered with a great deal of revolutionary rhetoric. An example of this style, is the final bit of dialogue, which is

spoken as some strikers' wives are waiting for a delivery of milk and then see it dumped by some of the boss's thugs:

> Pearl: They've mounted a machine gun on the Willow Street gate.
>
> Carrie: Over my dead body! I say it to them--over my dead body! Will this final injustice prevail?[143]

Just what this surprising return to Third Period rhetoric may have been signaling, insofar as a new direction for Odets or for New Theatre and Film is concerned, can never be known. For the next issue of the magazine, in April 1937, was also--without any warning--the final issue.

Some General Observations Concerning the Aesthetic and Critical Position of Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film

It is essential to remember that the American left-wing theatre movement of the 'thirties began as a workers' theatre movement--and that, during its formative years (1930-1933) it was primarily a movement of amateurs. Furthermore, unlike some other theatres that were initiated by amateurs--such as the Provincetown Players and the Washington Square Players--the workers' theatres began as a response to a political rather than an artistic impulse. The driving force, in the early years of the workers' theatre movement, was the desire to use Art as a Weapon in the Revolutionary Struggle.

It was nearly three years before the leaders of the workers' theatre movement declared--through the organ of the movement, Workers Theatre--that the workers' theatres would

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[143]Clifford Odets, "A Scene from The Silent Partner," New Theatre and Film, March, 1937, p. 6.

have to produce better art if they wanted to be successful with their propaganda. But I don't believe that it was stubbornness or aesthetic backwardness that prevented these policy makers from expressing the importance of this relationship earlier. Two facts must be taken into account, in order to understand why it took so long for the workers' theatres to arrive at a more balanced approach to the question of art and propaganda and to develop more artistic plays and a more aesthetically sophisticated level of theatre criticism.

First of all, the relationship between art and propaganda is an extremely complex and elusive one. Even Bertolt Brecht--as complete a man of the theatre as ever there was--found it difficult to strike the perfect balance between these two separate concerns. And are his "learning plays," such as The Mother and He Who Says Yes/ He Who Says No, really any more aesthetically satisfying than some of the early agit-props of the early workers' theatre movement? I think not.

Secondly, the close ties that existed between the early workers' theatre movement and the American Communist Party (which, in turn, was tied to the policies of the Comintern) must also be taken into account. The utilitarian Third Period approach to the theatre had an inhibiting effect on the artistic development of the workers' theatre movement. The workers' theatres were told that they should concentrate on communicating their political messages and that their time

and energies should not be wasted on developing theatre technique. Also, the doctrinaire Third Period policies had the effect of excluding, both intentionally and inadvertently, many theatre professionals who came into the left-wing theatre movement, once the more liberal Popular Front policies began to make it possible for them to join the movement (as fellow travelers) and to assist in its artistic growth.

All of this is not to say that none of the plays of the early workers' theatre movement had any artistic merit, however. That is simply not the case. Several of the early agit-prop plays--e.g., Step On It, Scottsboro and Newsboy--were and still are quite theatrically exciting.[144] But these plays were, of course, exceptions: most of the early workers' theatre plays were dreadful theatre.

This brings me to the question of the dramatic criticism that was published in Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film. Every critic writes with some perspective or bias--sometimes it is political; sometimes aesthetic--as a basis for his criticism. And it has been made very clear that the critics who wrote for the magazines wrote from a quite specific political and ideological perspective. In the early Third Period days of the movement,

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[144] See above, pp. 264-66, for a description and excerpt from Step on It. Much of Scottsboro has been reproduced in Chapter III, pp. 153-57. The complete script of Newsboy is published in Stage Left, by Jay Williams, pp. 85-91.

the political orientation of the magazine's critics overshadowed any aesthetic convictions that these individuals may have personally had. As New Theatre and New Theatre and Film evolved, broadening their outlook and ideology, as well as their intended readership--all in accordance with the basic policies dictated by the Comintern--the critics who wrote for the magazines were able to relax a bit within their political perspective and devote more attention to aesthetic considerations.

The degree to which the critics who wrote for New Theatre and New Theatre and Film were able to free themselves from their political outlook, in order to make their aesthetic judgments, varied, as might be expected, from individual to individual. For some critics, it was impossible to see any production in anything but a political light. For others--and John Gassner immediately comes to mind in this regard--although their political convictions were generally evident in their reactions to the content of a play, it was also possible for them to criticize the play's form as well as the presentation of the play onstage, with a more-or-less purely aesthetic consciousness.

In general, as with the plays and performance techniques, the level of the dramatic criticism improved as the workers' theatre movement evolved into the more professional and less politically doctrinaire left-wing theatre movement. And some of the articles which appeared in New Theatre and

New Theatre and Film, on the subject of aesthetics for the revolutionary theatre--such as the essays by Michael Blankfort, John Howard Lawson and John Gassner--have contributed stimulating ideas to the debate on this issue which continues to hold interest for contemporary drama theorists.

CHAPTER VIII

SOME CONCLUSIONS

> In their excavations of the radical past, the historians have dug up little but fragments and ruins. Yet surely a movement which involved so many intelligent and generous men and women cannot be barren of significance. Communism it has been said, contributed nothing of permanent value to American literature; but even if the poems, plays, novels, criticism and reportage composed under party sponsorhip or written by writers whose social sympathies had been quickened by party agitation were worthless (which is simply not true), no writer who lived through the revolutionary interlude either as advocate or critic remained unaffected. . . . The strong impact of Communism's program upon even those writers who opposed it must be reckoned with. So must the vitalizing influence of the Left Wing intellectuals who stirred up controversies, discovered new novelists and playwrights, opened up hitherto neglected areas of American life, and broke down the barriers that had isolated the writers from the issues of their time.
>
> We who precariously survive . . . can regret their inadequacies and failures, their romanticism, their capacity for self-deception, their shrillness, their self-righteousness. It is less easy to scorn their efforts, however blundering and ineffective, to change the world.
>
> --Daniel Aaron,
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> Writers on the Left, pp. 395-96

The End of the Left-Wing Theatre Movement: What Happened to Bring It About?

