

**Dramatizing Democracy:
The Living Newspaper Plays of the WPA Federal Theatre
Project**

**A thesis
submitted to the faculty of the graduate school
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by**

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents, Harry Gardner and Agatha Boeckmann Gardner—survivors of the Great Depression and Roosevelt Democrats. Neither of my parents graduated from high school, but both of them instilled in their children a belief in the value of higher education.

Abstract

This study focuses on the Living Newspaper plays of the WPA Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939). It includes as part of the study a selection of the publicity posters designed for the Living Newspaper productions by artists employed by the WPA Federal Art Project. It examines ways in which the Living Newspapers related to the mass media of the Depression era. It explores the ways in which cultural ideas and values around the themes of technology and modernity, citizenship, and the role of government in society are expressed in the written and visual texts of the plays and the poster images.

This is a qualitative study and is interdisciplinary in its approach. It is grounded in the fields of cultural history and cultural studies, and is informed by literary studies and art history. The method I've used is content assessment, which media historian Marion Marzolf described as a "reading, sifting, weighing, and analyzing of evidence."

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Preface

From a Century of Progress to the World of Tomorrow

“Saturday, May 27, 1933. 10 o’clock AM. The opening of the World’s Fair is now being announced over the radio. The Century of Progress is being officially opened by James Farley, Postmaster General who is taking President Roosevelt’s place.

According to the radio announcer, it is a hot clear day, a beautiful day for this historical event’s opening. Here in Minneapolis, it is warm but cloudy.

The gates were thrown open at 9 AM this morning. This exposition displays the progress of the world in the last 100 years. Incidentally, this month marks the beginning [of] the second third of the 20th century.”

In 1933, a young man sat listening to the radio broadcast of the opening of the Chicago World’s Fair. “Century of Progress” was its theme, and the young man was so moved and excited by the event—and the vision of the world it promised—that he felt compelled to record the moment on paper.

This young man was my father. He was 19 at the time. The world described on the radio that day held the promise of a better future, propelled by the steady march of technological progress. “Vast Spectacle on Parade Gets Under Way With Day of Pageantry” proclaimed the Minneapolis Journal in a front page story that evening (“World’s Fair Opens” 1). A related story reports the fair grounds were “teeming with hundreds of thousands of visitors from many lands, paying tribute to a century of progress, 100 years of unprecedented advancement in agriculture, travel, and transportation” (“Beam” 1).

Yet in the coming years of the decade—the years of the Great Depression—my father faced job layoffs and the general economic hard times shared by so many of his fellow citizens. It was a world in which the story of progress embodied in the fair's exhibits seemed threatened, its promise broken—or at least interrupted—with no certainty about when the prosperous times would return.

I have included this personal family history here because (to me) it so poignantly, if briefly, illustrates the paradoxes between the world envisioned by the opening of that World's Fair in 1933, in which so many Americans like my father wished to believe, and the bitter reality of an economy and people in distress.

The cultural tensions caused by the distance between the promise of a better future through technology and the reality of the failing economy of the 1930's were played out in many arenas: in boardrooms and living rooms, in local city halls and the halls of Congress, in the workplace and even the places where Americans were entertained.

The public employment programs of President Franklin Roosevelt's administration were intended in part to close the gap between the bright future hoped for and economic hardship of the present. This beginning second third of the 20th century that my father referred to saw the beginning of government policies and programs that inform conflicts and tensions played out in American public discourse to this present day.

The Chicago World's Fair and the radio on which its opening was broadcast were just two of the forums in the 1930's where Americans discussed, debated, interpreted, and imagined what constituted progress and a better life in contemporary society, and how that better life could be achieved. Another forum was the theatre of the day, and one theatre venue in particular—the Living Newspaper plays of the Work's Progress Administration's Federal Theatre Project.

The decade of the 1930s ended with another World's Fair in New York in 1939 which took as its theme "The World of Tomorrow." In that theme was envisioned a "world which you and I and our millions of fellow citizens can build from the best of the tools available to us today" and which showed the "best industrial techniques, social ideas and services, the most advanced scientific discoveries" while at the same time illustrating the "interdependence of man on man, class on class, nation on nation (*Official Guide Book 5.*) In between the Century of Progress and the World of Tomorrow, a nation debated the meaning of progress, who would receive the benefits of the progress and how, and in what ways the imagined better future could best be achieved.

Chapter 1—Introduction

This research is a study of the Federal Theatre Project and related productions of the Federal Art Project. Both were part of the President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA).

The Living Newspaper plays of the Federal Theatre Project were a part of the massive WPA public jobs program enacted in a time of great national emergency. But they were also a significant cultural endeavor that in concept and purpose were linked to the mass media of their era. Like the 1930s newspapers and newsreels they imitated on stage, they sought to provide accurate information on pressing contemporary public issues. They also provided their audiences with in depth background and history on current problems that was meant to impart knowledge and increase understanding of the issues at hand. Thus, *One Third of a Nation* traced the story of American tenement housing and the business, economic, legal and public policy framework which developed around it from the 18th to the early 20th century America. *Power* dramatically portrayed the relationship between the consumer and the electric companies in America as it described for its audience the rural electrification goals of the New Deal Administration's public Tennessee Valley Authority and the extension of the benefits of modern technology implied by its creation. Both plays argued for an active role for government in assuring a basic standard of living and economic security for its citizens.

This study will focus on the texts of selected plays called the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) and the images and texts of publicity posters designed for the FTP productions by the Federal Art Project (FAP).

The arts and theatre programs of the WPA have to date received attention in academic fields such as theatre arts, art history and cultural studies, but these programs have apparently been of scant interest to communication history scholars. The intent of this study is to establish the place of these WPA cultural programs in the study of mass communication history.

In her reference work on the WPA, *Pickaxe and Pencil* (1982) Marguerite Bloxom states that no definitive conclusions could be made about the success of the WPA programs, cut short as they were by diversion of resources to the U.S. entry into World War II (v). Be that as it may, the cultural output of the FTP and FAP offers rich opportunities for the exploration of what the efforts of these artists and writers can tell us about who Americans were (or thought they were), what were their hopes and concerns, their values and ideals, and what they thought of the changes driving the political, economic and cultural conditions of the nation at this crucial juncture in American history.

At the time of Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933, industrial production had fallen to an unprecedented low, close to 25% of the labor force was unemployed, and more than 5,000 banks had closed (Zinn xxxix.) The establishment of employment programs such as the WPA had a two-fold purpose: the jobs programs were meant to spur growth in a crippled American economy and at the same time give hope to the

nation's distressed citizens. The jobs made available by the WPA offered security and hope to those who had lost their means of livelihood as a result of the economic crisis. The WPA programs also helped to focus the attentions of the nation on the future, and to help its citizens unite behind a common goal of recovering national prosperity.

At the same time, as in any period of crisis and upheaval, the events of the 1930s also prompted a taking stock, a reevaluation of what kind of society Americans envisioned for themselves.

The body of work produced by the men and women of the federal theatre and art projects revealed the tensions in American society during a period of rapid change in part driven by great technological advances, of which mass communication was an integral part. Together, the works of the FTP and FAP form a documentary portrait of American perspectives and aspirations during the 1930s.

FTP director Hallie Flanagan wrote that the federal theatre was "part of a tremendous rethinking, re dreaming, and rebuilding of America" (Zinn 178). She linked the federal theatre workers with the broader national rebuilding efforts underway, not just with the other WPA cultural programs but

...with the thousands of men building roads and bridges and sewers; one with the doctors and nurses giving clinical aid to a million destitute men, women, and children; one with workers carrying traveling libraries to desolate areas; one with scientists studying mosquito control and reforestation and swamp drainage and soil erosion (qtd. in Zinn 178-179).

The works of the FTP and FAP demonstrate the importance of the arts as a forum for the nation's public discourse. They highlight how the process of communication

itself is intricately woven into the vary fabric of society—it is inseparable from the nation’s cultural context.

Newspapers, visual images, and the theatre represent three major forums where vital cultural communication takes place. That the FTP would include in its missions a Living Newspaper unit speaks to the cultural expectations during the time of the Great Depression. The Living Newspaper plays show how the idea and image of the newspaper was connected to other cultural vehicles of communication. In their use of the newspaper as a public square for the presentation of information and the debate of ideas, the Living Newspaper plays may also suggest—at least to the FTP workers-- what the mainstream media were not providing to the public in their coverage of the causes, consequences, and way forward out of the Depression.

Many scholars have written of the cultural impact of mass media on society. James Carey articulated his views on the relationship of mass communication to other cultural institutions and the crucial function it plays in the both the transformation and maintenance of cultural attitudes, traditions, and beliefs (Carey, *Communication* 1992). Both Carey and historian Warren Susman addressed the communication revolution of the early 20th century and the effects of that revolution on American society. Carey’s work examined the integral role of communication in the formation and maintenance of culture over time. Susman’s work studied the pivotal period of the 1930s and 1940s when the communications revolution converged with a turbulent period in the United States’ economic and political history. He wrote of the impact of the communications revolution and the accelerated changes it brought to society.

Hanno Hardt has observed the role artists play in connecting newspapers to the larger cultural landscape (1998). Writing of the 1930s, Hardt noted the “increasing presence of media products in the public sphere” and the depictions of newspapers by artists observing and commenting on the role played by the press in the cultural and social changes of the Depression era. Newspapers, he wrote, “were still a universal medium of information and entertainment during this period...” still broadly inclusive in appeal as opposed to the more exclusive appeal characteristic of contemporary media marketing strategies (54).

In his essay “Publicity for the Depression” (Covert, Stevens, eds. 1984), James Boylan argued that the mainstream newspapers during the 1930s failed in their responsibility to the American public in their unwillingness to admit the Depression was as serious as it really was (to avoid making things worse) and by equating the nation’s business interests with those of the larger community. In doing so, they seriously limited the scope of discussion available to the reading public on the analysis of and possible solutions to the economic Depression. Serious and innovative discussion was more likely to be found in the alternative print media of the era, for example, in periodicals such as *The Nation* or *The New Republic*. Boylan’s argument echoes press critiques of the period including George Seldes in his 1938 essay “House of Lords” (McChesney and Scott 35-46) and Max Lerner’s “Propaganda for a Golden Age” published in *The Nation* in 1939 (Zinn 179-186). Hardt argues that including visual texts in mass media historical inquiry raises “creative thought and artistic expressions to the level of documentary evidence with promises of enriching the comprehension of individual expression in advancing the

idea of a cultural history of journalism (42).” In doing so, he highlighted the cultural impact of the posters produced by the FAP.

William Stott has also argued that the WPA cultural programs belong to American documentary tradition. In *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (3-4), Stott links the FTP Living Newspaper plays to a larger documentary movement of the 1930s. He argues that the crisis of the 1930s and the failure of mainstream media to articulate the concerns of and challenges facing the America people brought about an urgent, passionate, and energetic response in a documentary movement new to American culture. And in this movement he places the FTP Living Newspapers as a vital part.

The above studies inform this study exploring the Living Newspapers in the context of mass media history and American cultural heritage.

Purpose

This study, then, seeks to examine the Living Newspaper plays as forms of cultural communication that document ideas about progress and the relationship of citizens to their government in 1930s America. Specifically, this research is a case study of two of the Living Newspaper plays, *One Third of a Nation* and *Power*.

Nation focuses on the causes of and solutions to slum housing in the United States.

(The play’s title is taken from Roosevelt’s second inaugural speech.) And *Power* has as its subject the electrification of rural America and the New Deal’s Tennessee

Valley Authority public utility project. This study will also include examination of some of the publicity posters designed for these two plays by FAP artists.

This research examines written and visual texts of the Living Newspaper plays in their historical and cultural contexts. It does so within the larger theoretical framework of cultural studies and is mainly guided by the work of James Carey and Warren Susman. It draws as well on the contributions of literary studies as they relate to the study of larger cultural issues.

Research questions

Specifically this study asks: (1) How did the Living Newspapers relate to other mass media of the period? (2) What attitudes and ideas did the plays and their related publicity posters convey about technology as a component of a democratic society? (3) What attitudes and ideas did they convey about the role of citizens and their expectations of government?

Sources

Primary source materials used in this study include the texts of the plays and posters, plus related publications of the Federal Theatre Project and the WPA, also newspaper and periodical articles of the period; memoirs and other items of the WPA cultural programs. Secondary sources include related biographies and historical studies about the WPA theatre and arts programs and works related to the culture of 1930s America.

Chapter 2—Historical Background of the Depression; the Works

Progress Administration Programs

When President Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, the nation was in the depths of an unprecedented failure of the American free enterprise system. Banks and businesses had failed, unemployment was growing. The severe economic hardships and their consequential disruption of the social order created a climate of fear, anxiety and despair. Events abroad—Japanese aggression against China and the rise of Nazism in Germany—only served to augment the sense of a nation and world in crisis.

In the New Deal, Roosevelt recognized that a crisis of confidence in the economic system of the country meant a crisis of confidence in the democratic system itself. New Deal programs were designed to restore economic vitality—and just as importantly, economic and social justice—to insure survival of not only the capitalist system but also of the nation’s democratic way of life. According to Edsforth, “at the heart of the New Deal reform program was a liberal commitment to make federally guaranteed economic security a political right for every American citizen (2).” The nation could only prosper if all its citizens enjoyed a basic protection from poverty and hunger. But the social changes went beyond providing for basic needs. The New Deal established a framework of programs designed to provide economic fairness and basic economic security to the American people.

The Works Progress Administration

In his annual address to Congress in 1935, Roosevelt proposed his plan to reinvigorate the economic health of the nation. He proposed a new direction that would focus on the problems of labor, the unemployed, and agriculture (Rauch 130). In laying out his vision for national renewal, he said “among our objectives I place the security of the men, women, and children of the nation first (Rauch 131).” He spoke of the need to provide through legislative action “the security of a livelihood through the better use of the national resources of the land in which we live,” the “security against the major hazards and vicissitudes of life” and “the security of decent homes (Rauch 131).” Thus he signaled his intent to establish major programs designed to relieve the chronic economic problems facing the nation, including the public employment program called the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Part of the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, the WPA began operation in 1935. Two government documents offer assessments of the purpose, scope, and accomplishments of the WPA programs. They include the 1938 *Inventory: An Appraisal of Results of the Works Progress Administration* by WPA administrator Harry L. Hopkins, and the *Final Report of the WPA Program 1935-43* (U.S. Federal Works Agency, 1943). In his report, Hopkins described the employment woes of the country as coming from two intertwined causes: the nature of work in the United States had been changing as workers who had been independent craftsmen who owned their own means of production were replaced by machines in factories. Businesses became larger with ownership further removed from the workers and the communities where they lived; private employment was no longer local in character (Hopkins, U.S. Works Projects, *Inventory* 3).” Secondly, relief work had been solely

the responsibility of local governments and agencies, whose resources were overwhelmed by the massive unemployment created by the 1929 stock market crash and its aftermath (U.S. Federal Works, *Final Report* 3). Thus the unemployment was a result of structural changes occurring in the economy that were greatly exacerbated by the onset of the Great Depression.

