**Federal Dance Project (1936 – 1938)**

**Summary**

The Federal Dance Project (FDP) was formed in January 1936, as part of President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration (WPA). Originally a component of the WPA’s Federal Theater Project (FTP), forceful lobbying by New York City dancers, under the leadership of Helen Tamiris, led to the creation of a separate dance unit. In keeping with the FTP ideal of bringing culture to the masses, the FDP aimed to bring the new modern dance to the people. The FTP was organized in regions, and dance units were formed in Chicago, Los Angeles and elsewhere, in addition to New York City. Choreographers affiliated with the project included Helen Tamiris, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, Ruth Page, and Katherine Dunham.

The FTP and FDP were surrounded by political conflict from the beginning, and when funding cutbacks hit the Federal Theatre Project as a whole, the Federal Dance Project was absorbed back into the theatre project in October 1937. However, dance productions continued under the aegis of the Federal Theatre Project, until further political controversy led to the dismantling of the FTP two years later in 1939. Despite its short life, the Federal Dance Project demonstrated the power of federal funding for dance and anticipated the recognition of dance as a separate genre when the National Endowment for the Arts was established in 1965.

**Founding of the Federal Dance Project**

In 1935, the Works Progress Administration was mandated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in an effort to provide employment to masses of unemployed Americans, the result of the Great Depression. In the arts, four programs were set up: the Federal Music Project, the Federal Writers Project, the Federal Arts Project and the Federal Theater Project. The Federal projects in the arts had a distinctive mission: beyond providing work for the unemployed, they were to democratize the arts themselves, by providing art for the masses. Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theater Project, hoped to create a theatre that would prove so essential to the communities it served that it would continue after federal support was withdrawn. This concept was especially appealing to new modern dance choreographers, who were struggling to build an audience for their fledgling art.

Initially, dance artists were employed under the aegis of the FTP, but in New York City dancers successfully lobbied for a fifth program, the Federal Dance Project. Choreographer and dancer Helen Tamiris was instrumental in the creation of the Dance Association, an organization promoting collective action, which took the lead in convincing Hallie Flanagan that dance should have its own place. In January 1936 plans were laid. Don Oscar Becque, a producer in the FTP, was named as supervisor of the new unit in New York City and an initial budget of $155,000 approved. This amount included appropriations for costumes and scenery for eight productions, a theatre for performances, a support staff of administrative and office workers as well as theatre workers, and one hundred and eighty-five dancers, all of whom were to be on Home Relief, a government welfare program. Choreographers appointed to the project represented a broad range of approaches to dance. Besides Becque there was Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman, leaders in the new modern dance, as well as Tamiris. Gluck Sandor was best known as a theatrical and ballet choreographer, while Felicia Sorel came from an eclectic background that included ballet with Michel Fokine, modern dance with Mary Wigman, and Spanish dance with Vincente Escudero. Musicians, under the supervision of Donald Pond, a young English composer, included Genevieve Pitot and Wallingford Riegger, both associated with the new modern dance.

**Productions**

In June of 1936 the first production of the FDP, Weidman’s *Candide*, opened at the Henry Street Playhouse and at the Majestic Theater in Brooklyn. Tamiris’ *Salut au Monde* followed in July and August of the same year. Becque’s *Young Tramps* also opened in August 1936. Among these early productions, only *Young Tramps* was created specifically for the FDP, while the other works were reworkings of materials previously staged by the choreographers.

Created specifically for the Federal Dance Project in New York City, Tamiris’ *How Long Brethren?* premiered in May 1937 and created the popular audience that Flanagan had anticipated for the project. Playing at the Nora Beyes Theater, in tandem with Weidman’s *Candide,* it was the most successful and longest-running of the FDP productions. It brought culture to the masses at the same time that it provided employment on a generous pay scale to dancers and singers. Based on the *Negro Songs of Protest* collected by Lawrence Gellert, the work featured twenty dancers, including Helen Tamiris, and a choral group of twenty members of the Federal Theater Negro Choir.

Dance productions under the aegis of the FTP in other cities included *Frankie and Johnny* and *Guns and Castanets* (Ruth Page and Bentley Stone) and *L’Ag Ya* (Katherine Dunham), produced by the Federal Ballet in Chicago, and *Let My People Go* and *American Exodus*,choreographed by Myra Kinch for the FTP Concert Group in Los Angeles.