Mrs. Edith J. R. Isaacs, the editor and publisher of Theatre Arts Monthly during the nineteen-thirties, wrote about the demise of the left-wing theatre movement in her November

1937 editorial:

> On the left wing, the theatre's overlong rest seems unfortunately bound to persist for some time to come, since one by one the various groups which, during the last ten years, have been tilling the professional field of propaganda or proletarian drama have ceased their activity. Some have been broken by internal dissensions, others have turned to the Federal Theatre as a relief from their own production problems, still others have been forced out through economic necessity. . . .[1]

Ben Irwin, the president of the New Theatre League, disagreed with Mrs. Isaacs' appraisal of the state of the left-wing theatre movement. And in refutation of her contentions, Irwin wrote an optimistic editorial entitled "Resurgence of the New Theatre," for the April-June 1938 Theatre Workshop--the NTL magazine which was specifically devoted to the various arts of the theatre.

Mrs. Isaacs, said Irwin, was "typical of the coterie that made up the burial squad of the progressive drama"[2]--all of whom were mistaken in their analysis of the situation. The "progressive drama" was simply going through a stage of re-defining itself and was developing in the direction of becoming a true people's theatre. As opposed to those who had declared that the Federal Theatre Project had drained off the energy that had kept the left-wing theatre movement alive, Irwin maintained that, on the contrary, the Project

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[1]Edith J. R. Isaacs, "Giants Win, Cubs Lose, Broadway in Review," Theatre Arts Monthly, November, 1937, p. 842.

[2]Ben Irwin, "Resurgence of the New Theatre," Theatre Workshop, April-June, 1938, p. 109.

was helping--both financially and artistically--to subsidize the work of the evolving People's Theatre. "The stage is set and the properties are at hand for the new theatres to present their drama before a people's audience, a history-determining audience," he wrote. "This audience awaits us impatiently. Ring up the curtain!"[3]

Hindsight affords us the ability to perceive the naivete of Irwin's assertions. By late 1937, the left-wing theatre movement was, if not dead, certainly in its death throes. The Theatre Union--the most important of the left-wing theatres--had disbanded in April 1937, due to financial difficulties, but also because there was much factionalism within the group.[4] And perhaps it was symptomatic of this period of break-up for the Left that the Group Theatre, which was a social theatre, if not a truly left-wing organization, also ceased its activities, temporarily, in 1937.

John Gassner explained the decline of the "new theatre movement" in a preface to the reprinted New Theatre essays, in his anthology, Dramatic Soundings, and noted the effect of New Theatre and Film's termination (as of April 1937) on the stability of the movement:

> The suspension of New Theatre magazine . . . deprived the movement of a valuable organ in the spring of 1937. Debts

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[3]Ibid.

[4]Jay Williams, Stage Left, p. 187.

> rising from the bankruptcy of its commercial distributor undermined the publication at a time when the need for its influence was greater than ever, leaving Theatre Workshop, a technical, nonpolitical quarterly, as the sole publication of the New Theatre League. Support from sympathetic sources also declined; perhaps chiefly because other causes, like Spanish loyalism, were regarded as more immediate.[5]

Among the other factors which Gassner attributed to the left-wing theatre movement's decline, was the fact that, in 1936, the Depression seemed to have lifted a bit, and the public turned to lighter entertainment. But the prime cause, according to Gassner, was the establishment of the Federal Theatre Project, which offered a livelihood to many of the left-wing theatre's activists and also drew off the audience support from the workers' theatres. Jay Williams wrote about the effect of the Federal Theatre Project on the left-wing theatre movement, in Stage Left.

> . . . The Federal Theatre contained almost all areas of the experimental and social theatre, and managed to solve nearly all the problems connected with them which had stymied all the independent groups that preceded it. About all that was left out was straight-forward agit-prop, which had been abandoned by most of the workers' theatres anyway, and plays with a direct Marxist orientation which came right out and preached revolution and, there were few of these left in the workers' theatres repertory. . . . One or other of the project's many companies sooner or later would do a play dealing with war, labor relations, social satire, fascism, racial discrimination, or any of the other issues which exercised the Left, and what was more could give them full professional productions with topnotch music, sets, lighting, costumes and choreography. The price of plays could be kept lower than Theatre Union's top, and plays would

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[5]John Gassner, Dramatic Soundings, p. 437.

> still reach the widest possible audience. . . . The Federal Theatre's competition with Broadway is debatable, but there is no question that it affected the workers' theatres. The Theatre Union's failure rested in part on this competition; the project could offer Paul Green's Hymn to the Rising Sun or George Sklar's Life and Death of an American in full dress and at half the price of admission, and absorb any loss without blinking. It was no wonder that before long the best of the workers' theatre groups melted away into the Federal Theatre. They brought with them their determination to do social conscious [sic] works if they could and reach the mass of non-theatre-going public. They did not altogether abandon their activities and continued to perform off the project to some extent, but it was inevitable that their movement should be weakened.[6]

The declining participation by many individuals who had been active in the left-wing theatre movement was also an outgrowth of the atmosphere of fear that was engendered by the red-baiting on the Federal Theatre Project and, as of 1938, by the Dies Committee investigations into Communist activities on the Project. Furthermore, it should be noted that the decreasing number of participants in the left-wing theatre movement was really a reflection of a more general breakdown in the Popular Front "progressive" movement as a whole. This latter situation was due, to a great extent, to the disillusionment with the USSR which many American partisans and fellow travelers began to experience in the late nineteen-thirties.