The WPA's objectives were, according to Hopkins, to provide public employment to those in need of work and through that work provide needed public services and improvements.

WPA projects covered a wide variety of programs across the economic and employment spectrum in every state of the union and according to local need.

Projects included roads and bridges, public buildings, parks and playgrounds, water and sewers, production of goods, natural resource conservation, health, and aviation.

They included preservation of historical sites, education, library services, historical surveys and records, science and research, recreation, and disaster relief. In a time of economic crisis, the WPA met real community needs, and provided desperately needed wages and job training.

The Arts Programs

But the WPA programs went beyond the obvious public works programs that rebuilt roads, planted trees, or constructed new schools. Arguing "artists can get just as hungry as laborers (*Inventory* 77)" Hopkins supported the investment of WPA funds in the arts as well. Collectively known as Project Number One, the federal arts programs included projects in art, music, writing, and theatre.

Though representing only about 2% of the total WPA budget, the arts programs of the WPA left a lasting legacy of works which preserved, explored, examined, and celebrated the richness and variety of cultural expression in the United States.

The Federal Writers' Project (FWP) employed at its peak about 6,000 persons. The FWP's best known works were an ambitious series of travel guides, called the American Guide Series. Travel guides were produced for all 48 states, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia, plus numerous other local, regional, town, and city guides. Other works were compiled on specific national groups, American folklore, and from slave narratives. The FWP guides captured for posterity the flavor and character of American regional history and were well received by the public and critics alike (*Inventory* 85-86).

The Federal Music Project (FMP) at one time employed as many as 16,000 people. They were organized into 40 symphony orchestras and about 80 smaller orchestras, 69 bands, 52 dance orchestras, 30 opera and choral units and other vocal and choral groups. Over the life of the project, the musicians gave about 4,500 performances each month, with a combined audience of more than 3,100,000 concertgoers. Besides performing musicians, the WPA music project employed up to 1,600 music teachers whose classes were attended by an average of 140,000 persons monthly. The music project also provided unprecedented exposure to works by new and unknown American composers, making it possible for large audiences to hear native music performed that they might not otherwise have heard (*Inventory* 73-74).

The Federal Art Project (FAP) at its height employed more than 5,000 people and operated in 39 states, in New York City, and in Washington, D.C. (*Inventory* 81).

Artists of the FAP produced murals for public buildings, taught art classes, put on art exhibits, established art galleries and community art centers (e.g., the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis). They created myriad works of sculpture, oil paintings, wood carvings, prints, posters, and more FAP workers compiled the *Index of American Design*, which provided a “pictorial record of the nation’s decorative, provincial, and folk arts from the early 17th Century to the close of the 19th Century (*Inventory* 82).” The FAP also produced works that supported the endeavors of other WPA programs, such as conservation posters, posters for public health campaigns, and publicity posters for Federal Theatre Project plays.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was intended to revive an art form hit hard by the Depression and by the advent of rival mass media entertainment gaining in popularity (i.e., film and radio). The FTP’s mission was to create new audiences and bring affordable theatre to people who’d never seen a play.

The FTP produced many forms of theatrical entertainment, including circuses, puppet shows, musical comedies, light opera (such as Gilbert and Sullivan) and classical theatre, such as the works of Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, George Bernard Shaw, and Eugene O’Neill. Under the expansive vision of FTP national director, Hallie Flanagan, the FTP exposed new audiences to enduring classics, offered light entertainment at a time when the nation’s citizens were in need of laughter, and engaged citizens from all walks of life in debates about the problems the country faced and how best to solve them.

The FTP included dance groups, youth theatre with plays such as *Pinocchio* and *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, and radio shows. FTP writers penned new works that

spotlighted major historical figures in American culture such as Abraham Lincoln, Davy Crockett, and folklore heroes like Paul Bunyan (Brown, *The FTP: A Catalog* xv). The Living Newspaper plays were original works that explored in great detail and with innovative techniques complex current national problems.

In addition to producing plays the FTP activities included involvement in education, therapy, and prison welfare (*Inventory* 78). In the plays it produced, Hopkins said, the FTP “delved deeply into rich historical aspects of national development [and] faced controversial current problems with arresting courage (78).”

The FTP put on an average of 2,833 performances each month, averaging more than a million in monthly attendance. Most (65%) of the shows were free; fees were nominal when charged. Performance venues included “city theatres, community halls, tents, schools, prisons, armories, churches, parks, hospitals, and CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camps.” At its peak, the FTP employed 12,700 “actors, designers, playwrights, theatre musicians, stagehands, ushers, maintenance workers, and box office, accounting, and secretarial people (*Inventory* 77).”

The FTP was not meant to be competitive with the commercial theatre but instead was meant to complement, support, and stimulate commercial theatre activities (Flanagan, *Arena* 29). The FTP introduced innovative theatre forms and production techniques. It was meant, during these hard economic times, to preserve the theatre workers’ knowledge, skills, training, and talent as a national asset and for their eventual return to the commercial theatre enterprise. Hopkins noted that more than 1,500 workers returned to work in the private theatre, and in the 1937-38 season, many Broadway casts included actors from the FTP (*Inventory* 78).

The driving vision behind the ambitious goals for the federal theatre was Vassar professor Hallie Flanagan. Hopkins wanted someone who understood American theatre in the broadest sense. “This is an American job,” Hopkins said, “not just a New York job. I want someone who knows and cares about other parts of the country (Flanagan, *Arena* 20).”

Like Hopkins, Flanagan came from the Midwest. She was born in South Dakota, educated in Iowa and Massachusetts. At the time she accepted the post as FTP national director, she said she had traveled in every state of the union, lived in big cities like Chicago, Detroit and St. Louis, and small towns (Flanagan, *Arena* 21). She had worked at Grinnell College where she both wrote and directed plays, held theatre positions at the University of Iowa and at Harvard. Her travels had taken her to Europe where she studied their theatre and the role that governments had played through history in support of the theatre arts. She had taught and directed the Vassar Experimental Theatre before signing on with the FTP.

Both Flanagan and Hopkins held a similar philosophy, born of shared experience and training, about the integral importance of the arts in society. Both had studied at Grinnell College under a college president who “regarded art, music, and the theatre as necessary and normal expressions of life (Flanagan, *Arena* 7).”

Flanagan’s hope for a national theatre program encompassed not only artistic aspirations but also her belief in theatre as a social force. She believed firmly and enthusiastically in the integration of the theatre into the social fabric of the nation, and that the theatre had an essential role to play in shedding light on important issues of civic life and in stimulating public discourse. In contemplating the place of the

FTP in the overall goals of the New Deal, she asked “what part could art play in that program? Could we, through the power of theatre, spotlight the tenements and thus help in the plan to build decent houses for all people? Could we, through actors and artists, who have themselves known privation, carry music and plays to children in city parks, and art galleries to little towns? Were not happy people at work the greatest bulwark of democracy (Flanagan, *Arena* 27)?”

She recognized, too, the crucial role that federal theatre could play not only as a lifeline for individual artists, but as a healing force for the nation as a whole during the harsh years of the Depression. The arts projects, she said, addressed not only the physical hunger, but “the hunger of millions of Americans for music, plays, pictures, and books... (Flanagan, *Arena* 9).”

Flanagan believed the theatre must keep pace with the changing times and the FTP was a chance to push American theatre to expand in new directions with the country’s changing future. “We live in a changing world; man is whispering through space, soaring to the stars in ships, flinging miles of steel and glass into the air. Shall the theatre continue to huddle in the confines of a painted box set? The movies, in their kaleidoscope speed a juxtaposition of external objects and internal emotions are seeking to find visible and audible expression for the tempo and the psychology of our time. The stage must experiment... (Flanagan, *Arena* 45-46).”

In addition to finding new forms of expression that would allow the theatre to hold its own against newer forms for mass media like the cinema, Flanagan felt just as strongly that the theatre must have a voice in the national conversation on the issues of the day. “In an age of terrific implications as to wealth and poverty, as to the

function of government, as to peace and war, as to the relation of the artist to all those forces, the theatre must grow up. The theatre must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, or the changing social order will ignore, and rightly, the theatre (45-46).”

The Living Newspaper Plays

The Living Newspaper plays were original productions of the FTP that were dramatized news—documentaries really—on pressing social issues “that informed the audience of the size, nature, and origin of social problems, and then called for specific action to solve it (J. O’Connor 8).” The plays covered a broad range of topics that included subjects such as the plight of the American farmer (*Triple A Plowed Under*), rural electrification (*Power*), housing for the poor (*One Third of a Nation*), public health (*Spirochete*), and a review of the year’s major news stories (1935). Sponsored by the New York Newspaper Guild, the living newspaper staff organization was set up like a city newsroom, with an editor-in-chief, managing editor, city editor, reporters and copy readers (Flanagan, *Arena* 65). Story material for the plays was drawn from newspaper accounts, government reports, court decisions, congressional hearings—all the resources that are the material of civic life and historical record. The Living Newspaper plays were by far the most controversial works of the Federal Theatre Project. Their relevance to the nation’s political battles provided ammunition to those critics in Congress who thought the government had no business providing direct subsidies to the arts, and were opposed to New Deal programs. The plays

became the focal point in the controversies that resulted in Congress's withdrawal of funding for the FTP in 1939.

The FTP drew praise from cultural critics, artists, audiences, and many government officials. But the FTP's visibility and bold willingness to tackle hot-button topics also made it a target of critics of New Deal programs and the Roosevelt Administration.

Not all FTP ventures met with approval from the White House and some productions ran into trouble with local WPA administrators. An early Living Newspaper play, *Ethiopia*, was withdrawn on orders from the White House, over fears the play's portrayal of Haile Sellassie would cause trouble for United States' relations with that government. In Chicago, the play *Model Tenement* was closed by the city WPA, and *Hymn to the Rising Sun* was shut down by the state WPA (Brown, *The FTP: A Catalog* xvi). Though Flanagan and the staff of the FTP grew more successful in their goal to establish regional theatre throughout the country, political forces signaled the FTP's future was in danger.

In August 1938, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) under the chairmanship of Texas congressman Martin Dies began to hold hearings to "investigate charges of 'un—American propaganda activities' in the country as a whole. According to Brown (*The FTP: A Catalog* xxi), the committee's attentions were soon drawn to the highly visible Federal Theatre Project. A small group of FTP personnel had charged the project was controlled by Communists with an agenda beyond the provision of relief. One committee member, J. Parnell from New Jersey, charged in a press conference that the FTP was "serving a branch of the Communistic

organization” and was “infested with radicals from top to bottom (Brown, *The FTP: A Catalog* xxi-xxii). “ Flanagan herself was accused of communist sympathies, seemingly evidenced by her trip to Russia in 1926 and the theatre’s attention to issues concerning labor and worker’s rights (Brown, *The FTP: A Catalog* xxii).

Though she repeatedly requested it, Flanagan was denied the chance to testify before HUAC. Her staff had prepared a 250-page brief to answer charges and accusations brought against the FTP in congressional hearings. It was not until December 1938 that Flanagan was finally called to testify. On the day she appeared to give her testimony the committee dismissed her by noon and did not bother to enter the FTP brief provided to the committee into the *Congressional Record* (Brown, *The FTP: A Catalog* xxiii).

Initially, the WPA did not take seriously the threats to the FTP by the HUAC. The FTP tried a last ditch effort to mount a campaign of support to save the Federal Theatre Project, but to no avail. The WPA administration chose not to fight the inevitable, given the small portion of the WPA programs that the FTP represented, and decided not to do battle for its continuation (Brown, *The FTP: A Catalog* xxiii).

The 1939 WPA budget legislation included money for the FTP in the Senate version but not in the version proposed by the House of Representatives. FTP funding did not survive the compromise bill, and operation of the FTP ended in 1939 just four years after it began. In a final performance, the cast of *Pinocchio* allowed Pinocchio to die at the end of the play, and the lights went out on the Federal Theatre Project.

Though the Federal Theatre Project did not survive, Flanagan felt it had accomplished much for the theatre in general and had made a compelling argument for the place of the arts in American life. She summarized its achievements, writing that:

...”millions of Americans want to go to the theatre if brought geographically and financially within their range. These public theatres explored sources of native American life and used this material in regional drama. They launched a nationwide theatre for our own Negro race. They added impetus to the theatre for children and to religious drama. They developed...new uses for theatre talents in the fields of education, therapeutics, diagnosis, social, and community work. They gave opportunity to hundreds of dramatists, actors, composers, designers. They created new plays and did them in new ways and left a mark, as critics have repeatedly pointed out on the dramatic pattern of our age.” (*Arena* 372)

But the greatest significance of the FTP was its creation of new audiences. Flanagan argued for the vital role a vibrant regionally-based public theatre could play in maintaining a healthy democratic society. In order for citizens to participate fully in the democratic process, they must understand, and “the theatre is one of the great mediums of understanding (*Arena* 372).” She went on to argue a point that could be just as relevant in today’s world: “Is not the need for accurate and brilliant means of communication particularly urgent today, when conflicting ideas of government are contending for hemispheres (*Arena* 372-373)?” Though the FTP had ended, its mission, Flanagan felt, remained pertinent and necessary.

Chapter 3—Literature Review

This section is not an exhaustive review of studies that have been done of the WPA cultural projects, or even of those studies pertaining only to the Federal Theatre Project, all of which are too numerous to include here. Instead, this review will focus on those works relevant to the WPA cultural programs and pertinent to the questions posed by this current study.

The WPA cultural projects have received attention from scholars in diverse disciplines such as theatre, literature, cultural studies, and history. There has been little attention paid to the WPA programs by scholars of journalism history and mass communication. But the WPA cultural projects, and in this case the Federal Theatre Project in particular, offer rich opportunity for examination of these programs from a communications perspective.

