

Introduction

Good morning! My name is Anna Kutter and my paper, *Democracy, The New Deal, and COVID-19: The Argument for a People's Theatre*, utilizes archival work, democratic and public goods theory, and American theatrical history to make an argument that the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is the ideal time to reimplement a federal theatre in the United States.

The Federal Theatre Project was a programmatic subset of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, designed to stimulate the American economy, provide employment opportunities for arts workers within their fields, and make locally relevant works of theatre accessible to rural and low-income communities in the midst of the Great Depression.

Although it faced an untimely end, the Project proves that a contemporary federally funded theatre could serve not only as a touchpoint of relief after the COVID-19 pandemic, but as a crucial way for communities to express, explain, and examine their political relationships.

Today I will begin with a discussion of theatre as a public good and potential catalyst for democratic connection. This will be followed by an overview of the history of the Federal Theatre Project. Finally, I will conclude with the personal archival material of Hallie Flanagan, the director of the Project, focusing on her suggestions for the institution of a permanent Federal Theatre, and by explaining how a program structured around her contributions to American democracy could function in the 21st century.

Theatre & democracy

The theatre has served as a public good—a catalyst for democratic connections—since its origins in Ancient Athens. Democracy thrives in a society's mutual investment in the objects, services, and experiences which they have in common. These modalities of the theatre as an

institution represent a potential for theatre to live up to the democratic hallmarks of universal access, egalitarianism, and social connectedness.

The current American theatre does not live up to this potential. It is not universally accessible because it exists as a wholly capitalist enterprise. Instead of providing a forum for community members to understand one another's experiences, the only stories which are told are the ones which will sell.

It is not egalitarian because marginalized theatrical artists and workers are disproportionately affected by the inequities of the industry, such as unemployment and poor or exploitative working conditions, and as such are not well represented both behind the scenes and in the stories told onstage.

This leads me into my third point, which is that the contemporary American theatre is not a tool for social connectedness. Limited representation is detrimental to democracy because it leaves us under the governance of those few who are already in control not by virtue of popular agreement, but because long-standing systems have been set up to benefit them.

This is especially true in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which shuttered the doors of hundreds of community theatres across the United States and added to the theatrical employment problem, particularly for workers of color.

But using the opportunity of our recovery from COVID-19 as a flashpoint for structural change, we can reshape the American theatre to its original purpose – a shared experience from which members of a democracy can stage and explicate their own relationships.

Federal Theatre Project

Solutions to these problems do not need to come out of thin air; there is precedent for them in American public policy. The Federal

Theatre Project led to the creation of socially vital, regionally specific, and historically important works of theatre. From 1935 to its termination in 1939, the Project employed over 13,000 people, brought low-cost theatre to over 30 million audience members, and made locally relevant plays accessible to rural and low-income communities.

The FTP lived up to standards of accessibility because it created opportunities for theatre in small towns and rural areas across the United States which had not previously had them. Across the country, ticket fees were kept at rates much lower than the commercial theatre, or not charged at all.

The FTP also placed an egalitarian emphasis on workers' rights and equality for the marginalized. The FTP included units with plays produced and performed entirely with Black casts and crew, and many FTP shows were racially integrated, a rarity at the time. Professional theatrical workers – usually unionized – were hired from relief rolls in each FTP city. 90% of funds allocated were legally required to be used for workers' salaries. The Project was therefore a success for workers' dignity and their rights to do the work which they know and are skilled at.

The Project was also a tool for community connection. During the four years in which it operated, Federal Theatre Project productions were well-attended and well-reviewed in local newspapers. Even when regional productions featured controversial themes, they fostered community discussion and debate about the role of accessible and inclusive political art. The Living Newspapers, which dramatized the political problems faced by the working class, proposed radically progressive and economically leftist solutions. In New York, plays by Jewish playwrights were performed in both Yiddish and English. Rural communities in the South used FTP stages to condemn the social constructs which upheld racist oppression against Black Americans.

Unfortunately, these themes grew to shape a debate over the Project's very existence. Hallie Flanagan's insistence that the American people only benefitted from challenging theatre conflicted with the Project's need for federal funding. In June of 1939, as part of an anti-Roosevelt campaign intended on shutting down the WPA, the House Committee on Un-American Activities declared the Federal Theatre Project "propaganda for Communism" and immediately cut off all funding.

Applying it today

However, if we agree with Hallie Flanagan, who famously responded to this claim by calling the Project "propaganda for democracy," and agree that a *federal* theatre is the best platform from which to build a *democratic* one, what would this program look like in the 21st century, without the structure of the Works Progress Administration?

In April of 1939, anticipating the danger to come, Flanagan was working on a plan to establish a permanent federal theatre in the United States. Key points of the plan include her intentions for funding the program, maintaining equitable labor practices, and incorporating theatre more explicitly into local political communities.

I found this document in Flanagan's personal materials in the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and I believe that it gives us a new perspective of Flanagan as a democratic theorist and demonstrates the financial and structural feasibility of a federal theatre as a permanent venture in American policy.

Flanagan invokes public goods theory to suggest financing the plan via funds earmarked from an admissions tax on live arts and general amusements, which at the time had precedent in dozens of European and South American countries and has since been implemented in hundreds of local governments across the United States.

She also makes it clear that while a federal theatre, unlike the Federal Theatre Project, need not hire workers *entirely* from relief rolls, it should still keep a clear focus on hiring theatrical workers from rural communities, at one point going so far to suggest that 75% of a federal theatre's workers should be otherwise unable to find employment. This would shift the Federal Theatre away from New York, the center of theatrical employment in the United States, and into communities where both audiences and workers have little access to locally relevant theatre – perfectly in line with both the original goals of the FTP and the theatre's potential as a democratic tool.

Conclusion

In conclusion, further examination on the development of a permanent federal theatre would indicate a strong national commitment to communal public goods, democratic connection, and support for labor in pursuit of the arts. Beyond that, it speaks to an acknowledgement of our shared history and a commitment to move into the future with the intention of crafting our political structures around the values and lived experiences of the people who will most benefit from them. Thank you very much.