Daniel Aaron discussed the circumstances which contributed to this disaffection in Writers on the Left:

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[6]Jay Williams, Stage Left, p. 216-17.

> The solidarity engendered in the Left movement by Spain's anguish, however, was shaken by the sensational Moscow trials, reports of which filled the American press for the next two years [1936-1938]. At the moment when the party seemed to have succeeded brilliantly in its united-front campaigns, the arraignment and the execution of the old Bolsheviks blurred the sharp distinction between Communism and fascism the party had been so assiduously fostering. By transforming Trotsky from a disappointed oppositionist into a malevolent and diabolical plotter conspiring with fascist leaders to destroy the USSR, the Comintern at one stroke alienated a large number of its American allies and obliged its still-loyal supporters to defend an insupportable position.[7]

It was a combination of circumstance, therefore--financial difficulties, competition from the Federal Theatre Project, fear of the Dies Committee investigations and disillusionment with the Soviet Union--that, collectively, helped to bring about the demise of the American left-wing theatre movement, as well as the movement's publication, New Theatre and Film

The Significance of the Left-Wing Theatre Movement and of the Magazines Which Both Served and Guided It

One of the major objectives of Morgan Y. Himelstein's book, Drama Was a Weapon, is to prove the veracity of his statement that, "the impression of the thirties as a theatrical decade devoted to the social drama has persisted to the present time, but . . . the social drama did not, in fact, dominate the American stage. Although many plays of social significance were produced in the Depression decade, their

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[7]Daniel Aaron, Writers on the Left, p. 308.

importance has been overstated by the friends of the new movement."[8] In certain limited respects, the accuracy of Himelstein's contention is contestable.

The importance of the left-wing theatre movement during the nineteen-thirties may have been slight, in terms of the extent of its activities as compared to the total theatrical output during the decade. Sam Smiley, in his book, The Drama of Attack; Didactic Plays of the American Depression, notes that, "by year, socially oriented plays achieved professional production on New York stages in fluctuating numbers: spring 1930, one; 1930-1931, seven; 1931-1932, fifteen; 1932-1933, ten; 1933-1934, nineteen; 1935-1936, thirty-one; 1936-1937, twenty-two; 1937-1938, twenty; 1938-1939, twenty-four; fall 1939, eight."[9] Even at the height of the left-wing theatre movement's success, therefore, during the 1935-36 season, only thirty-one plays which Smiley classifies as "socially oriented" were produced professionally. Surely only a small percentage of these plays can be fairly regarded as having been left-wing dramas.

The significance of the left-wing theatre movement

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[8]Morgan Y. Himelstein, Drama Was a Weapon: The Left-Wing Theatre in New York: 1929-1941 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 6.

[9]Sam Smiley, The Drama of Attack; Didactic Plays of the American Depression (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1972), p. 29.

was also perhaps not great, to the extent that the movement had little immediate success in accomplishing its stated goals. The primary aim of the workers' theatre movement, as articulated in the first issue of its organ, Workers Theatre was, " . . . to plan the organization of class conscious theatres in every town and every community in the country; . . . to show these dramatic groups and the workers organixing [sic] them how to utilize these groups so as to make them weapons in the class struggle, tools for the liberation of the working class."[10] Although the organization came about--the League of Workers Theatres and then the New Theatre League were formed--the anticipated revolution did not take place. The left-wing theatre movement and its organs Workers Theatre, New Threatre and New Theatre and Film were not measurably successful in effecting any permanent economic, social or political changes in this country.

Nor was the left-wing theatre movement, at the time, noticeably successful, insofar as its other espoused causes or crusades were concerned. The workers' theatre movement, as we have seen, was absorbed into the Federal Theatre Project and thus ended with the termination of the Project, in 1939. No instant changes were brought about in the policies of either the AF of L unions or in those of Actors' Equity--although the Actors' Forum which was supported by the left-

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[10]Editorial, Workers Theatre, April, 1931, p. 3.

wing theatre movement and by New Theatre did have some success in convincing the Equity Council that they would have to be more responsive to the needs of the union's general membership.

The left-wing theatre movement did help to integrate the theatre audience, but there were no obvious advances made by or for the Negro in the American theatre--another area in which the left-wing theatre movement and its magazines tried to stimulate reform. And, as I have suggested earlier in this study, the left-wing theatre movement and its magazines did not and could not have realistically hoped to have any significant effect on the historical events that were related to their zealous fight against war, fascism and censorship.

One notable exception to this litany of failures by the left-wing theatre movement and Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film was in the crusade for unemployment insurance which was sponsored by the American Communist Party and embraced by the magazine. Towards the end of the decade, an unemployment insurance bill that was written by Earl Browder--the head of the ACP--was introduced by Congressman Lundeen of Minnesota,[11] thus setting the wheels into motion for the passage of the legislation which affects so many of us to this day.