In her introduction to *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions*, Lorraine Brown offered several reasons for the scant attention to the FTP in the years following the Second World War. Among them were the physical inaccessibility of the archives and the political and intellectual Cold War climate post- World War II.

War-time chaos and then the ideological climate of the Cold War years discouraged interest in the controversial program that had drawn fire from the House Un-American Activities Committee. Beyond this, post-modern intellectual thought largely dismissed the importance of the WPA cultural programs' contributions to the nation's artistic legacy.

In 1974, the Library of Congress gave the entire collection on indefinite loan to the Special Collections and Archives of Fenwick Library at George Mason University. Between 1974 and 1986, an extensive cataloguing project of Federal Theatre Project records resulted in an organized archive of many source materials—such as “posters, play bills, typed scripts and reader’s reports” (*The FTP: A Catalog* viii) –finally made accessible to interested scholars.

It is difficult to produce a chronological account of the development of studies of the WPA cultural projects. The disinterest and lack of access to FTP archives after project closed makes it nearly impossible to trace a trajectory in the development of intellectual interpretations and analyses of the FTP and the other WPA cultural projects. But there is no doubt the projects garnered much attention and critique during the years immediately after the program ended and then again beginning in the 1960’s and 1970’s. A recurrent theme, however, has been the interest in the WPA cultural projects for their role in preserving American traditions and culture, expanding subjects to include a multiplicity of voices which had been seldom heard in American arts, and in the process drawing attention to the diverse American character.

Brown has pointed out how many scholars examining the WPA cultural programs have “focused on the problems inherent in trying to combine art, work-relief, bureaucracy, and politics in the arts projects of the WPA (*The FTP: A Catalog* xxiii-xxiv).” Studies elaborating on these issues include among others *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939* (Matthews 1967), *The New Deal for Artists* (McKinzie 1973), *The Federal Writer’s Project: A Study in Government Patronage of the Arts*

(Penkower 1977). Added to that since Brown's 1986 book where the above works were mentioned is Paul Sporn's *Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Federal Writer's Projects in the Midwest* (1995). And more recently, Susan Quinn's *Furious Improvisation* (2008) provides a spirited description and analysis of the personalities as well as the cultural, economic, and political forces at play that drove both the success and the ultimate demise of the Federal Theatre Project.

Discussions about conflicts in government sponsored arts programs were not new, however. A contemporary study of the FTP entitled *Bread and Circuses* by Willson Whitman pointed out that the multiple purposes of the FTP were inherently sometimes in conflict (135). These multiple aims included relief for unemployed actors and revival of the theatre industry, the provision of low-cost or free theatre entertainment and a "certain amount of education in drama appreciation and even in government (153)."

And what were the conflicts? According to Whitman, preserving the skill of the actors and other theatre professionals might create more skilled employees than the non-FTP theatre could accommodate; the theatre industry in general may be "too gravely ill (135)" to be revived; the FTP's mission to provide low-cost or no-cost theatre fair would be financially unsustainable by the private theatre industry that was unsupported by government dollars. Still, Whitman argued, the FTP was a "major event in theatrical history" and "an event of some importance in the history of the United States (3)." The FTP's ability to adapt productions, organization, and management to the varying regions of the country was absolutely necessary to building a "representative (8)" federal theatre. That the FTP was able to stage notable

productions in places outside New York, on the west coast and places in between was “in itself...a well-nigh incredible achievement (6).”

More recently, Rozenzweig and Melosh in their article “Government and the Arts: Voices from the New Deal Era” (596-608) discuss “past and present voices” and how they are joined in an “ongoing conversation” about the political conflicts inherent in government funding of the arts and the ways in which the historical context of the WPA arts programs and their political impact find resonance in our own times (for example, government funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and money given to artists whose work is deemed by some to be too controversial in nature). Early assessments of the arts projects by historians “applaud the financial and moral support offered to artists during the Great Depression (597-598).” Other historians express doubts about the compatibility of artistic creativity and government bureaucracy, concerned about government interference and the ability of government to serve as the “engine of a national culture (598).” They pointed out that other historians argued the WPA cultural programs like the FTP demonstrated the potential for government involvement in forming national arts programs (598). Art historians were dismissive of the artistic aesthetics of the 1930s and so ignored them for significant consideration as part of the American artistic canon (598-599). Broad cultural histories of the 1930s have paid little specific attention to the location of the New Deal arts projects within their historical cultural context.

McKinzie’s *New Deal for Artists* examines the WPA Federal Art Project, its social and political challenges, critical reception by art critics, the public, and the press, its cultural and artistic legacy, the compatibility of artists and the creative process with

bureaucracy (188), and its implications for models of government patronage of the arts. Of the Federal Arts Project's roots in the social, political, and intellectual climate of the 1930s, McKinzie drew several conclusions. "WPA artists reflected the aesthetic convictions of the 1930s", he said (106), and were inescapably influenced by the regionalists such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, and the social realists, two schools of art which to varying degrees embraced nativism and social comment. He quoted American Midwestern artist Thomas Hart Benton who said that the artistic production of the WPA reflected the roots in the "country wide revival of Americanism" creating art which focused on "the American scene (106)." Artists were drawn into, and treated aesthetically, the national debate reassessing "the nature of American society (106)." The works produced by the artists of the WPA echoed a focus in new historical writing during the 1930s which called into question traditional images of America (106)." Muralists of the WPA treated subjects such as agricultural life, man and nature, history, interpretations of American freedom, and labor, and the nature and meaning of work and its rewards (109).

Of all WPA art units, the "graphic artists had the greatest potential of integrating art and life (118)" noting that "240,000 prints found their way to schools, colleges, libraries, and government offices (118)." In O'Connor's collection of 1930s essays by FAP artists and administrators (*Art for the Millions*), one essayist in "The Poster in Chicago," wrote that "[t]he poster, serving the public, is readily understandable to the man on the street..." and that "[t]he poster performs the same service as the newspaper, the radio, and movies, and is as powerful an organ of information, at the same time providing an enjoyable experience (181)." FAP director Folger Cahill

drew on the educator John Dewey's ideas when linking art to the experience of daily life when he wrote "it is the artist...who keeps alive our ability to experience the common world in its fullness." Cahill wrote of a "usable past that is a powerful link in establishing the continuity of our culture (43)." Of the integral role that art plays in making sense and meaning out of our cultural experience, Cahill wrote: "American art today is searching for methods which will guide the American people in bringing order, design, and harmony into the environments created by our society, and it is searching for forms and symbols and allegories which will reveal the character of American life and the American people." Thus Cahill links past and future and the role that the arts play in that communicating, or conversation, of the meaning of our past and the imagining of our future, in which art becomes communication, and (quoting Dewey again) where the experience of art helps to create a "free and enriching communion" in American democratic life (43).

The Future as Depicted in WPA Murals

Art provides a way of publicly exploring the values, beliefs, and ideas important to a society at any given point in time, and the Depression-era United States was no exception to this national conversation.

Art historian Karal Ann Marling explored New Deal murals for representations of the future and interpretations of the past in her article "A Note on New Deal Iconography: Futurology and the Historical Myth." Marling argues that those concepts often expressed and those rarely expressed were equally important in exploring meaning in the art of the 1930s, especially "when the artistic and political

leaders of the epoch under review professed, as did the administrators of the New Deal art programs, to be moved by populist aspirations and so to reflect the national consciousness (423).” Examining government art program murals, could help “define those issues of paramount importance to patron, painter, and art audience in the 1930s (424).” Behind those murals, the article argued, is a belief, and the Depression-era murals reflected 20th Century America’s preoccupation with social issues.

Under the auspices of the Treasury Department’s Section of Painting and Sculpture, more than one thousand murals were installed in public buildings across the country, primarily post offices, where they could be viewed as people went about their daily business (425). Marling’s study found national history a frequent topic of the murals. Marling acknowledged that practical reasons may have driven the emphasis on historical subjects. (Historical topics, for example, may have been considered least likely to invite controversy in project already subject to close scrutiny by the public and lawmakers alike.) Furthermore, familiar local historical themes may have been the easiest subjects on which to achieve consensus by local residents (425-426). But she argued that practical considerations could not entirely account for the popularity of historical themes. Similar themes also proved popular in the murals of the WPA Federal Art Project. She quoted F. O’Connor who, in *Art for the Millions*, described the appeal of the historical narrative during a period of profound national crisis:

The fall from economic grace which so shocked the American people and induced in so many millions of unemployed a profound sense of self-doubt and inadequacy, engendered a turning back to a past when men presumably did things right.... This renewed interest during the Depression years in the past as a foundation for the present is symbolized by the establishment of the National Archives during the 1930’s and embodied in the publication of such scholarly series as the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1928-36) and the

History of American Life (1928-44). It is also behind many projects undertaken by the cultural programs of the WPA. (Marling 426)

Marling uses Susman's analysis of the 1930s, *Culture and Commitment*, to explore the forms in which can be discovered the symbols people used to cope with their world (427) and discover a usable past--that is, an historical narrative that helped to define and make sense of the present and provide a map to constructing the future. In her study of the iconographical subjects and images of the Treasury department murals, Marling argued that in the murals' historical depictions of the American experience, fears could be "released, externalized, and mitigated (433)." In this way, the mural became an "emotive, mystical act of faith in America's capacity to survive (433)." These treatments of the "usable past show how the underlying themes of survival and continuity gave rise to ...a futurological orientation in the art of the New Deal (433)."

Creating Meaning from Newspapers in the 1930s

The Living Newspaper plays of the WPA Federal Theatre Project open a 1930s window on to one American theatre's interpretation of the role of the newspaper in American society. In the Living Newspaper plays, the users, the readers, took news stories appearing in the dailies and shaped them and used them to create an original narrative that told the story of Americans the Depression. They illuminated the story behind the headlines and proposed solutions to the nation's problems, sometimes, not surprisingly, to be achieved through New Deal initiatives.

In *News for All*, a study of the way readers of newspapers have created meanings that shaped American life, Leonard observed that "Americans had been talking back to

their press and editing it in their own ways since the days of Benjamin Franklin (xiii).” News, he argues, has interpretive communities and settings, shaped by how readers read these texts. How readers used these texts is essential to understanding what the news has meant to different communities in American national life (xii-xiii). Democratization of the news takes on a new and interesting meaning in Leonard’s description of how poor families in the 1930s papered their walls with the pages of newspapers. A conventional interpretation, highlighted by traditional interpretations of documentary photographers such as Margaret Bourke-White, would suggest that the newspapers served to point out the contrast between the unobtainable luxuries and lifestyles portrayed in the newspaper ads and illustrations with the harsh deprivations of the rural American South of the 1930s. But Leonard argued the choice and placement of the stories and illustrations in the rural homes of Depression-era families reflected an appropriation of the news by ordinary citizens, the creation of a personal narrative from public images and events, claimed their place in the national arena. “Furnishing with media,” he argues, “is a declaration that one is connected to a society. Here are Americans who have gained stature and pleasure with news. These walls proclaim, not despair (115).”

Hanno Hardt’s “Constructing History: Artists, Urban Culture, and the Image of Newspapers in 1930s America (1998)” explored the representation of newspapers in the visual arts in order to establish the arts as (often overlooked) sources for understanding the cultural history of the press. Studying the arts for their representations of newspapers, he contends, helps us to understand “the location of media in the social landscape (42).” He argues that treating artistic expression as

“documentary evidence” offers the opportunity to enrich our “comprehension of societal practices” and “legitimizes the role of individual expression in advancing the idea of a cultural history of journalism (42).”

Hardt refers to both history and art forms for social communication that contribute to the conceptualization of “the social, cultural, and political practices of society...(42).”

Media historians, he asserts, have ignored portrayals of newspapers in literature and the arts, and instead focused on institutional histories of the press (e.g., technological developments, First Amendment rights). In doing so, they’ve missed the cultural narratives and the insights offered by authors and artists in their responses to and interpretations of the press and role of the press in the context of the larger society (43). In his study of artistic representations of newspapers in 1930s America, Hardt found that newspapers reinforced American values (44), provided a “text for 1930’s America (46);” illustrated the merging of democracy with technology, and argued that newspapers “played a major role in the shaping of an American culture as exponents of progress and salespersons of a better way of life (47).” He also found that artists of the Depression, responding to the crisis engendered by the failures of the capitalist system in the 1930s, “exposed the myth of progress and equality,” by focusing light on the social, economic, and political conditions of the times, and promoted the idea among artists of art as a “tool of liberation (49).” Hardt draws specifically on the posters WPA Federal Art Project to make his point, citing the advances in technical production that helped to move the experience of art from the private spaces such as schools, post offices, and libraries. And in the WPA’s notion of the artist as worker the WPA art project advanced the notion of art as an everyday experience in the

community (52-54).” Hardt also found that the newspapers of the period were “...used to portray the rich and the working classes” and that they “define and document urban life (56-57).” In describing the place of the newspaper in the urban life in the thirties, Hardt said “people acquired and consulted the newspaper as an object of their daily routines, and with a mixture of tradition and ingenuity, as an instrument of surveillance and a source of information and power (58).” In conclusion he argues that “[t]he visual evidence of 1930s printmaking reinforces an impression of the American press as a pervasive democratizing force in society.” The Living Newspaper unit of the WPA Federal Theatre Project, in its goal of placing the issues of the day before the American people in a fact-based theatrical documentary format, also serves to underline the notion of the newspaper as a central institution in the reinforcement and renewal of American democratic ideals.

The WPA Arts Projects as Documentary

The Living Newspaper plays belong to the realm of the performing and literary arts but they also can be considered as a documentary form existing within the larger field of 1930s documentary works. The plays were entertainment, to be sure. But they also were intended to present to Depression audiences factual information in a format designed to shed light on crucial public issues that affected the daily lives of citizens and the life of the nation.

In his 1942 book *On Native Ground*, literary critic Alfred Kazin credited the New Deal and its programs as a major catalyst in the expansion of documentary literature in new directions. Kazin characterized the documentary literature of the New Deal

ear as a “literature of description (492),” a unique form combining camera and prose that in prolific fashion chronicled the American experience. Kazin’s work focused specifically on prose works, and in this “literary use of the camera (495)” were formed works such as *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* by photographer Dorothea Lange and writer Paul S. Taylor and, of course, *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans.

