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| FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT (1935-1939) |
| **[Enter any *variant forms* of your headword – OPTIONAL]** |
| The Federal Theatre Project was a government-subsidized program established in 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide jobs for theatre artists during the Great Depression in the United States. Along with similar programs in Art, Music, Dance, and Writing, the project was designed to produce professional theatre throughout the country and eventually established companies in thirty-one American states. While the fare of the program was broad, including circuses, vaudeville, musicals, and children’s theatre, its offerings were largely progressive, which led to conflicts with Congressional Republicans who viewed the program as propaganda for New Deal politics. Eventually, charges of communism led to an investigation by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the budgetary elimination of Federal Theatre in 1939. |
| The Federal Theatre Project was a government-subsidized program established in 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide jobs for theatre artists during the Great Depression in the United States. Along with similar programs in Art, Music, Dance, and Writing, the project was designed to produce professional theatre throughout the country and eventually established companies in thirty-one American states. While the fare of the program was broad, including circuses, vaudeville, musicals, and children’s theatre, its offerings were largely progressive, which led to conflicts with Congressional Republicans who viewed the program as propaganda for New Deal politics. Eventually, charges of communism led to an investigation by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the budgetary elimination of Federal Theatre in 1939.  As a part of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Federal Theatre was supervised by Harry Hopkins and administered by Hallie Flanagan Davis, who had been a classmate of Hopkins at Grinnell College and who had established a very successful experimental theatre at Vassar College. Flanagan insisted that the program be ‘free, adult and uncensored’ (*Arena,* 28), and that its theatres reflect the entirety of the American people, as well as the serious economic and political threats that confronted them. She undertook the establishment, for example, of several Negro theatres (in Harlem, Newark, Chicago, and Seattle) that produced plays about black experience in the United States during a decade when race riots and public lynchings were not uncommon. These theatres were controversial and did not prosper in the Deep South, but they contributed to the body of work popularized during the Harlem Renaissance and encouraged dozens of African American writers, designers, composers, and performers to pursue careers in the theatre. One of Federal Theatre Project’s most celebrated productions was a ‘voodoo *Macbeth*’ (1936) that was directed by Orson Welles and set in Haiti with an all-black cast.  File: National Film Preservation Foundation\_ Footage of Orson Welles's \_Voodoo\_ Macbeth (1937).html  Figure 1 Original footage of Orson Welles's "Voodoo Macbeth (1936).  Source: Available at: http://www.filmpreservation.org/pres  erved-films/screening-room/voodoo-  macbeth] Also available at:  www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xa9Mjfr5foY  While the predominant style of Federal Theatre was traditional and frequently realistic, an important exception was the Living Newspaper unit, which produced socially relevant plays on current political topics such as subsidized housing (*One-Third of a Nation*, 1938), socialized medicine (*Spirochete*, 1938), and public ownership of utilities (*Power*, 1937).  File: PosterForPower.png  Figure 2Poster for Power, Federal Theatre Project, 1937  Source: Available at George Mason University Libraries: http://digilib.gmu.edu/dspace/handle/1920/4017  These productions were influenced by Russian and German models and experimented with both epic and expressionistic devices. A typical Living Newspaper production utilized a narrator, short scenes with characters that represented ideas and attitudes rather than psychological complexity, and direct address to the audience. *Injunction Granted* (1936), for example, was clearly inspired by the Russian director Nikolai Ohklopkov.  File: InjunctionGranted.png  Figure 3 Injunction Granted, Living Newspaper, Federal Theatre Project, 1936  Source: Reproduced in Lorraine Brown, “Federal Theatre: Melodrama, Social Protest, and Genius,” which is linked to the Library of Congress webpage listed above. The article is at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftbrwn00.html>; the photo is at <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/images/ftbrwn07.jpg>  Its open stage with circles of platforms and a dozen designated playing areas reflected staging and design concepts that director Joseph Losey had seen in Vsevolod Meyerhold’s and Ohklopkov’s theatres in Moscow, and its clown figure, who comments ironically on the action of the play, combines with a loudspeaker voice to break through the traditional fourth wall. Unfortunately, the play’s enthusiastic endorsement of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) led to charges of communism that not only forced an early closing of *Injunction Granted* but ultimately led to the termination of the entire Federal Theatre Project. During its brief tenure, however, the project staged several remarkable productions, including *The Cradle Will Rock* (1937), *It Can’t Happen Here* (1936), *and Prologue to Glory* (1938), and introduced many artists, including Orson Welles, John Houseman, and Rose McClendon, who made significant contributions to American theatre. List of Works De Rohan, Pierre, ed. (1938) *Federal Theatre Plays*, New York: Random House. |
| Further reading: (Cobb, 1990)  (Flanagan, 1940)  (Fraden, 1994)  (Mathews, 1967)  “New Deal Programs: Selected Library of Congress Resources: Federal Theatre Project,” <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/newdeal/ftp.html>.  (Osborne, 2011)  (Witham, 2003)  [Enter citations for further reading here] |