It is here that I must caution the reader against accepting the contention of Himelstein and others who have attempted to prove that the left-wing theatre movement of the nineteen-thirties was not of truly great consequence. The failure of

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[11]William Manchester, The Glory and the Dream, I, 116.

many of its social objectives notwithstanding, the left-wing theatre movement and the magazines which served and guided it, were of considerable significance, in terms of the development of the modern American theatre. "Today," wrote Jay Williams,

> the fabric of the theatre, the films, and the ubiquitous television is so shot through with the threads of the socially-conscious theatre and the forms it established . . . that no one any longer sees the connection. Yet it exists. The experimentation of the expressionists, the insistence that theatre should have a meaning, the realism of the Group's acting, the irreverance of the workers' theatres, the acceptance of social and political comment, the breaking down of the proscenium, all worked to change the atmosphere and even the structures of the theatre so that today a title like Jesus Christ Superstar, which would surely once have been condemned as the work of atheistic Reds, lifts not a single eyebrow, and a set composed of bare platforms draws no special comment.[12]

No social or political issue is considered out of bounds in the contemporary American theatre. Perhaps the links from the left-wing agit-props, such as Scottsboro and Newsboy to the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project, to such modern documentary productions as The Trial of the Catonsville Nine and Eric Bentley's Are You Now or Have You Ever Been? may not be immediately apparent to the non-student of the American social theatre. But the links are definitely there; and the influence of the American left-wing theatre movement of the nineteen-thirties on the substance and the texture of the theatre that followed was great.

The extent of the left-wing theatre movement's influence was connected to another contribution of the movement:

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[12]Jay Williams, Stage Left, pp. 240-41.

the concept of a structured network of little theatres from all across the country that could serve as a vehicle for the exchange of ideas and information and thus enhance the viability of the individual member theatres. This notion, first espoused by Workers Theatre magazine in 1931, resulted in the formation of the League of Workers Theatres in 1932, which then became the New Theatre League, in 1935. The NTL theatres, for the most part, fed directly into the Federal Theatre Project, in 1936. And although the Project and the New Theatre League were dissolved in 1939 and 1941 respectively, the concept of an organization of American theatres--professional regional companies, university, community and children's theatres--is embodied in the American Theatre Association of today.

Essentially, the magazines Workers Theatre, New Theatre and New Theatre and Film were the heart of the American left-wing theatre movement and were of substantial importance in two respects. As contemporary catalysts in the growth of the left-wing theatre movement, the magazines helped to stimulate and made public some of the highest quality of intellectual activity--in regard to the theatre--both during the decade and to this day. As the recorders of the events and the thinking of that period in our theatre's history, the magazines help to make the American left-wing theatre movement live for us today.

APPENDIX A--THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL EVENTS AND CHANGES IN THE AMERICAN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT AND *WORKERS THEATRE*, *NEW THEATRE* AND *NEW THEATRE AND FILM*

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENTS AND IN MAGAZINES
1931	Third Period Policy of the Comintern (1928-35)		April 1931--*Workers Theatre* published by Workers Laboratory Theatre of Workers International Relief August 1931--*Workers Theatre* published by "United Workers Theatres of N.Y." (WLT and Prolet-Buehne)
1932		Publication of *Culture and Crisis*	April 1932--First Workers Theatre Theatre Conference and Spartakiade May 1932--*Workers Theatre* "official organ" of League of Workers Theatres (LOWT) of International Workers Dramatic Union (IWDU) First printed *Workers Theatre* November, December--no *Workers Theatre*: no funds
1933	March 1933--IWDU becomes International Union of Revolutionary Theatres (IURT) Report at plenary of IURT; Socialist Realism declared valid May 24-30, 1933--First International Workers Theatre Olympiad, in Moscow	March 1933--*Daily Worker* calls for "United Front from Below" April 1933--*The New Masses* urges "United front from below"	March 1933--*Workers Theatre* (Ben Blake, Editor) editorial: Workers' Theatres must win over artists from bourgeoisie March 1933--formation of united front Theatre Union

APPENDIX A (continued)

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT & IN MAGAZINES
1933			July-August Workers Theatre Editorial: politics must be toned down in theatre work of workers' theatre groups; Workers Theatre will become New Theatre (magazine will broaden scope) September-October--first issue of New Theatre November 1934: Peace on Earth--first Theatre Union production no November or December New Theatre
1934	First Soviet Writers; Congress: socialist realism fully defined and explicated	American Communist Party membership continues to grow; ACP begins to support "New Deal"	January 1934 New Theatre--first installment of "Prospects for the American Theatre" survey March 1934 New Theatre Editorial: the bourgeois artists must be reached April 1934--Herbert Kline becomes Managing Editor of New Theatre Workers Laboratory Theatre severs connection with workers International Relief April 13-15, 1934--2nd National Workers' Theatre Festival; LOWT Commission recommends new editor for New Theatre May 20, 1934--first "New Theatre Night"

APPENDIX A (continued)

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT & IN MAGAZINES
1934			June 1934 *New Theatre* Editorial: magazine will attempt to get prestigious contributors; announces doubling of circulation in past six months
			July-August 1934 *New Theatre*: Herbert Kline, editor; enlarged issue of magazine given as evidence of growth a and widening of workers' theatre movement
			report of performance at second "New Theatre Night" by members of Group Theatre
	September 1-10, 1934--Second Theatre Festival, in Moscow		September 1934 *New Theatre* editorial: revolutionary movement must become a mass movement, "we must professionalize. . . ."
		October 1934 articles in *The New Masses* by Michael Blankfort: LOWT must broaden	October 1934 *New Theatre* circulatinn: 8,500
		November 27, 1934 *New Masses* article, by Stanley Burnshaw, "The First United Front"	November 1934 New Theatre circulation: 9,000
			December 1934 *New Theatre* circulation: 10,000

APPENDIX A (continued)

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT & IN MAGAZINES
1935		January 22, 1935 The New Masses, "A Call for an American Writers Congress"--". . . Each writer will represent his own personal allegiance. . . ."	January 1935 New Theatre: "Special Soviet Issue"--circulation: 12,000 January 6, 1935--Waiting for Lefty performed at "New Theatre Night" by members of the Group Theatre February 1935 New Theatre Editorial. New Theatre League being formed to replace LOWT February 19, 1935--Awake and Sing! opened on Broadway by Group Theatre March 1935 New Theatre--"organ of the New Theatre League . . ."
		April 1935--American Writers' Congress	April 1935 New Theatre--"published by the New Theatre League . . ." April 14, 1935 Bosley Crowther's "Theatre of the Left" published as main article in Drama Section of Sunday New York Times May 1935--high point of New Theatre and left-wing theatre movement May 12-19--National Theatre Week: "Socialist, Communist, Little Theatre and Student groups . . ."