Of the WPA projects, Kazin particularly focused on the contribution of the Federal Writers Project travel guide series. In this extraordinary undertaking, writers fanned out across every state of the nation to produce a vast body of work that painted a portrait of America and Americans unprecedented in its diversity and detail. Of the WPA guides, Kazin had this to say:

More than any other literary form in the thirties, the WPA writers’ project, by illustrating how much so many collective skills could do to uncover the collective history of the country, set the tone of the period. As the first shock of the depression passed, and the social reporters settled down to cover the country with a growing eagerness and interest in the epic unfolding out of their investigations, the WPA guides became...a repository as well as a symbol of the reawakened sense of its own history. (501)

This attempt to assemble and understand the history and contemporary condition of American life found expression as well in the Living Newspaper plays of the Federal Theatre Project. William Stott’s *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* expanded Kazin’s discussion of documentary prose to include, among other things, the work of the Federal Theatre Project. Stott described his book, in part, as a “cultural history” that “surveys the documentary expression of the 1930s and early 1940s, and suggests not only that a documentary movement existed then but that recognition of it is essential to an understanding of American life at the time (ix).”

He also further expands on Kazin's discussion of the 1930s as a period of documentary literature based on a "descriptive nonfiction" driven by conditions of national crisis. Stott, however, goes beyond Kazin's discussion of this genre defined by books (e.g., *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) that combined photographs and written text. Stott argues that Kazin's discussion was too limiting and that "a documentary motive was at work throughout the culture of the time: in the rhetoric of the New Deal and the WPA art projects; in painting, dance, fiction, and theater; in the new media of radio and picture magazines; in popular thought, education, and advertising (4)."

What is a documentary?

Stott provides two definitions of "documentary" that allow for the treatment of the WPA theatre project undertaken by the research in this study. First, he acknowledges the traditional view of what documentary means, i.e., that of material derived from official documents or records such as "written or printed paper bearing the original, official, or legal form of something, and which can be used to furnish decisive evidence or information (6)." But Stott offers a second definition of documentary which focuses on the expression of the human experience in the context of individual lives, "a human document [which] carries and communicates feeling, the raw material of drama (7)." This dual definition is especially suited to the examination of the WPA Federal Theatre Project and its place in the cultural history of the United States: in the way the Living Newspaper plays employed the official, legal documents mentioned above as citations for the historical, legal, and public records that formed the basis for

the information presented in the plays; in the ways the plays used the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of their characters whose individual experiences highlighted the larger public issues under examination in the stories told by the Living Newspaper plays. “There are two kinds of documents,” Stott summarizes, “or two tendencies within the documentary genre. The first, the more common, gives information to the intellect. The second informs the emotions.” Stott describes a form of documentary that he calls “intermediate documents which “increase our knowledge of public facts, but sharpen it with feeling; put us in touch with the perennial human spirit, but show it struggling in a particular social context at a specific historical moment. They sensitize our intellect (or educate our emotions) about actual life. They are social documents, their use is social documentary...(19).” “Documentary is a radically democratic genre,” Stott argued. “It dignifies the usual and levels the extraordinary. Most often its subject is the common man’s point of view (49).”

Stott asserts that Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project, “expanded the idea of documentary literature (3). This research places the Living Newspaper plays of the FTP in this “intermediate” form of documentary that seeks to inform the intellect as well as move the emotions, and to emphasize the experience of the common citizen in the context of the great public issues of 1930s America.

Chapter 4—Theoretical Foundation

This study has as its theoretical basis an interdisciplinary approach, employing perspectives from cultural history, communication studies, anthropology, and literary studies. It will incorporate the cultural history theory of Warren I. Susman, who had a particular focus on the American culture of the 1930's and 1940's. It will draw from mass communication theory the thinking of James Carey on communication as a study of culture. Finally, this study will also be informed by a literary studies approach to the study of culture and cultural history.

James Carey and Communication as Culture

Three decades ago, communications scholar James Carey wrote an article critiquing the path journalism history had followed to that point and outlined an alternative path he felt was essential to expanding and revitalizing journalism history research. Journalism studies were beholden to the American social science thought and it's primarily "scientific and ahistorical character (Carey, *Problem of Journalism* 3)." Although this social science stream of research had established a foundation for mass communication studies to which all of the field's scholars were indebted, he argued the field had become stagnant by limiting itself to the narrow constructs of the scientific method. While valuable in itself, this method left out ways of perception that could not be answered, totally, by the paths of inquiry required by the conventions of science. Furthermore, journalism history had been weighed heavily toward a linear 'march of progress' theory of historical studies, a view of journalistic development as a "slow, steady expansion of freedom and knowledge" that

emphasized “the expansion of individual rights” and more recently, “the public’s right to know (4).” It was an avenue of research conceptualized as the study of “large, impersonal forces (4)” affecting the press, and “aimed at reconstructing the events, actions, and institutions and organizations of the past (4).”

But, Carey argued, the cultural dimension of journalism history goes beyond the study of the organizations, institutions, and major figures of the journalism field. Carey defined cultural history as “not concerned merely with events but with the thoughts behind them (4).” The aim of cultural historians, then, is the “recovery of past forms of imagination, of historical consciousness (4).” To gain a deeper and broader understanding of the events of history, we must attempt to reconstruct the “attitudes, emotions, motives, and expectations (4)” that formed the actors in these historical events. What we would be trying to get is: “how did it feel to live and act in a particular period of human history (4)?”

Carey argued that the central story that journalism scholars had to tell was the history of reporting. In making his case, Carey described the practice of journalism as both a cultural and a literary act (5). A journalistic report, he asserts, is parallel to other literary and cultural efforts, in that it provides a way to “size up situations, names elements and names them in a way that contains an attitude toward them (5).” In this way, journalism “provides audiences with models for action and feeling” a quality he said it shared with other literary acts (5).

In *Communication as Culture*, Carey offers two views of communication: first, the transmission view of communication; and second, the ritual view. The transmission view, Carey argued, is the most common definition particularly industrial societies

such as ours, and means the imparting, or sending, and distribution of information to others. “Our basic orientation to communication remains grounded, at the deepest roots of our thinking, in the idea of transmission: communication is a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people (15).” The ritual view, he argued, is rooted in much older human traditions, and is “directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs (18).” These shared beliefs, Carey said, are embodied in the modes of cultural expression: the performing arts such as dance and plays, in architecture, in news stories, in speech. In Carey’s approach, a newspaper is not just a means of sending and acquiring information, although it is that: it is also “a situation in which... a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed (20).” Newspapers then can be viewed as a cultural text, much in the same way that a novel, a play, or a politician’s speech could be. And, Carey argued, news is “a historic reality... a form of culture invented by a particular class at a particular point in time (21).” In the ritual view of communication, Carey contended, news is not information but a form of drama:

“It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action; it exists solely in historical time; and it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it.” (21)

Carey does not view the transmission and ritual views of communication as negating each other. Rather, the processes of transmission communication can best be understood within the framework of the ritual communication view and the broader, underlying cultural forces at work at any given point in time. “Communication,”

Carey says, “is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed (23).”

Carey advised the communication scholar to look to other academic fields such as science, anthropology, religion, and literature for the intellectual ideas that could expand and enrich the study of the meaning and place of communication in human experience (23). On the contributions of the arts to the study of communication, for example, Carey said “[a]rt...can take the sound of the sea, the intonation of the voice, the texture of a fabric, the design of a face, the play of light upon a landscape, and wrench these ordinary phenomena out of the backdrop of existence and force them into the foreground of consideration (24).”

The link between “communication” and “community” is central to the ritual communication view, and is entwined with the daily activities of ordinary human life. Thus, the act of communicating embraces “conversations, conveying instructions, being entertained, sustaining debate and discussion, acquiring information.” So, the act of communication is part of the total human experience and the understanding of communication cannot be divorced from the activities of human life in general (33).

Carey described three strategies for the study of communication: the first treats the study as a behavioral science; the second, as a formal science; the third, as a cultural science. It is this third strategy that concerns this study of the WPA Living Newspaper plays.

A cultural science views human activities as text to be studied. These texts, Carey argued, are interpretations, and the task is “like that of a literary critic...to interpret

the interpretations.” Communications must be considered in the context of the larger historical and social context in which it exists in order to be most effective in our understanding of people and their experiences at a particular point in time (65).

Also relevant to this study of the Living Newspaper plays, their topics, and the views they express, is Carey’s discussion of the “history of the future (173)”, that is, the idea of the future as expressed in the past. In *Communication as Culture*, Carey devotes a section to the ways in which the future has been regarded in American cultural life. The passage below is included as it is pertinent to the understanding of how one such cultural vehicle, the Living Newspapers, envisioned a new social order growing out of the economic failures of the 1930s.

First, the future is often regarded as cause for a revitalization of optimism, an exhortation to the public to keep “faith,” and is embodied in commemorative expositions of progress, world fairs, oratorical invocations, and the declaration of national and international goals. Second, the future in the politics of literary prophecy, is attractively portrayed as the fulfillment of a particular ideology or idealism. The past and present are rewritten to evidence a momentous changing of the times in which particular policies and technologies will yield a way out of current dilemmas, and a new age of peace, democracy, and ecological harmony will reign. (174)

Warren Susman and Cultural History

The Living Newspaper plays of the New Deal’s Federal Theatre Project came into being at a pivotal time in United States history. It was a time of profound structural changes taking place in American culture intertwined with the immediate economic crisis of the Great Depression. Like the New Deal program of which they were a part, the Living Newspaper plays were inextricably bound to the culture of their times, gave voice to the cultural tensions that characterized the 1930s and made use

of the nation's history to reshape American identity and define the nation's goals. The plays reflected profound uncertainties about the present as well as lofty hopes for the nation's future. In their chronicling of important issues facing the American people during the Depression, the Living Newspaper plays both mirrored and made use of the images, concepts, and perceived cultural role of mass communication and technology that were changing the way people viewed the world around them. Cultural historian Warren Susman characterized the 20th Century as an era of conflict between two cultural forces—an old order clashing and combining with the new to reshape the American cultural landscape with far reaching effects on the daily lives of the nation's citizens (*Culture as History* xx). The old order stressed the virtues of the individual, moral qualities, scarcity, hard work, limitations, and self denial. The new order, the “culture of abundance” (xx), was one of emphasis on personality, stressed leisure, play, recreation, and self-fulfillment, immediate gratification, public relations, and publicity. There was a new emphasis on consuming, buying, and spending. The notion of the consumer achieved a new prominence in the American economic order and indeed became central to the way that order was conceptualized (xxiv).

Susman argued that ideas about what constituted the good life in 20th Century United States were founded on the notion of a ‘culture of abundance’ that began to take hold in the early part of the century. Furthermore, technological changes, along with new sources of energy, made possible the “amazingly rapid movement of people, goods, services, and ideas (xx)” in the 1920's and 1930s and were a major force in the creation of this vision of an abundant way of life, profoundly altering life's daily

patterns and our assumptions about what characterized the good society. The study of public opinion moved to the forefront as a way to ascertain and influence thoughts, attitudes, and values and ways to affect belief and behavior in American culture.

This vision of abundance often reflected a utopian notion, Susman said (xxix). Many saw in its promise a world where it was possible to address society's ills and shortcomings, to create a more democratic sharing of society's abundance among all of its citizens, and change America's very notions about what was possible. The Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression understood and made effective use of the idea of "cultural abundance" in its use of symbolic language to inspire, motivate, and create a vision for renewing Americans' hope and belief in the future. Though the country was in the depths of the Depression, Roosevelt believed in and argued for the vision of an abundant life in his speeches to the American people (xxiv). In the Living Newspaper plays we will see how the culture of abundance was embraced, and how the plays argued for public programs and remedies beyond that adopted by the nation's legislative bodies.

In *Culture as History*, Susman proposes two types of societies. One is a status or community society, where the role of myth serves as cohesive force which provides "collective dreams of the society about the past, present and future in the same instant(8)." The other is a contract or associational society, which demands rational explanations for the prevailing social order. History helps to "explain the origin, the nature, and the function of various institutions and their interaction (8)." By bringing

order to our ideas about ourselves and our past, history helps form a political philosophy that both explains the past and points to a way to change the future (8).

According to Susman, no society is purely a status or a contract society. Myth exists in a contract society, but the myths are multiplied, and conflict more dramatically than they would in an ideal status society. In fact, it is this point of convergence where history and myth come together that Susman said provides the key to the central tensions within a culture, and this meeting ground is where much a culture's story is told. The two systems explain the dynamic conflict over values in the 20th Century. No one system is entirely dominant, but the two world views jostled against each other, played off one another, and became the subtext for public discourse in the 20th Century. Susman argued, however, that the culture of abundance was in the ascendant, and this new way of looking at the world during the first half of the 1900's was in large part ushered in by a period of history referred to as the "communications revolution (257)."

Susman and the Communications Revolution

"The period from 1920-1940," Susman wrote, " is characteristically read in terms of dramatic tensions that shaped our culture" (268) in which the changes wrought by communications played a significant role. Susman asserts that in fact, Americans began to think of themselves during this time as living in a communications culture. It was also a period in which the study of communications as an academic field came into its own (268; 260).

But acceptance of this new world facilitated by advancements in communications was not without doubts about the new way of life being created. Fears about the new world wrought by communications both competed and combined with optimism about expanding possibilities (259).

The effects on society of the communications revolution were profound: consciousness was altered, perceptions of time and space were changed forever, new cultural forms developed and older forms were reshaped continuously. Changes in the American way of life were sweeping, as the nation experienced changes in the ways people lived and died, worked and played, formed new ideas about the home, and expanded roles for women.

New cultural forms were created by the communications revolution, and included new forms of literary and visual texts such as comics, posters, photographs, magazines, advertising, and motion pictures; and new ways of moving through space and connecting with others, such as automobiles, radio, and the telephone (x).

Communication *is* culture, Susman argued, and it is at the core of culture and of life (252). To understand the role communication plays, it is crucial to consider the significance of the larger cultural context in which the communication occurs, to think, “ecologically,” as it were (253).

The 1930's: Culture and Commitment

Overlaying this period of great change in modes and forms of communication were the profound re-evaluation and redefining taking place in the nation's public discourse on what it meant to live and participate in a democratic society. The period

of the Great Depression brought great uncertainty about what it meant to be an American, what we should expect from each other, our commercial and social institutions, and our government, what a new American society should look like, and what the individual's place in that society should be.

According to Susman, the 1930's was the "decade of participation and belonging" a desire to belong to something larger than oneself. The Roosevelt administration understood that psychological as well as economic needs must be met if the nation was to surmount the challenges of the Depression. So the numerous efforts of the New Deal sought to engage citizens as individuals, empowered by working together to achieve national goals (*Culture and Commitment* 15).