**Politics**

Initially, dancers needed to be on government relief in order to qualify for employment on the FDP. This led to spirited debates over levels of professionalism. Adopting techniques of organized labour, dancers in New York City picketed FDP headquarters in attempts to raise wages and to win spots for all unemployed dancers, not just those on Home Relief. In response, Hallie Flanagan called for an auditions board to audition all dancers and to set standards; a minimum of five years of dance experience which could be a combination of technical training at approved schools and professional appearances, and a choice of auditioning before either a ballet or a non-ballet board would now be required. In some cases dancers already hired by the project were asked to reaudition, leading to further protests and charges of favouritism. Becque was now thoroughly disliked by the dancers, who charged him with dictatorial methods and discrimination, as well as failure to fulfill the original dance quota; they circulated a petition for his removal as supervisor. In December 1936, Becque was replaced by Lincoln Kirstein. Shortly thereafter Kirstein was replaced by Stephen Karnot, who had been active in the Workers Laboratory Theater, and who continued to lead the FDP until its demise in 1937.

The mission of the FDP highlighted the conflict between economic need and commercial talent and from the beginning dancers’ efforts to bargain collectively involved strikes and picketing. The FDP, along with the New York FTP, quickly earned a reputation for radical politics. When Congress threatened to withdraw funding for the FDP, Charles Weidman led dancers performing in *Candide* and Tamiris’ *How Long Brethren?* in what may have been the theatre’s first sit down strike. Demonstrations protesting the budget cuts and layoffs continued throughout its run; dancers even staged a hunger strike. Nevertheless in October 1937, the FDP was absorbed back into the FTP.

**Relation to Modernism and Legacy**

In many ways, the mission to deliver a people’s culture was antithetical to a modernist agenda with its focus on ambiguity. The FDP had hired leaders of the new modern dance, which emphasized principles of distortion and abstraction, and presented them with a mandate to reach a popular audience. FDP choreographers, eager to provide employment to the dancers, sought ways to combine the disparate agendas. In New York City the most successful integration of modernist choreographic principles with emotional and expressive themes was Tamiris’ *How Long Brethren?*, which engaged the political and moral reactions of its audience. In varying ways, Katherine Dunham’s *L’Ag’Ya* and Ruth Page’s *Frankie and* *Johnny* in Chicago as well was Myra Kinch’s *American Exodus* and *Let My People Go* in Los Angeles also integrated popular appeal and modernist aesthetics.

Within a decade of the demise of the Federal Dance Project, modern dance choreographers found their way to Broadway, and the impact of the project on the subsequent broadening of the audience for modern dance cannot be underestimated. When the National Endowment for the Arts was established in 1965, there was no question but that theatrical dance, particularly the genre of modern dance, would receive federal funding for the first time in more than twenty-five years.

**Ellen Graff**

**Major productions of the FDP in NYC**

*Candide* (1936) Charles Weidman

*Prelude, Parade, Celebration* (1936) Doris Humphrey

*Salut au Monde* (1936) Helen Tamiris

*Young Tramps* (1936) Don Oscar Becque

*The Eternal Prodigal* (1936) Gluck Sandor and Felicia Sandor

*How Long Brethren?* (1937) Helen Tamiris

**Major productions under the FTP in other cities**

*L’ag Ya* (1938) Katherine Dunham. Chicago

*Frankie and Johnny* (1938) Ruth Page and Bentley Stone. Chicago

*Guns and Castanets* (1939) Ruth Page and Bentley Stone. Chicago

*American Exodus* (1937) Myra Kinch. Los Angeles

*Let My People Go* (1938) Myra Kinch. Los Angeles

**References and Further Reading**

Flanagan, H. (1940) *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theater,* New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce.

Foulkes, J. (2002) *Modern Bodies: Dance and American Modernism from Martha Graham to Alvin Ailey,* Chapel Hill and London, Duke University Press.

Graff, E. (1997) *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City 1928 – 1942,* Durham and London. Duke University Press.

Manning, S. (2004) *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

O’Connor, J. and L. Brown (1978) *Free, Adult, Uncensored: The Living History of the Federal Theater Project,* Washington D.C.:New Republic Books.

**Paratexts**

Poster for Tamiris’s *Salut au Monde*, designed by Richard Hall; Library of Congress

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.07144/>

Poster for Chicago Federal Ballet, National Archive

<http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/new_deal_for_the_arts/images/celebrating_the_people/federal_ballet.html>