APPENDIX A (continued)

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT & IN MAGAZINES
1935		June 12, 1935--Federal Theatre Project announcement	
	August 1935--The Comintern declares policy of collaboration with all enemies of Fascism: Popular Front era begins	August 1935--Federal Theatre Project begins its activity	
	September 1935--Third Moscow Theatre Festival		September 1935--*New Theatre* circulation: 16,000 October 1935 *New Theatre* editorial calls for "a genuine united theatre front" November 1935 New Theatre--announcement of celebration of growth of *New Theatre*, at Edison Hotel
	late 1935--Earl Browder to Moscow to seek Comintern advice about 1936 election campaign		

APPENDIX A (continued)

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT & IN MAGAZINES
1936		American Communist Party flourishes under Popular Front policy	January 1936 *New Theatre* circulation: 20,000
			May 1936--Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* on Broadway; directed by Worthington Minor & Walter Hart
			August 1936--announcement in *New Theatre* that technical quarterly, *Theatre Workshop* will soon be issued by the New Theatre League
	September 1936--Fourth Moscow Theatre Festival		
			October 1936--Dramatists Play Service being formed by Dramatists Guild--Repertory Dept. of NTL plans cooperation
		November 1936--Re-election of Roosevelt, with tacit support by ACP	November 1936--final issue of *New Theatre* Herbert Kline, editor
	late 1936--News of Moscow Trials begins to appear in US press		

APPENDIX A (continued)

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT & IN MAGAZINES
1937		February 9, 1937 *New Masses* editorial mentions reorganization of *New Theatre* into *New Theatre and Film*	
			March 1937--first issue of *New Theatre and Film*
			April 1937--final issue of *New Theatre and Film*
			April 1937--break-up of Theatre Union
	Moscow Trials, "Doctors' Plot"--growing mood of disillusionment with USSR in US		April-July 1937 *Theatre Workshop*--use of term "dialectical materialism" in editorial
			October 1937--Curtain Call mimeographed "house organ" of New Theatre League sent out to League members
		heyday of Federal Theatre Project	

APPENDIX A (continued)

YEAR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USSR	POLITICAL EVENTS--USA	CHANGES IN LEFT-WING THEATRE MOVEMENT & IN MAGAZINES
1938		Dies Committee begins to investigate communist activities on Federal Theatre Project	November 1938--New Theatre News, pocket-sized magazine with format similar to New Theatre--edited by original Workers Theatre/New Theatre personnel
1939	August 22, 1939--German-Russian Pact: the Popular Front period is over	June 30, 1939--Federal Theatre Project terminated by Congress	January 1939 New Theatre News Editorial calls for "a People's Theatre November 1939--New Theatre News issued in mimeographed form
1940			January 1940 New Theatre News article warns against doing "liberal" plays such as Paradise Lost. Editorial warns that Dishonor Role of groups in debt to NTL will be published. February 1940--NTL Dishonor Role published in New Theatre News July 1940--last issue of New Theatre News

APPENDIX B--ABSTRACT OF THE "PROSPECTS FOR THE AMERICAN THEATRE" SURVEY (Published in the September 1933, January, February & March 1934 issues of New Theatre)

Question 1: Do you think that the American theatre will recover from its present decline? Why?

Answers:

Sidney Howard: Theatre, "must be reborn as an institution of people at large. . . ." Sees signs of hope in little theatre productions and university experimental theatres.

Alfred Kreymborg: Theatre will survive if it takes a more active interest in our lives.

Barrett H. Clark: The present decline of the theatre is economic--will end when all business improves.

Anita Block: The theatre will last as long as life lasts.

Rose McClendon: The American theatre will recover.

Albert Maltz: "I think the American theatre of the near future will largely become a revolutionary theatre, a theatre of the workers in the sense that it is concerned with their problems and is inspired by their revolutionary needs. If the American theatre by any mischance should for the next few years take any other course than a revolutionary one, it must continue its present toboggan into the ash heap."

Frank Gilmore: The theatre will never recover its former strength because of competition from other forms of entertainment.

Michael Gold: The theatre will never recover. "The bourgeois world is coming to an end, via Fascism."

Paul Peters: "As a vital force in our culture, Broadway is dead; but as a tool, it is still useful to capitalist society."

Paul Green: The American theatre will recover, "because the human spirit by virtue of its nature must continue to express itself in its vital living forms, and the theatre is one of those forms."

George Sklar: The American theatre will recover because new groups--the Theatre Union, Theatre Collective--are entering the scene and deal with the American scene in terms of the class struggle.

Lee Simonson: Refers the New Theatre readers to specific sections of his book, The Stage is Set.

John Howard Lawson: The American theatre will recover because it is needed by the upper middle classes as a place to escape to. The revolutionary theatre will develop along separate lines.

J. Edward Bromberg: There will never be a real basic recovery.

Alfred Harding: The theatre will survive as it has survived all previous catastrophies.

Emjo Basshe: The American theatre won't regain its former position.