This 'culture of commitment' also manifested itself in the intellectual and artistic products of the decade. A "search for experience and ways to record it" brought about new forms of documentary as illustrated in works such as James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and the works of the Federal Theatre Project (*Culture as History* 178). These new cultural forms were related to the "discovery of significant myths, symbols, and images from the culture itself that might also serve as a basis for reinforcement or indeed the re-creation or remaking of culture itself (*Culture as History* 178)." One of the most persistent symbols, said Susman, was that of "the people" (an image we can find often in the texts of the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper plays, *One Third of a Nation and Power*).

The 1930's, so profoundly influenced by the forces of the communications revolution, were in fact a dramatic era of sight and sound (*Culture as History* 158).

Susman argued that Franklin Roosevelt understood from the beginning of his first presidential campaign in 1932 the importance of harnessing cultural symbols to spur political and social change. The New Deal, Susman argued, was a “sociological and psychological triumph (159)” because, more than any other political movement, it “commanded the set of images, symbols, and myths with the most meaning for the bulk of the American people (179).”

The Living Newspaper plays made full use of the images and concepts of the mass media, and indeed, as their name indicates, demonstrated the idea of mass communication as instruments for social change and empowering citizens in a democratic society. The centrality of communications in American culture was so pervasive that images and symbols of communications became iconic themes in our cultural landscape. As Susman explained, “...one of the characteristics of modern American culture has been the conversion of means of communication into icons; objects of everyday life attain iconographic significance in the modern world, and none are more useful, it would seem, than icons from the realm of communications (*Culture as History* 263).” The cultural programs of the Roosevelt administration were no exception to this: the WPA Federal Theatre Project employed the concepts and images of mass media through the Living Newspaper plays to convey to the American people the ideas and ideals of this culture of abundance and the programs of the New Deal.

The New Deal, Technology, the Future, and Democracy

The Living Newspaper plays were products of their times in that, in both *One Third of a Nation* and *Power*, they sought to achieve the good society—a better and more equitable American way of life—by applying the best that modern concepts and methods of social science, science and engineering had to offer to solving the nation’s problems and building a better future. Susman contended that even in the face of the failures of the 1930s the American “did not surrender his faith in science and technology (*Culture and Commitment* 14).” Beyond technological development, “planning, organization, and designing of the future” (14) became a central theme. Carey addressed specifically the New Deal’s Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) rural electrification program and how the TVA was equated with a stronger, healthier democracy. The TVA “was intended to serve as a showcase for the positive linkage of electricity, decentralization, and citizen participation in reclamation of the landscape (*Communication as Culture* 130-131) and noted furthermore that “at home and abroad” the development model that the TVA presented was considered “a prime vehicle of social democracy (131).”

Susman wrote that “[t]he cultural historian...seeks to discover the forms in which people have experienced the world—the patterns of life, the symbols by which they cope with the world (*Culture and Commitment*, 1). James Carey said the purpose of cultural studies is “to understand meanings that have been placed on experience, to build up a veridical record of what has been said at other times, in other places, and in other ways; to enlarge the human conversation by comprehending what others are saying (*Communication and Culture* 61-62).” The Living Newspaper plays and their *accompanying publicity posters represent three cultural forms—the theatre, the

newspaper, and the visual arts—in which humans have communicated their feelings, thoughts, ideas, hopes, and concerns of their place and time. The chapter that follows seeks to analyze two of these plays, *One Third of a Nation* and *Power*, for the “conversations” the Federal Theatre workers were having with their fellow citizens about life in the United States of the 1930s and their vision of the American future.

Chapter 5—Methodology

This study seeks to establish themes prominent in the creative output of the FTP Living Newspaper plays and show how those themes are linked to important ideas and values of their time. The goal is to help us understand, as James Carey said, how it felt to “live and act in a particular period of history (*Problem of Journalism History* 3-5, 27).” This study employs what Marion Marzolf (*Operationalizing Carey; American Studies*) and Jean Ward (*Interdisciplinary Research*) described as the necessarily interdisciplinary approach in order to get at the full range of cultural artifacts available for study to the media historian.

More specifically, this study adopts a methodology Marzolf described as the “historian’s method of reading, sifting, weighing, and analyzing the evidence” or a “content assessment (*American Studies* 15).” This study is also indebted to the work of Karolyn Kitch (*The Girl on the Magazine Cover*) for guidance on how the methodology proposed by Marzolf can be fruitfully applied to the reading of visual texts.

Primary sources used include the play scripts, publicity posters, program administrative memos, memoirs and WPA government documents. Secondary sources such as that of cultural historians and art scholars are relied on for important contextual background.

This study focuses on two of the Living Newspaper plays, *One Third of a Nation* and *Power*. The study was limited to two plays for the sake of manageability. These two particular plays were chosen because of the rich resources on them available for study

in libraries and on-line archives. The posters selected are but a very small sample of the poster designs produced by FAP artists for the Living Newspaper plays. Their analysis is meant to enhance the study of the messages from the plays, and to show how similar themes were expressed visually as well as through the written play scripts.

A note on the posters: about 2,000 examples from 35,000 poster designs from the WPA survive, according to Francis V. O'Connor (in DeNoon 7). I include this information to emphasize a point: that is, this study is not an attempt make broad claims the about ideas and values of the 1930s in general. Rather, it intends to show (to paraphrase Carey) how a particular group of people in a particular time and place tried to make sense of the society in which they lived.

Think of these texts, then, if you will as public conversations between Americans about the important issues of the day. They are distinct to their own time and place, but nevertheless forge cultural links backwards and forwards, connecting the American democratic experience past and present.

Chapter 6—Analysis: Dramatizing the News

Roosevelt's New Deal Programs aimed not only to rehabilitate the unemployed but to foster communication. Just as he saw the roads built by the WPA crews as ways to bring people closer in a physical sense, he intended that the arts and documentary projects would build human understanding. These took many forms: government photographers documenting the lives of ordinary people; writers, artists, and theater people dramatizing current issues and discovering a 'usable past.' (Molella, *FDR: the Intimate Presidency* 21)

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was a social and artistic experiment that embodied the New Deal spirit which redefined American freedom and democracy. It was, to be sure, first and foremost a public employment program. But the FTP's broader mission was to bring theatre to the widest possible spectrum of Americans—to the young and old, to communities rural and urban, to parks, schools, small community theatres, and big city theatre venues. It was meant to bring theatre to all people, many of whom had never seen a play performed before. It aspired to be an American people's theatre, and it was designed to entertain, educate, inform, and provoke.

In the formats used and subjects chosen, the FTP Living Newspaper plays melded several popular cultural forms into a hybrid vehicle of mass communication. They drew their audiences in by offering the excitement and immediacy of a live performance, the authority of a newspaper, the topicality of a newsreel, and the depth and focus of a documentary.

In the process, the Living Newspapers created conversations between Americans on crucial public questions at a time of pivotal change in American society. They helped Americans to explore their past; to consider the benefits of technology and modernity

and what that meant to a democratic way of life; and to re-imagine the role of government and the citizen in 20th century America.

It's All in the News

Hallie Flanagan wrote “our plays concern themselves with conditions back of the conditions described by President Roosevelt (“Not in Despair” 5).”

The Living Newspapers were live theatrical performances, of course, where the public issues of the day were brought to life in dramatic stage events. But the plays could be said to be ‘living’ in other ways as well: the staff of the Living Newspapers were organized like a city newsroom; the plays’ staging was influenced by other media of the time; productions were responsive to local and changing conditions; they created dialogues with their audiences; they sought to educate and provide information that was reusable in citizens’ lives; and in the way the plays willingly took on controversial current topics, they sparked equally controversial responses from critics and the Congress.

Sponsored in part by the New York Newspaper Guild, The Living Newspaper staff was organized like a daily city newspaper. According to Hallie Flanagan, they had an “editor-in-chief [head playwright], managing editor, city editor, reporters, and copyreaders.” Their task was “to shake the living daylights out of a thousand books, reports, newspapers, and magazine articles” to create a thoroughly and accurately documented dramatization of contemporary American problems. (*Arena* 65). Though this may seem a gimmick, it was a gimmick with a purpose.

Flanagan saw the Living Newspaper mission much like the role of a newspaper in a democratic society—reporting the facts, giving the background, exploring different sides of the issue and explaining how the reader was affected. “Like the newspaper,” said Flanagan, “it [the Living Newspaper] is varied in medium, including not only news but history, economics, the human interest story, the signed article, the chart and graph, the statistical survey, the cartoon, and the columnists’ comment. . . . Also like a good newspaper these various editions had a policy which. . . was to study and dramatize various problems in our national economy—agriculture, power, housing, showing their historic development and their effect on people (*Arena* 71).”

The dramatic visual nature of the productions and the issues of political and social import that the plays addressed made the Living Newspapers both highly visible and politically vulnerable. Wrote Flanagan in *Arena*, “Facts are high explosives, and hence any plays based on fact must be carefully documented and handled with judicious restraint (72).”

Speaking of *Nation*, the FTP’s General Counsel Irwin Rhodes emphasized the paramount importance of thorough and meticulous documentation.

We were in such a vulnerable position; we double-checked every quote. We would never say anything that hadn’t been said. In *One Third of a Nation*, even though we may not give the names of the people calling out these lines, they were exact quotes from the *Congressional Record*. So there was no question about the truth of them. (qtd. in J. O’Connor, *The Federal Theatre Project* 169)

Here, for example, is dialogue from *Nation* on a Senate debate taken from the *Congressional Record* of August 2 and 6, 1937. The topic is the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act designed to provide livable housing for the nation’s poor: The Loud Speaker acts as narrator, explaining the action to the audience.

LOUDSPEAKER [Voice of the Living Newspaper]. Senator C. O. Andrews of Florida.

ANDREWS (stands left). Mr. President, I should like to ask the Senator from New York [Wagner] where the people who live in the slums come from.

WAGNER (turning toward ANDREWS). A great many of them have been here a long time. What does the Senator mean by “Where do they come from?” Whether they have come from some other country?

ANDREWS. I think we ought not to offer any inducement to people to come in from our country or foreign countries or anywhere else and take advantage of our government in supplying them with homes. For instance, if we examine the birth records of in New York, we will find that most of the people there in the slums were not born in New York, but the bright lights have attracted them from everywhere, and that is one reason why there are so many millions in New York without homes!

LOUDSPEAKER. Despite his position during the debate, Senator Andrews voted for and supported the bill in its final form.(DeRohan, *Federal Theatre Project Plays: Nation* 108).

The emphasis on veracity went beyond the cited facts and statistics, or the faithful recording of congressional testimony and debate. Howard Bay, the set designer for *Nation*, for example, accompanied the head of the New York Housing Authority on site visits to buildings scheduled for demolition in order to search out actual fragments of tenement house structures to incorporate into the stage set (J. O’Connor,

The Federal Theatre Project 172). One Federal Theatre worker wrote in his memoir of the effect the stage production for *Nation* had on him: “I could smell the roaches, the overflowing garbage, and the dank air within the old tenement walls, like those I had known as a boy living in the Lower East Side of Little Italy (Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents* 164).”

Dry facts and statistics came to life using a multi-media approach that included light and projections as background for the action on stage. “The projections could include...such factual information as dates, statistics, charts, maps, headlines, or they could be more visual: photographs, animated cartoons, and short film sequences (J. O’Connor, *The Federal Theatre Project* 10).

The popularity of the newsreel was at its height in the 1930s and 1940s. “In a world without television and only recently with picture magazines, the newsreel was eagerly awaited in the movie house, bringing as it did images of the great, of the drama of war, and the tragedy of life (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 329).” The novelty and dramatic impact of the news reel documentary was not lost on the Living Newspaper staff, and Flanagan acknowledged the plays’ strong connection to this contemporary American cultural form (*Arena* 70).

Like the newsreels and documentaries of their day, The Living Newspaper plays employed a loudspeaker “off-stage” voice that cued the audience to opening and shifting scenes, introduced characters, and announced dates and places of events depicted on stage. Moreover, “...the loudspeaker became the voice of the public, posing questions and pressuring officials, thus keeping the action lively and dramatic

while sharing his knowledge with the audience (J. O'Connor, *The Federal Theatre Project* 10-11).

Scene One in *Nation* ("Fire") depicts a winter evening in a dilapidated New York tenement where a fire is about to start. The tenants, children and adults, are seen going about their chores and activities. The opening narration of the Loudspeaker describes the common occurrence of the scene that is about to unfold: (DeRohan, *Federal Theatre Project Plays: Nation* 13).

LOUDSPEAKER. February 1924—This might be 397 Madison Street, New York. It might be 245 Halsey Street, Brooklyn, or Jackson Avenue and 10th Street, Long Island City." [The script cites *New York Times* articles on fires that have occurred over a six-day period.]

Scene Two has the narrator tallying the human loss caused by the fires and sets up the audience for the play's examination of the fire's causes.

"LOUDSPEAKER. Thirteen persons lost their lives in that fire on Madison Street—four men, two women, and seven children. Another man was killed in an unsuccessful attempt to make his way down a fire escape ladder into the yard. When the fire department arrived the building was in flames. Only a few of these inside could be reached [the script here cites the *New York Times*, February 19, 124 as its source]. What started this fire? Why did it spread so quickly? Why was the death toll so high? (DeRohan, *Federal Theatre Project Plays: Nation* 15).

Subsequent scenes walk the audience through the investigation of the fires' causes, the law, the history of New York housing and land development, the landlord - tenant

relationship, who the people were that lived in the tenements, the human cost and social consequences of poor housing conditions, rent strikes, and public housing (the Wagner-Steagall Housing bill), and citizen response.

Response to changing conditions and regional differences

At the end of *Nation*, the narrator reminds us that the housing conditions described exist all over the country: “Ladies and Gentlemen, this might be Boston, New York, St. Louis, Chicago, Philadelphia—but let’s just call it ‘one third of a nation!’” (121).

The text of the Living Newspaper plays also reflected local conditions in the regions where they were being staged. Said author Studs Terkel of the Living Newspaper production of *Nation* in Chicago:

“The [Federal] Theatre was the most controversial of all by the nature of the plays they were doing. We did *The Cradle Will Rock*, *One-Third of a Nation*—based upon the Roosevelt second inaugural address: ‘I see one third of a nation ill fed, ill clothed, ill housed’—but ours was different than the New York’s. Ours was about the Chicago Fire and the wooden houses and what happened after that. A couple of members of our group wrote the script based upon the New York script. I was the little guy, the man on the street going through it (qtd. in Schwartz 49).”