Claire and Paul Sifton: The theatre will perhaps recover, if American capitalism recovers. Simultaneously, "outlaw theatres"--stressing facts ignored by polite theatres--will develop.

John Freeman: The Broadway theatre's recovery depends on the recovery of capitalism--it will never come back to its former strength. Advances will be made at the expense of the workers and farmers. From a revolutionary viewpoint, the theatre can't recover artistically.

Worthington Minor: The theatre always recovers.

John Dos Passos: Doesn't think the New York theatre will recover.

John Wexley: Yes, it will recover. Because more meaningful plays with social implications have been produced.

Hiram Motherwell: Yes.

Liston M. Oak: The theatre will not permanently recover. The capitalist system, of which the Broadway theatre is a part, is on the decline.

Glenn Hughes: Yes. Because there is and always will be an audience for live theatre. At the present time, not many people can afford it.

Franchot Tone: The theatre has always survived and will survive. Theatre " . . . is one of man's natural aesthetic activities."

Mordecai Gorelik: No, it won't recover. The American theatre--except for the revolutionary workers' theatre--is part of a system which is in its decline.

Question 2: Should the Theatre:

a. Serve as an escape from life?
b. Reflect contemporary social conflicts?
c. Should it exclude the class struggle from its themes?

Answers:

Sidney Howard: The theatre must, first of all, be entertaining. "The theatre should inspire a greater involvement in life." It should include all themes it can deal with in an entertaining manner.

Alfred Kreymborg: The class struggle is "now one of the great worldly themes."

Barrett H. Clark: The theatre "should exclude nothing--as a matter of principle, otherwise it will be limited and largely synthetic like the present Russian theatre."

Anita Block: The theatre should include social conflict.

Rose McClendon: Theatre should provide escape and stimulus.

Albert Maltz: "In a world where as much rebuilding is needed as in ours, 'escape' literature ought to be put on a shelf and labeled 'poison.'"

Frank Gillmore: Theatre should provide both escape and stimulus. It shouldn't avoid class struggle any more than it should concentrate solely on it.

Michael Gold: The revolutionary is the only creative stimulus.

Paul Peters: "From Aristophanes down to O'Neill very good dramatists treated contemporary social conflicts. . . . A theatre which does not reflect social conflicts is a corpse of a theatre. . . . Of course you can keep a dead man propped up for some time . . . and that is what Broadway is like today."

Paul Green: Theatre "is and always will be concerned with the exhibition of man's character, his struggles, and his creeds of value--or if we are speaking of comedy, man's spirit of playfulness."

George Sklar: To be vital, the theatre must face the social conflict of its time. The class struggle is the springboard from which social conflicts arise.

Lee Simonson: Theatre should provide escape and stimulus, by reflecting social conflicts. Theatre of class conflicts can be boring too.

John Howard Lawson: Escape from reality is characteristic of the bourgeois theatre. Proletarian drama must be concerned with social conflicts. There is little meeting ground for the two. "Revolutionary theatre must develop its own audience and follow its own destiny."

J. Edward Bromberg: Theatre should reflect contemporary conflicts--not necessarily always the class struggle--only when it fits in with particular plays.

Alfred Harding: Theatre should be entertainment and stimulus. "It would be as foolish for the theatre to exclude class struggle as to concern itself solely with it."

Emjo Basshe: The class struggle and all of its aspects must be a part of the theatre.

Claire and Paul Sifton: In a way, the theatre always reflects contemporary social conflicts. "The respective classes will have their respective theatres. The dominant type of theatre naturally will be that which best meets the requirements of the dominant class."

Joseph Freeman: As long as the capitalists control the theatre, they will put on capitalist plays which serve as an escape from reality. Only a revolutionary theatre can present plays about the class struggle truthfully.

Worthington Minor: Theatre has always been an escape; it should include everything in its subject matter.

John Dos Passos: Workers Theatre is desireable, if it is good.

John Wexley: Theatre should reflect contemporary social conflicts and the class struggle--one of the most vital conflicts which can be produced.

Hiram Motherwell: No theme should be excluded.

Liston M. Oak: The class struggle offers the most interesting dramatic material.

Glenn Hughes: Theatre should explain and reflect contemporary social conflicts. It is difficult to write good plays about the class struggle.

Franchot Tone: Theatre should not be an escape. It should reflect contemporary events, and should only exclude the class struggle when it's not dramatic material. The class struggle will only be of interest to an audience that feels connected to it.

Mordecai Gorelik: "A vital theatre builds itself upon the most important dramatic conflicts of its era. The tremendous drama of the class struggle is the natural subject-matter of a living theatre of today."

Question 3: Which outlook upon life offers the greatest creative stimulation for the dramatist of today

a. conservative?
b. fascist?
c. liberal?
d. revolutionary?

Answers:

Sidney Howard: "Revolutionaries and fascists are permitted to be bores, but not dramatists." A dramatist shouldn't write from a political outlook.

Alfred Kreymborg: The revolutionary outlook gives the greatest stimulation.

Barrett H. Clark: Political outlook is unimportant compared to artistic ability.

Anita Block:--The Revolutionary outlook "is the one outlook on life that holds any constructive or creative hope for man's future on this, our earth."

Rose McClendon: The liberal and revolutionary outlooks are the best.

Albert Maltz: The Revolutionary outlook is the only possible creative stimulus.

Frank Gillmore: did not respond to this question.

Michael Gold: The revolutionary outlook is the only creative stimulus.

Paul Peters: "I should say bluntly that a dramatist who isn't a revolutionary today, tho' he may become ever so good a craftsman and a stylist, must remain an inferior artist."

Paul Green: felt that this question was out of place--theatre is much more than politics.

George Sklar: Revolutionary

Lee Simonson: Any political outlook can be a creative stimulus to a creative dramatist.

John Howard Lawson: Revolutionary.

J. Edward Bromberg: A complete understanding of all outlooks on life offers the greatest stimulus. This type of open outlook resolves itself into a revolutionary spirit.

Alfred Harding: Political outlook depends on the individual dramatist. "Of them all, the revolutionary writer seems most likely to forget that he has a story to tell."

Emjo Basshe: Revolutionary.

Claire and Paul Sifton: Revolutionary.

Joseph Freeman: "What we must do is to convince the honest dramatist that the revolutionary viewpoint is correct. Only when the dramatist sees the world from the revolutionary viewpoint can he see it truly. . . . Conservatism is based upon lies, and no great art can be created out of lies. The revolutionary movement explodes the lies of capitalism; it shows the way towards a new world. Out of its truth a great art can be created."

Worthington Minor: "I can't imagine. I know only that Hitlerism is bad because it excludes Jews--and somehow that race seems to have an aptitude for dramatics, witness the Christian Legend."

John Dos Passos: "I think the whole art vs. propaganda row is a dead horse and I don't see what can be gained from flogging it anymore. If you can make a go of a workers' theatre and attract an audience and hammer into them some valuable truths the result will be a first rate theatre probably, and first rate plays. You can get about as far cursing out fascism as you would cursing out typhoid fever--no use arguing about it. If you put on a good play capitalizing the conscious workers' point of view that'll be useful prophylaxis."

John Wexley: The revolutionary outlook is most stimulating.

Hiram Motherwell: Doesn't think that politics have much interest for the audience today.

Liston M. Oak: Revolutionary.

Glenn Hughes: All offer stimulation. It depends on the dramatist. The least creatively stimulating is the fascist outlook.

Franchot Tone: "Revolutionary--but generally too much stimulus to allow real creation apart from dogmatism."

Mordecai Gorelik: "For dramatists of great ability the revolutionary path is the natural way of development."

Question 4a: Do you believe that the trend indicated by such plays as 'Steel,' '1931,' and 'We the People' is a factor making for a better theatre or a worse one?

b: Can revolutionary plays (of the type referred to above) succeed on Broadway?

Answers:

Sidney Howard: Admires social plays, such as We the People and 1931, but feels that they are too overladen with their political outlook.

Alfred Kreymborg: The trend of social plays has a chance--if Broadway wakes up.

Anita Block: Social plays are unlikely to succeed on Broadway.

Rose McClendon: Revolutionary plays can "eventually" succeed on Broadway.

Albert Maltz: Revolutionary plays have little chance of success on Broadway.

Frank Gillmore: "A good play will succeed whether it be propaganda or otherwise."

Michael Gold: Revolutionary plays are unlikely to succeed with petty bourgeois audiences.

Paul Peters: Revolutionary plays won't succeed on Broadway until workers come into the audience and take over.

Paul Green: Revolutionary plays, if good, will succeed.

George Sklar: Revolutionary plays will succeed if prices are lowered so that workers can afford them.

Lee Simonson: "I am not a professional prophet."

John Howard Lawson: "It is impossible to educate an audience to accept proletarian material."

J. Edward Bromberg: "No!"

Alfred Harding: Revolutionary plays can only accidentally succeed.

Emjo Basshe: Revolutionary plays will only succeed if a huge audience is organized; expenses and thereby prices must be lowered.

Claire and Paul Sifton: The trend indicates a different theatre. Revolutionary plays can't succeed on Broadway. (The Siftons were the authors of 1931.)

Joseph Freeman: Plays like those referred to make for a better theatre. It is doubtful that they can make a financial success.

Worthington Minor: The plays referred to are "execrable examples of bad taste and bad dramatic writing." Bad plays won't succeed.

John Wexley: Such plays make for a better theatre; but revolutionary plays can't succeed. (Wexley was the author of Steel.)

Hiram Motherwell: Such plays make for a better theatre and can certainly succeed.

Liston M. Oak: The plays listed are not revolutionary--they represent of trend towards the left which makes for better theatre. Usually revolutionary plays cannot survive.

Glenn Hughes: Social theatre is not necessarily the most important kind of theatre. The only way to see if such plays will succeed is to try them.

Franchot Tone: Didn't like the examples given. No, revolutionary plays won't survive.

Mordecai Gorelik: Although he didn't like the plays mentioned in the survey, their production represented a positive trend to him. Most revolutionary plays don't have a chance of succeeding on Broadway--it is possible that a great revolutionary play would succeed.

Question 5a: Is there a need for a workers' theatre in America --a theatre consciously reflecting the viewpoint of the revolutionary working class?

b: Have you seen any performances by a workers' theatre group?

c: Do you believe that the workers' theatre holds any promise for the future of the theatre in America?

Answers:

Sidney Howard: "Theatrically speaking, the unconscious viewpoint translates itself naturally into drama; the conscious one merely talks about itself."

Alfred Kreymborg: Workers' theatre is perhaps the hope for the future, because the workers are the closest to life.

Barrett H. Clark: Doesn't feel that workers' theatre holds any hope for the future. Has never seen a workers' theatre production: ". . . I'd like to. But I don't think any such thing can be."

Anita Block: Workers' theatre has hope to offer the future, but it needs encouragement from the workers.

Rose McClendon: Workers' theatre holds some promise for the theatre in America.

Albert Maltz: no response to this question

Frank Gillmore: Not much need for or hope to be expected from the workers' theatres.

Michael Gold: " . . . our object is not to save the bourgeois theatre. It will go its own way. We can't compete with it for its own audience but build a new one."