Of the Philadelphia production, John O’Connor and Loraine Brown in *The Federal Theatre Project* wrote: “Two days before the play opened in the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, a tenement house in that city caved in. So, instead of a tenement fire at the opening of the production, a portion of the set collapses, crushing the helpless inhabitants” (173).

Like the news, the plays also adapted themselves to changing conditions as new developments occurred. *Power*, had two endings—one in an earlier version of the

play which asked “what will the Supreme Court do?” reflecting the pending legal status of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), and a new ending added later when a constitutional challenge to the rural electrification project was resolved in favor of the TVA by the Supreme Court (see <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/collections/stage/file.html>).

The Living Newspapers as American Conversations

The Living Newspaper plays were both literal and metaphorical conversations among citizens about American life. An important function of journalism, some would argue, is to facilitate a conversation about public affairs. Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg in *The Conversation of Journalism* wrote of the importance of journalism to “the maintenance of democratic dialogue (2).” Journalism fails if it does not represent a broad range of voices and put the issues at hand in their historical and contemporary context. Too much emphasis on experts and officials shuts out the common citizens that journalism is suppose to serve. There is a long tradition in American society for the idea of conversation as a metaphor for the public service role journalism should play, with roots at least as far back as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead of the Chicago School of social thought (21). The authors also discussed the idea of journalism as “commons” i.e., a “meeting place (6)” for public use, to interest and engage citizens in the vital issues of their times, and where people “can learn, mature, agree, and disagree and from which social change can grow (6).” Although they were writing of the re-examination of the role of journalism with the massive changes at the end of the 20th Century, their ideas, based in traditional

notions of conversation as communication, apply to the role played by the Living Newspaper plays. To approach journalism as a public conversation—that is, as citizens talking with one another--invites the inclusion of voices from many individual communities within the larger shared community, allowing for a diversity of voices.

Although the voices heard in the Living Newspapers included society's power brokers, intellectual elites, and captains of industry, the voices of the workers, the small farmers and shop owners, the housewives, were heard as well those whose voices had been largely unheard and whose lives had been largely unobserved in the cultural arenas of the day. Public intellectuals, artists, the government, responding to the momentous events of the 1930s, paid greater attention to the aspirations and needs of Americans across the social and economic spectrum. Lary May in *The Big Tomorrow* noted how the 1930s saw a shift in cultural authority from society's elites to the commoner and that "... the democratic possibility of mass art had moved into the civic arena as a force for democratic renewal (127)." And scholars have noted how popular culture provides a meeting ground for values and ideas of the past and present to struggle and perhaps resolve the direction of the future. (See, for example, Susman 1964; Lipsitz 1990; May 2000). The Living Newspaper plays as artistic efforts and vehicles of mass communication are reflections of the intellectual, social, and political currents of their day. The Living Newspapers, in the stories they chose to tell and in the characters that appeared in the stage world they created, provided a context for interactions between Americans struggling to explain their contemporary condition and seeking a way forward from there. To the staff of the Living

Newspaper project, this was an endeavor where the full spectrum of American voices must be heard.

Stott has pointed out how the Living Newspaper plays represented a cross-spectrum of American life. In *Nation*, we encounter the immigrants who inhabited the city's tenement housing—the Italian and Irish families, the Jewish couple, the street children. We meet charwomen as well as landowners, janitors as well as financiers, the mayor of New York and United States senators, as well as the stevedores and bootblacks of Harlem. In *Power*, we find a similar cast representing many facets of American society. There is the consumer “everyman,” as well as businessmen, butchers, dry goods clerks, barbers, grocers, housewives, the farmers, and city dwellers—all who have their moments on the stage—as do the electric company manager, college professors, the public utility commissioner, United States senators and justices of the Supreme Court.

In the scenes, the cast of characters, and the stories told by the Living Newspapers, Americans from all walks of life meet and converse with one another in an attempt to understand and address major social and economic problems. Through the Living Newspapers, Americans are linked together. In the best conversational tradition of communication that Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg described in *The Conversation of Journalism*, the plays created a public square—a newspaper come to life—where Americans from the past and the present, from widely differing economic classes and social strata, and from rural and urban America could tell their stories, make their opinions known, and argue about solutions for the problems they collectively faced.

The Living Newspapers as Propaganda?

The FTP's Living Newspaper plays sympathetic treatment of major New Deal initiatives prompted some to criticize the plays as New Deal propaganda. There are several cultural and political factors that contributed to the view of the Living Newspapers as vehicles of propaganda and demagoguery. Schwarzlose (87-88) attributes this to ambivalent attitudes in the culture at large toward mass messaging through the media made possible by rapid developments in mass communication technology and which seemed distant, impersonal and thus unknown (unverifiable) and not to be trusted. Molella reinforces this notion of ambivalence toward this new era of technology and its influence on society. "During the 1930s," he writes, "the electronic media came of age in America and fundamentally altered the political process (4)." But FDR's skillful use of radio messages reassured Americans who viewed him as trustworthy, friendly, stable, and concerned about their interests rather than regarding him as an "intrusive 'Big Brother'(4)." FDR on the radio, Molella asserts, "mirrored the basic cultural tensions of the 1930s: on one hand, the search for a 'usable past'; and on the other, a celebration of the new, with an ardent faith that modern technology would build a brighter future (4)."

Winfield in *FDR and the News Media* (94) argued that critics of the Roosevelt administration rightly feared "possible propaganda" given events in the nation and the world at that time. Widespread press coverage of the Nazi and communist propaganda abroad in the 1930s and the demagoguery of Huey P. Long and the 'radio

priest' Father Coughlin at home in the United States contributed to the sense of fear and distrust of media messages.

The Federal Theatre's ability to coordinate nationwide productions of plays and to reach so many people at once "foreshadowed the power of TV and aroused fear in Congress of the FTP's potential as a propaganda agency (Molella 43)." But Hallie Flanagan emphasized the Living Newspaper unit's determination to present factual, verifiable, balanced presentations of important public issues—in other words, propaganda as education. Harry Hopkins saw a more benign purpose at work than New Deal critics would have it. Of the FTP production *Power* Hopkins said, "People will say it's propaganda. Well, I say what of it?...It's propaganda to educate the consumer who's paying for power (Molella 40)." Propaganda, in the case of the Living Newspapers, seemed to be in the eye of the beholder.

Controversial as they might have been, the Living Newspaper plays offered audiences a forum for examining the great public problems of the day in their historical and contemporary context and in a lively and engaging fashion. FTP productions such as *Power* and *One Third of a Nation* took the problems laid out in the newspaper reports from which their stories were drawn and invited citizens through the vehicle of the plays to discuss and debate those problems and their solutions in order to create a better future. Toward this end, the plays re-examined the American past, created opportunities for conversations across American society, reaffirmed and debated the power of technology to serve democratic ends, and argued for government action where the private sector was unable or unwilling to meet consumer needs. The plays also coaxed and cajoled American citizens to assert their right to participate in

decisions over the directions both their individual and collective futures would take. *One Third of a Nation* and *Power* both sought to increase understanding of historical factors that led to the problems of the present; to prompt audiences to reconsider societal values; to draw connections between the audiences' lives and the stories being told, thus giving them a stake in the issues' outcome; and to present the government as an active partner in the problems' solution.

The remainder of this analysis section will explore in more detail the techniques the plays used to accomplish these goals, and how they achieved what Hallie Flanagan said was "an authoritative and dramatic treatment, at once historic and contemporary, of current problems (Introduction in DeRohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Power* viii).

One Third of a Nation

Nation opened January 17, 1938 and ran for some 237 performances in New York and nine other cities across the country. Other cities where *Nation* played included Detroit, Cincinnati, Portland (Oregon), Philadelphia, Hartford, New Orleans, Seattle, and San Francisco. Audiences for *Nation* were massive. In New York alone, from January 17, 1938 to October 22, 1938, persons attending the play numbered 217,458. In Detroit, the play proved so popular that it was held over for four weeks (Flanagan, *Arena* 217). It was a play that was especially well-suited to national performance, as every large city had problems with slum housing, making *Nation* easily adaptable to local conditions. The New York production opened nightly with a tenement on fire. The Philadelphia production, however, opened with a tenement collapsing and crushing its tenants, depicting an actual event that occurred two days before the play

opened at Philadelphia's Walnut Theatre. Paramount Pictures released a film version of *Nation*. The play was even "performed" in Congress in February 1938 when Senator Bailey of North Carolina read Act II, Scene 4 ("Government Housing") into the *Congressional Record* during senate debate (some of the dialogue from that scene was itself taken from the *Congressional Record* of August 1937). *Nation* was considered perhaps the Living Newspaper's most successful play and often received critically favorable reviews for its powerfully dramatic staging and engaging presentation of factual material. A reviewer in the *Detroit Times* wrote: "The worst thing about One Third of a Nation is that it is true...unforgettable vividness and compelling power...thrilling beyond description...a rare experience in the theatre—not to be missed by anyone (qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena*, 217)."

Nation is a story about slums, the history of slum housing development, the poor people who lived there, and the misery they endured in dilapidated, unsafe, unclean, and crowded housing conditions. It is the story of demand outstripping supply, of speculation and profit, of disease, crime, and ineffective laws and regulations.

The story depicted is told in two acts with eleven scenes. The cast of characters number more than 130, and include actual persons intermingled with fictional characters representing the people affected by, and responsible for, the slum conditions that are the play's subject.

The scenes are played out in tenement rooms (open in cut away views to the audience), on city streets, in city commissioner's meetings, and in the chambers of the

United States Senate. The past and present are intertwined as the story traces the 200 plus years of tenement housing history in the nation's urban life.

In the New York production, Act I, Scene One, "Fire!", opens in 1920's New York where puffs of smoke warn of impending danger as tenants go about their evening activities. Scene Two switches the audience to the "Investigation" by city officials in the fire's aftermath. Scene Three, "Land" takes the audience back to the first New York land grants to Trinity Church by the British governor, and the first growth of the city population who become the land's tenants. Scene Four "Looking Backward" finds the play's "Little Man" (Mr. Angus K. Buttonkooper, a renter) meeting up with a "Guide" from 1850's New York who introduces him to the immigrant tenement inhabitants of the 19th Century—an Irish family, a Jewish family. Subscenes explain "Why They Came (steady work, plenty of potatoes, bread and meat)," "What They Saw," and "What They Got (cholera)." Scene 5, "Appoint a Committee" depicts a 19th Century Citizens Committee investigation of tenement health conditions, which produces "New York's first comprehensive document on housing" on which no action was taken. Scene Six, "Renting," follows apartment seekers—an Italian family, an Irish family, a Jewish couple—accompanied by rental agents as they negotiate with landlords over rooms to let.

Act Two, Scene One, "The Law," traces the legal history governing slum housing. Characters include Announcers of the Law, and the play even gives voice to the House itself as the scene recites official attempts to address slum housing conditions:

FIRST MAN. It shall be required that no horse, cow, calf, pig, swine, sheep or goat be domiciled in any tenement or lodging house [Tenement House Law 1867].”

SECOND MAN. It shall be required that there be a proper fire escape for each tenement, and there shall be one toilet for every twenty occupants. (Gong strikes).

VOICE OF HOUSE. 1887! A law!

SECOND MAN. Water on every floor! [Tenement House Law of 1887]
(Lights out on Announcers.)

VOICE OF HOUSE. Did you hear that? Fire escapes, a toilet for every twenty occupants, no windowless rooms, and water on every floor! That’s what the law says! But I’m still here. And I haven’t changed a bit....

Scene Two of the second act (“Crosstown, 1933”) finds Mr. Buttonkooper inquiring of the Loudspeaker in response to the last scene “why don’t we tear down all those old-law tenements?” The cast of characters includes Street Kids with Announcers calling out statistics on juvenile delinquency. It also introduces a Rent Strike with a Tenant League Organizer and a Group of Women Strikers. Scene Three “What Price Housing” addresses the costs of private provision of affordable housing, a set-up for Scene Four, which makes the case for “Government Housing.” Scene 5, the final scene in the play, is called “Looking Forward” and poses a dilemma to the play’s Little Man, Mr. Buttonkooper, as he tries to reconcile the reported cost of removing slum housing in New York with the sum appropriated by Congress to accomplish the

task (the final amount was \$526 million, down from the original funding of \$1 billion):

LITTLE MAN. ...I'm taking that \$30 million [the amount the city could expect from the federal appropriation] and trying to fit it into the New York City housing problem.

LOUDSPEAKER. That's fine. Before you begin, let me show you what the New York City housing problem really is—in dollars and cents. This is Langdon Post, former Tenement House Commissioner.

VOICE OF POST: A conservative estimate of the cost of removing slums in New York City alone is about two billion dollars! [The script cites a December 10, 1937 letter from Langdon W. Post to the Living Newspaper.]

LOUDSPEAKER. Two billion dollars! There's your problem in arithmetic, Mr. Buttonkooper. How to make thirty million equal two billion.

LITTLE MAN (with paper and pencil). That's what I'm working on.

LOUDSPEAKER. Well, what's the answer?

LITTLE MAN. A headache... (De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Nation* 113-114).

The end of this final scene has Mr. Buttonkooper searching in frustration for the causes of the housing problem, recalling the landowners and the landlords from the plays' beginning whose land speculations drove up the costs of land and rent prices. The Loudspeaker reminds of one other cause: public "inertia."

LITTLE MAN. Inertia? (He looks puzzled.)

Mrs. Buttonkooper (who has been seated in the audience) agrees with the Loudspeaker and joins her husband on stage. The remainder of the scene finds the Buttonkoopers resolving to act and make their voices heard—and to begin *now*. Her voice addresses the state and federal powers:

MRS. BUTTONKOOPER. ... (shouting) We want a decent place to live in!

I want a place that's clean and fit for a man and woman with kids! Can you hear me—you in Washington or Albany or wherever you are! Give me a decent place to live in! Give me a home! A home!"

And if no one hears and heeds them, she warns, "you're going to have just what you've always had—slums—disease—crime—juvenile delinquency...and..."

The scene circles back to where the play began, echoing Mrs. Buttonkooper's warning.

"Fire!" yells a voice. Tenants from Scene One begin their activities as before. Smoke appears. Fire sirens begin to wail. "Pandemonium" breaks out as the tenement as before is engulfed in flames. The Loudspeaker comes on for the last time, reminding audiences how widespread the problems are: "Ladies and gentleman, this might be Boston, New York..." (De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Nation* 118-121).

Social Science and Social Change—*Nation* Brings Public Intellectuals into the Conversation

Nation is a case in point of how the Living Newspaper staff harnessed public thought of the 1930s to grapple with the social issues in the public forum of the stage.

Warren Susman (*Culture as History*) in discussing the society of the 1930s wrote of the importance of the planner, and how housing in general became the focus of efforts to create a modern society. Attention was particularly drawn to the problems of slum housing and the need to provide not just adequate modern facilities but housing that provided “sun and air and outlook and convenience and facilities for recreation... a neighborhood layout and control which forever prevents blight—or boom—from descending on one section at the expense of the other sections... entirely new building forms, growing, on the one hand, out of the new standards and materials and methods and functions... [a] new human environment!...” (Bauer, “Slums aren’t Necessary,” qtd. in Susman, *Culture as History* 296-305). Elimination of slum housing not only improves neighborhoods. Providing public housing is “better for business, cheaper for the taxpayer, and infinitely more rehabilitating to those who need help (Straus, in Zinn 159).” Decent housing, argued Straus, is vital to the maintenance of a healthy democratic society. Straus quotes social reformer Jacob Riis: “Every time a child dies, the nation loses a prospective citizen... [y]ou cannot let people live like pigs and expect them to be good citizens.... The slums must go or the society that tolerates them will (Straus, in Zinn 160). Thus the very survival of a democratic system of government is linked to the welfare of its most needy citizens. Nathan Straus (head of the United States Housing Authority 1937-1942) becomes a character himself in *Nation* when the play includes his defense of government-funded housing as consistent with American property rights and the American economic system.

Bauer deals with the more abstract problem of planning the physical environment to create a more livable community. Strauss argues for the moral and social benefits of eliminating slum housing from the nation's landscape. The visual images employed to publicize *Nation* suggest the two approaches to the problem addressed by Bauer and Strauss. Two of the publicity posters represent these aspects of the public discourse surrounding the issue of slum housing. One poster created for the New York production of *Nation* shows a bird's eye view of a tenement block of buildings. The title, "One Third of a Nation," stamped across the image, focuses the attention of national public awareness on a pressing social problem. At the same time, the "negative" image of the buildings portrayed in a red line drawing against a black background, suggest an architectural drawing, or a blueprint, indicating that public planning was indeed underway (See Appendix A, 102).

A second publicity poster for a Seattle production of *Nation* takes a more sociological—and melodramatic—approach.. The image depicts an enormous, ragged, and menacing figure of a man who looms out of the roof of a dilapidated tenement structure, reaching for neighborhood children playing on the street in front. Here the threat to society and its most vulnerable citizens is the key theme (See Appendix A, 103).

Social scientists and government officials rely heavily on statistics to make their case, and the *Living Newspaper* plays employed facts and figures to dramatize the thoughts expressed by public intellectuals of the era. In *Nation*, the play's characters recite a litany of statistics to hammer home the societal costs of slum housing across the country. As our tenement "Guide" shows our consumer, "Little Man," through a

scene overhearing the conversation of some rough and cynical tenement children, the following conversation ensues:

GUIDE. Pretty mean little cuss [speaking of one of the slum children]. Are they all like that?

LITTLE MAN. That's what I'd like to know. Is that kid unusual or is it the result of where he lives and what he sees? (To Loudspeaker) Come on. Let's have the facts.

LOUDSPEAKER. Seattle, Washington.

FIRST WOMEN. Twenty-five percent of all juvenile delinquency found in six and one-half per cent of the city area—the slums.

LOUDSPEAKER. Richmond, Virginia.

SECOND WOMAN. Fifty per cent of all juvenile delinquency found in eighteen per cent of the city area—the slums!

LOUDSPEAKER. Cleveland, Ohio.

FIRST WOMAN. Forty-seven per cent of all juvenile delinquency found in seventeen per cent of the city area—the slums!

LOUDSPEAKER. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

SECOND WOMAN. Forty-six per cent of all juvenile delinquency found in nine per cent of the city area—the slums! (De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Nation* 82-83).

Still other scenes highlight the tenants' despair at the overcrowded conditions, the detrimental effects on family life, and the health risks of too many people in too little

space (*Nation* 82-83). The Living Newspapers time and again called forth the power of facts to make their case for reform.

Nation told the story of America's intransigent slum problems, building its case for urgent action in a dramatic presentation that employed facts and figures along with the emotional appeal of the human suffering behind the headlines, statistics, and government reports. The play exhorted public officials and government representatives to act to address the problems, and urged citizens to be part of the solution. The Living Newspaper *Power* utilized a similar framework, this time to advocate for public ownership of utilities and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) project.

Power

Power opened at the Ritz Theatre in New York on February 23, 1937 and ran for five months. Besides New York, the play was also produced in Chicago, Portland, Oregon, San Francisco and Seattle. Audience anticipation was great, with advanced ticket sales of 60,000 before opening night.

In its two acts and 21 scenes, *Power* sought to educate the citizen-consumer with lessons on the science behind electricity, the history of its invention, and the workings of the private commercial monopolies that controlled the American power industry. This play's focus was not so much on the plight of the disadvantaged, but on the average consumer. "It's about time that the consumer had a mouthpiece," said Harry Hopkins to the production company backstage after a performance. The nation's press offered favorable reviews as well. *Variety* called it "as timely as tomorrow's

headline.” The *Catholic World* offered “there is no denying that *Power* is one of the most exciting and provocative shows on Broadway.” *The Nation* magazine said the play “proves what journalists have always maintained, that an accurate fact carefully aimed may be as deadly as a bullet (qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena* 184-185).”

Flanagan asserted that *Power* made the character of the consumer more explicit than other Living Newspaper plays, highlighting “the struggle of the average citizen to understand the natural, social, and economic forces around him, and to achieve through those forces, a better life for more people (Introduction, in De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Power* x).” And indeed, the play does focus on the relationship of the consumer to the electric companies and the power they sell. And, here again, the audience meets the everyman character, Mr. Buttonkooper, this time trying to comprehend the complexities of the business of power that determines how much his electricity costs.

Flanagan wrote that *Power* more than any other Living Newspaper “found in projected scenery a technique illustrating the theme” of the play, following the action as the scenes unfold (*Arena* 184). The dramatic impact of *Power*’s staging is evident from the opening scene. After the musical overture, a projection appears on the front of the curtain, “The Living Newspaper presents POWER,” the other words fading as the word “power” grows larger. Beginning with the electricians at the switchboard itself, the play’s opening action spotlights, one after the other, a cast of characters representing the various activities of modern day life dependent on electric power.

Among others, there are factory girls working over the hum of electric sewing machines; an old couple at home listening to a radio playing the Danube Waltz; nurses and doctors in an operating room scene; policeman transmitting calls on their car radios; a restaurant owner; and a bakery proprietor. A loud detonation off stage signals a power outage, and panic ensues as the characters react.

Scene Two switches from the present to the past as the play introduces the inventors and inventions that made electrical power possible, from Michael Faraday's dynamo (the first instrument to generate electrical power, the Loudspeaker tells us) to Thomas Edison and the electric light bulb and the founding of the first American electric companies.

Scene Three introduces our Consumer (with a capital 'C' projected on stage) who learns what a kilowatt hour is (the projection becomes 'K' for kilowatt) as the unit for pricing electrical power. A brief Scene Four takes audiences to a 1905 convention of the National Electric Light Association as members discuss plans to expand the customer base, while the next scene has audiences listening to conversation on a New York park bench in 1907 between two men about how far electrical service has *not* expanded to their neighborhoods. (The dialogue is covered in more detail later on in this study.)

Subsequent scenes in Act One go on to explain to the consumer the companies' definitions of fair profits; what a holding company is and U.S. Senate hearings on the same; asks "Childish Questions" where a little girl quizzes her father about why the government doesn't provide electricity where the private companies cannot or will not; examines the consumer as lighting company investor; explores comparisons of

consumer prices from 1913 and 1926; and shows our Consumer as he works up the courage to sue the electric company for lower rates (his battle is visually rendered on the projection as a cartoon of Justice over a prize fight ring). Still other scenes involve company propaganda and its influence on newspaper editors through advertising revenues; power industry efforts “to control legislatures, public service commissions, members of Congress, school boards, municipal authorities, commercial clubs, secret societies, women’s clubs—even Boy Scout organizations” in the words of Nebraska Senator George Norris, who sits center stage as a scene of the U.S. Senate is projected behind him.

Municipal ownership costs versus private ownership costs per kilowatt hour are compared across the country while a map of the U.S. is projected (“Loudspeaker: Seattle Washington...Man [left]: Private ownership, twenty cents. Man [right]: Municipal ownership, five cents.”)

The story of the Tennessee Valley in 1933 comes to life in Scene Fifteen. Movies of the valley are shown on a scrim (projection curtain) while the Loudspeaker announces: “The Tennessee Valley...Parts of seven States, 40,000 square miles, two million people. All living in a region blighted by the misuse of land...no plumbing, industry, agriculture, or electrification....” The audience witness conversations between a farmer and his wife, a city man and his wife in Chattanooga, a farmer and the electric company manager, and a city man and a commissioner, all focused on the demand for fairness in the cost and provision of electricity. In the finale of Act One, the audience learns that the government has responded to consumers’ complaints with the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority for, among other things, the “social

and economic rehabilitation of the swampland and the hill people of the district” and the “generation and distribution of cheap electric power...” A TVA motion picture shows water flowing over a dam while, as the stage notes say, a “parade of men and women comes on stage behind the scrim, singing the TVA song.”

This final scene from the first act sets up Act Two, where private industry battles with the government, challenging in court the constitutionality of public ownership of utilities. The interests of the various stakeholders and their arguments are summed up in short-sentence dialogue as the legal cases work their way through the court system:

MAN ON THE STREET. What do I care? If it cuts my bills I’m for it!

EXECUTIVE. It’s un-American, that’s what it is!

STOCKHOLDER[WOMAN]. What about my stocks? What about my dividends?

DISTRICT COURT JUDGE. Unconstitutional!

FIRST BUSINESS MAN. This means the death sentence for private industry....

FARMER. We need light!

WORKER. We need power (De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Power* 84-85)!

The case eventually is decided in favor of the TVA by the Supreme Court (represented on stage by a bench, over which hang nine masks representing the Supreme Court Judges.) A second Supreme Court challenge looms, however, and the play ends with a question:

ENSEMBLE [all cast members on stage]: What will the Supreme Court do
(91)?

(A large question mark is projected on the scrim until the curtain falls and the lights go up, according to the play's notes. The second case is also decided in the TVA's favor and a second ending to *Power* is subsequently written.)

Faith in the ability of technology to improve the quality of life for all is a familiar theme of 20th century American culture. But in the 1930s, the failure of the economy and the consequences of that failure for American life highlighted the shortcomings of progress and the ability of the marketplace to spread its benefits to all members of society. Government action was needed; but action and prodding by its citizens was required as well. The benefits of technology were real in a modern democracy, but the power must be shared and citizens must step forward to make this happen.

Though the nation's economic system had failed so many Americans during the years of the Depression, the Living Newspaper plays still reflect the belief in technology as the road to a better future and a way out of the economic stagnation that the Depression brought. And beyond that, technology and the consumer abundance it promised were linked to the rights of citizens (and illustrated the conflation of the citizen with the consumer). Susman has pointed out the American belief in technology as progress remained in spite of the hardships wrought by the economic system so closely linked to the development of industrial technology. Carey also noted that the rhetoric of the Roosevelt administration was especially skilled in the use of the metaphor that linked technological progress to the health of the American

democracy, and can be seen in the language employed by the New Dealers to describe the societal benefits of the TVA program that was the subject of the Living Newspaper play *Power*. So, in the midst of an economic crisis, the virtues of abundance brought by modernity are celebrated despite the fact that the benefits of this new order were not equally shared.

The American fascination with the possibilities of technology, as well as its growing and pervasive presence in all aspects of American life, are evident in the story *Power* tells. Several scenes from *Power* show us how the Living Newspaper plays reflect the general societal belief in technology's promise as embodied in the New Deal's TVA program. For example, an early scene in *Power* has scientists and inventors envisioning the promise of technology and the benefits to humanity that will result. Michael Faraday, inventor of the dynamo, the first instrument to generate electricity: "If it will help humanity, it is good" ; George Simon Ohm: "Now we can control this force to the great gain of the world;" and Thomas A. Edison, inventor of the electric light bulb: "The happiness of man! I know of no greater service to render during the short time we live (De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Power* 16-17)!"

And, indeed, the opening scene in *Power* feature glimpses of the many inventions powered by electricity that Americans had come to rely on to enhance work, leisure activities, the business of daily living, and the power to communicate with each other. The theatre switchboard, the X-ray machine, the factories employing thousands, the radio broadcasting a football game, a waltz, police communications, the traffic lights—all highlight the integral importance of electricity to human activity from the

life-saving to the mundane . “You curl your hair, you cook, you even shave, all with Power!” the Loudspeaker exclaims (*Power* 10-12).

The celebratory attitude towards the expansion of electrical power is also evident in the publicity posters that the federal arts program artists created for *Power* productions around the country. They also visually portray the rapid changes that were occurring in the way Americans lived. One poster for a Seattle production shows the harnessing of power and natural resources for multiple uses, with its images of the hydroelectric dam, the lighted barn, and the cogs of factory machinery. A human fist gripping a lightning bolt emphasizes the benefits of technology as a central theme (See Appendix A, 104). The image shows power as an engine of agriculture and industry. The raised fist exemplifies the citizen and consumer power. It is a symbol of the strength and power of the individual American worker as well as a symbol of force as an economic engine—a dynamic nation in forward motion. Still another poster image trumpets the play *Power* as “A thrilling dramatization of modern industry,” depicting the factories, streetcars, railways, and telephone wires—all potent symbols of the modern era of industry, transportation and communication (See Appendix A, 105).

Francis Perkins in *The Roosevelt I Knew* wrote that Franklin Roosevelt recognized the shift in economic emphasis from agriculture to industry as the dominant way of life in the United States (331-332). The play *Power* was about a rural electrification program, but the images are firmly industrial and suggest the modern melding together of rural and urban lives through the expansion of industrial methods.