Paul Peters: Doesn't think that workers' theatre groups will form basis of a new drama. But they do have something valuable to offer.

Paul Green: Has seen workers' theatre productions and feels that these theatre hold some promise for the American theatre.

George Sklar: The workers' theatre offers the "only promise" for the future of the American theatre.

Lee Simonson: Workers' theatre groups should "get over the idea that vital drama is self-produced by orthodox class dogmas."

John Howard Lawson: The next ten years will see a real growth of the workers' theatre.

J. Edward Bromberg: The workers' theatre offers a promise, "providing it first becomes a theatre!"

Alfred Harding: "The theatre is bigger than any sect or sexes."

Emjo Basshe: The workers' theatre offers promise, "but it needs organization, direction, boldness."

Claire and Paul Sifton: Yes to a, b and c. But, "any conscious reflection runs the risk of being artificial and unsuccessful in the theatre. It frequently comes over the footlights as cold intellectual setting-up drill, than which nothing is more deadly in the theatre."

Joseph Freeman: There is a definite need for the workers' theatre. It must, however, be of good artistic quality.

Worthington Minor: Any plays written from a single perspective will of necessity be poor. Has never seen any workers' theatre productions--doesn't even know what it means. "It sounds like horny-handed Kiwanis."

John Wexley: Yes to all three questions.

Hiram Motherwell: "There is a need for new vigor from all directions."

Liston M. Oak: Yes to all three questions. But workers' theatre must learn that propaganda must be art.

Glenn Hughes: Expects that the workers' theatre would be too biased to make much of a contribution.

Franchot Tone: Sees no need for the workers' theatre--has seen some workers' theatre productions. The promise of the workers' theatre depends on the quality of its productions.

Mordecai Gorelik: "Unquestionably. . . . The American workers' theatre, still crude and amateurish, has extraordinary vigor, great potential talent, a devoted and critical audience, and is able to expand at a time when the industry of the bourgeois theatre is rapidly shutting down."

Question 6a: To what do you attribute the tremendous vitality of the Soviet Theatre?
b: Do you believe that this theatre marks an advance in theatrical art?
c: What in general, if anything, can the American theatre learn from the Soviet Theatre?

Answers:

Sidney Howard: Is not really familiar with the Russian theatre.

Alfred Kreymborg: The Russian Theatre has the greatest imagination because it has done away with everything outmoded. We can learn much from the Russian theatre and from perfecting ourselves.

Barrett H. Clark: "Until the USSR tells playwrights to go ahead as if they were artists instead of political pimps, it cannot expect real drama. Not that I'm unsympathetic to Russia or her theatre, but I get tired of having the Soviet theatre held up as a shining example to us who (in O'Neill, Green, Riggs and others--G. O'Neil) have it all over the USSR drama."

Anita Block: "In Russia, life and the theatre merge ideally into an integrated unit."

Rose McClendon: No response given to this question.

Albert Maltz: The vitality of the Soviet Theatre, "is merely a reflection of the tremendous vitality apparent in the Soviet Union as a whole."

Frank Gillmore: No answer.

Michael Gold: Russia "is the only place where the theatre really lives today."

Paul Peters: Theatre is vital in the USSR because it is an integral part of the people's lives there. "Only a worker audience can rejuvenate the theatre."

Paul Green: The vitality of the Russian theatre arises from the awakened vitality of the Russians. We can learn anything specific from their theatre. ". . . the matter of self-expression is always integral and identical with the nature of a people itself."

George Sklar: The Russian Theatre must teach us "that the theatre must not be aloof from life, but on the contrary, should face and deal constructively with its problems, and contribute to the building of a new and better society."

Lee Simonson: The vitality of the Russian theatre is attributable "to the fact that it was a tremendously vital theatre before the Soviets." We can learn technique from them, " . . . and the humility of the artist before the problems of realization."

John Howard Lawson: The Russian Theatre is vital because "the creation of a new society obviously brings about a revitalizing of theatrical forms and content." The Soviet Theatre should be studied, but the American theatre must be American in all respects.

J. Edward Bromberg: In Russia, "those theatres in which spirit and craft have formed a true amalgamation--have contributed to the advance of theatrical art." Our theatre "can learn that a different society is necessary for this type of theatre."

Alfred Harding: The Russian theatre marks no advance in the theatre art.

Emjo Basshe: The vitality of the Russian Theatre is due to the vitality of the Russian Revolution--the theatre there belongs to the workers.

Claire and Paul Sifton: The vitality of the soviet "idea" accounts for the vitality of the theatre. Also, in the USSR, the theatre takes the place of the church as a source of inspiration and morale.

Joseph Freeman: The vitality is due to the vitality of life created by the revolution. The creative forces of the masses have been brought to the fore. The American theatre, under capitalism, can only learn technical innovations from the Soviets.

Worthington Minor: Attributes the vitality to "the heritage of the most imaginative group of minds bred under the Tsarist regime." American theatre can learn "discipline of actors, imagination of directors, and care in production."

John Wexley: We should learn production ideas, and also that art can entertain and deal with issues.

Hiram Motherwell: Attributes Soviet Theatre's vitality to the vitality of the "Soviet Adventure," and also to the old high theatre tradition. The content of an art must grow out of its own soil. We can learn devoted application to art from the Soviets.

Liston M. Oak: The relationship of the workers to the theatre is important. We should learn that the threatre must deal with social issues and reflect the class struggle.

Franchot Tone: The vitality is due to audience interest. There are technical, directorial and acting lessons to be learned.

Mordecai Gorelik: The vitality of the Soviet Theatre has to do with its integral relationship to society. The new is encouraged. The American Theatre can learn the need to take part in a revolution.

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