But this enthusiastic embracing of the benefits of progress was not without its ambivalence. The play also points out that the benefits of modernity were far from equally shared. In a scene from *Power*, a policeman and gentleman sit on a park bench talking in 1907 New York City. The conversation started out with a discussion of the wonders of modern inventions, but the exchange ends on an ironic note when our 1907 citizen notes his inability to share in modernity's benefits. Here's how the conversation ends:

COP. So you got one of them new-fangled electric presses, eh?

MAN. No, not me, I can't afford it.

COP. Well, about these here fans and lamps: They any good?

MAN. How do I know? I ain't never seen one.

COP. You got electric *lights*, haven't you? (Cop rises).

MAN. Nope, I live way out in the country—145th Street. Company ain't got up that far yet.

COP (starting off). Which way you goin' home, trolley?

MAN. Trolley don't go out that way. Gotta take a horse car.

COP. Well, so long. Give me a ring some time!

MAN. Can't. Haven't got a phone. (MAN exits left) Certainly is a wonderful age we live in (De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Power* 25)!

Move forward in time to the Tennessee Valley of the 1930's and you have farmer's wife complaining to her husband about the lack of modern life conveniences. She urges him to demand that electrical power be extended to their farm. In doing so, their dialogue links access to consumer goods with their rights as citizens:

WIFE. ...Tell 'em you're an America citizen! Tell 'em you're sick and tired of lookin' at fans and heaters and vacuums and dish-washin' machines in catalogues, that you'd like to use 'em for a change (*Power 63*)”!

Chapter Seven—Discussion and Conclusion

American Conversations about Democracy—Citizen Participation— Government Redefined

The New Deal Administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt redefined American freedom from a notion of the self-made individual unhampered by government interference to a vision of society where the individual's ability to prosper and to fully participate in a democratic society depended on a basic level of economic security and protections provided by the government to insure a fair shake under a capitalist economy.

Employment programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and the myriad projects of the Works Progress Administration were set up to help provide immediate relief to those in need; passage of housing programs, creation of the Federal Bank Deposit Insurance Corporation, unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, and the Social Security Act not only helped to create a system of long-term security for the average American citizen, but also helped to reassure average citizens that the system could and would work for them.

Above all, the New Deal Administration embodied a spirit of optimism, a politics of hope. It was a time when ordinary citizens had a voice that was heard at the highest levels of government. It was a belief in the power of government and its constituents acting together to find common remedies to the nation's problems. And that the problems of a single group of citizens were the problems of the whole. Franklin Roosevelt felt this effort toward the common good was not a radical departure from traditional American values. Rather he viewed the New Deal program as the harnessing of the newest ideas and technologies toward the reestablishment of the

oldest American values—a renegotiation of the past to blend with the new in an “orderly peaceful progress” (“Review of the Achievements of the Seventy-third Congress,” June 28, 1934, <http://fdrlibrary.marist.edu/062834.html>). The *New Republic* in a 1940 article entitled “New Deal in Review 1936-1940” review of the performance of the Roosevelt administration, agreed saying “... we have reaffirmed in the past eight years an early American doctrine that had been all but forgotten in the preceding decades: that the country exists for the welfare and happiness of all its inhabitants...”(Zinn 416).” These were desperate times, of course, that required extraordinary effort to refocus the nation’s energies and resources toward national recovery. But in the process the country witnessed an outpouring of talent and imagination in political, social, economic, industrial, and cultural arenas that re-imagined ideas about who had a stake in the nation’s future and what that future should be.

Re-imagining the Public Good—The People and Their Government—New Citizen Voices

Hallie Flanagan saw the Living Newspaper audiences as active participants in the theatre experience and the story unfolding on the stage: “Sixty thousand people bought tickets for ‘Power’ before it opened,” she said, “thus voluntarily becoming a part of the unfinished drama of which each one of them is also actually and involuntarily a part (Flanagan, “Not in Despair” 5, 28).”

Norman Lloyd, an actor who played the consumer “everyman” figure in one Living Newspaper production had this to say of the ways in which the Living Newspaper

audiences interacted with the actors on stage: “When we had scenes in which the Living Newspaper touched a nerve, or a personality who offended them, they would talk back to the actor on the stage, because they’d never been in a live theatre, and maybe that’s what you did. That’s dangerous from a certain point of view. That’s why you had a living, exciting social theatre in the thirties (Schwartz 34).” Arthur Miller said of the New York Federal Theatre Living Newspaper audiences, “The Living Newspaper audience was like the audience for the Daily News. The whole city was there. There were people from Park Avenue and people from Third Avenue and people from God knows where—partly, I suspect, because there were some good actors in it who were attractive, and also the cost of the theatre ticket was so low. Anybody who could go to a movie could go to the Federal Theatre, so it was terrific. That spirit was more important than anything... (qtd. in Schwartz 140).”

Expanding Ideas of Freedom and Social Justice

Scholars have pointed out how Roosevelt and his administration redefined the meaning of freedom in the United States. Freedom was no longer simply the right to be left alone by one’s government, to achieve or to fail based on one’s individual efforts and circumstances alone. Freedom also meant that citizens should be able to rely on their government to provide for basic security against the vicissitudes of life, to redistribute the nation’s wealth in order to even the economic playing field. It was time when the concepts of freedom and liberty began to be tied to the idea of social justice. Freedom from bondage now also meant freedom from poverty, hunger, illness. It also included an expansion of people’s rights to be treated fairly with

decency, dignity, and respect; (Fischer 481-483). In a 1932 speech (Zinn 82) Roosevelt argued for the “need to correct...the faults in our economic system (84).” The success of the economic way of life depended on it,” he said.

I believe we are at the threshold of a fundamental change in our economic thought that in the future we are going to think less about the producer and more about the consumer. Do what we may have to do to inject life into our ailing economic order, we cannot make it endure for long unless we bring about a wiser, more equitable distribution of the national income. (82)

Roosevelt’s Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, argued for a vision of government and economic order that recognized the” interdependence” of economic groups to insure that the political and economic institutions served the needs and interests of all of its constituents, keeping in mind the general welfare of the nation.

In a 1940 review of the Roosevelt Administration’s accomplishments, the New Republic linked this renewed interest in the general welfare to earlier American values:

...we have reaffirmed in the past eight years an early American doctrine that had been all but forgotten in the preceding decades: that the country exists for the welfare of all its inhabitants; and that when this condition is not met, reformation is in order no matter how drastic it may be or how much it may be disliked by existing privileged minorities. (Zinn 416-417)

The currents of public thought influencing and stemming from the New Deal also stimulated the FTP Living Newspaper staff and the stories they presented to Depression audiences. Hallie Flanagan on more than occasion made it clear that she saw the Living Newspaper in particular and the FTP in general as a vital part of the reinvigoration of the American democratic promise in the nation’s recovery. Roosevelt’s new freedoms, extending the benefits of a capitalistic democracy to the broadest number of Americans possible, could be seen in the mission and purpose

Flanagan imagined for the FTP. To Flanagan, the Federal Theatre Project was linked to the larger American project of rebuilding the nation as a whole, of insuring the survival and strengthening of the American democratic experiment. Flanagan saw FTP workers as doing the work of the nation along side and in common purpose with factory workers, doctors and nurses, scientists, librarians, and men building roads and bridges (Introduction, De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Project Plays: Nation* xii-xiii). The Living Newspapers were as much about what could be imagined, as well as about what actually was.

Roosevelt's expanded ideas of freedom found expression in the text of the Living Newspaper plays themselves. A rural Tennessee farmer in *Power* welcomes the government intervention in providing electrical power to his community where a private power company only showed interest when the threat from government competition was immanent. "I don't want it," he tells the power company linemen attempting to wire his property before government workers get there. "The Government's taking care of me now! The United States Government! D'you hear that! Now go on and git (*Power* 76)." There's even a TVA Song, celebrating the U.S. government's bringing of power to the Tennessee Valley and the promise of a better life it brings with it. ("For things are surely movin', down here in Tennessee; Good times for all the Valley, For Sally and for me." *Power* 68-69).

The Living Newspaper plays had much to say about what citizens should expect from their government and the role of the citizen in a democratic society. Evident in the plays' text is the belief in citizen action and the conviction that government had an

active role to play in the social and economic life of the nation. In a time of dire economic conditions, the Living Newspaper plays embodied Roosevelt's message of hope for the future that was a key ingredient of the New Deal paradigm. Here, too, was a belief in the ability of the nation to solve problems through individual action and collective remedy of an informed citizenry.

Roosevelt's new definition of freedom included protection of citizens by their government from the harsher aspects of the capitalist economic system. The Living Newspapers embraced this new relationship between the American government and its citizens, but the plays also advocated active citizen participation in the democratic process, including the importance of being an informed citizen, willing to confront authorities of business and public life when citizens' interests were not being heard and addressed.

The plays reflected the idea of government as an agent of change, of countervailing balance, fairness and protection. They were both arguments for and reflections of the Roosevelt administration's linking of freedom to social justice and the equalized distribution of goods to realize the full benefits of a capitalist democracy for the benefit of individuals and society as a whole. So, in *One Third of a Nation*, decent housing was seen as a right and a necessity to insure healthy citizens as a vital component of a successful democracy. Public provision of modern housing and the elimination of slums meant safety, freedom from disease, and protection of the family. *Power* reflected the American belief in modern technology as a partner to the growth and maintenance of American democracy, and thus to American freedom. Both of these Living Newspaper plays advocated for the freedom of workers and

individual citizens to petition the government and public authorities when inequities needed to be addressed and where private interests were unable or unwilling to respond.

The Living Newspapers plays were an invitation to its American audiences to participate in the civic process. What is the problem? How did it happen? What are the effects on individuals and society? Who are the players? What is the process for remedy or redress? *Nation*, for example, walks its audience through the history of land ownership in New York, the policies and practices that created the tenement housing system, attempted local government remedies, tenement laws over the years, federal recognition and response to slum housing, and citizen action (rent strikes, individual citizen petitions). In *Power*, the judiciary role comes into play when the Supreme Court rules on a legal challenge based on constitutional grounds to government entry into the power industry.

In the Living Newspaper plays, government is poked, prodded, and exhorted to act. In *Nation*, money appropriated by Congress for housing for the poor is pointed out to be only a portion of the funds needed for slum clearance. Comparisons are made to military spending. (“Say Mister, how much was the appropriation for the Army and Navy?...Three billion, one hundred and twenty-five million dollars. Why...that’s more than enough money to clean out every slum in New York!” (De Rohan, *Federal Theatre Plays: Nation* 120). Tenants, exercising their rights as citizens, commit to action, too. “Well, what are we going to do?” “You know what we’re going to do—you and me? We’re going to holler. And we’re going to keep on hollering until they

admit in Washington that it's just as important to keep a man alive as it is to kill him (*Nation* 120)!"

Similar scenes of citizen action can be found in *Power*. Information again is seen as necessary ingredient to citizen action and empowerment. How electric prices are determined, what holding companies are and how they operate, even the definition of a kilowatt hour, are all explained. The electric companies may hold all—or most of—the cards until the government steps in, but the citizen's role is emphasized, too. And in examining the complexities of producer to consumer production and distribution of electricity, the play asks just who is the public interest—the Farmer, the Business Man, the Consumer-at-Large (*Power* 87)?

While government is looked to for remedy, the play reminds its audience of the potential power of the citizen inherent in the American system of government. The people are the government, *Power* tells us. In a scene entitled "Childish Questions," a young girl quizzes her father: "Daddy, who is the Government?", she asks. He responds, "The government is you and me, I guess—the people (38-39)." So, in the end it could be said that the title *Power* refers as much to the power of the American citizen to act and effect change as it is about the industrial power of rural electrification and the TVA. Where the play encourages government action, it is also then encouraging the citizen to take responsibility for the changes sought.

The Living Newspapers productions were a vehicle to examine contemporary public issues in dramatic form. The news came to life on the stage in hundreds of performances. But in their brief four-year run (1935-1939) the Living Newspapers

also became the news. Critics and audiences reacted both positively and negatively to the FTP's stage versions of Depression era documentaries. One audience member wrote: "My two best evenings in the theatre this year were 40 cents per seat – 'It Can't Happen Here' [by Sinclair Lewis] and 'Power.' Please continue this work....('Curtain Calls by Mail', *Federal Theatre Bulletin*, 2:29)." Another audience member response, this time to *Nation*, came from Eleanor Roosevelt, who told the theatre company: "I think you people...have done something for which people will be grateful for many years to come...something that will mean a tremendous amount in the future, socially, and in the growing-up of America...." (De Rohan, "First Federal Summer Theatre ... A Report" 5).

Critic responses were often favorable. For example, a newspaper reviewer writing in the *World Telegraph* said *Nation* was "A human document...in a setting which for stark realism has never been surpassed (qtd. in Buttita and Witham, 164)." And the *Seattle Times* wrote of the enthusiastic audience response to a local production of *Nation* that "Seldom has any play so caught the public interest" (qtd. in Flanagan, *Arena* 309). But the visibility of the Living Newspaper projects also drew the attention of New Deal and Federal One cultural program opponents in Congress. Some representatives and senators thought the government had no business supporting the arts, especially when other needs were so pressing. Others were growing weary of funding New Deal relief programs. Controversy also swirled around reports and accusations of Communist activity within the FTP (and to a lesser extent the other cultural programs), culminating in hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Unable to convince Congress that the federal theatre

should be continued, its funding was withdrawn and the Federal Theatre Project became part of the country's history—its conversation with the American people—at least through live performances—had come to an end (see Matthews, *Federal Theatre 1935-1939* 296-314).

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Research

The FTP Living Newspapers were closely linked to the mass media of their time. They were firmly rooted to and influenced by Depression era radio, cinema, and newsreels. Like the newspapers, they sought to impart knowledge as well as to serve as a public forum for discussion of ideas. The Living Newspapers were part of the 1930s New Deal programs that redefined the role of government in the lives of American citizens and in the economy. But they also participated in and reflected the larger cultural forces at work in the America of the Great Depression. They sought to establish for the American theatre a role in the democratic process. In their advocacy for social change, they still believed in the power of the active informed citizen to influence government policy and urged action toward that end.

The Federal Theatre Project looked to play a role in the maintenance of the democratic force in American society. The plays *Nation* and *Power* addressed two pressing contemporary issues: how to provide proper housing for the underprivileged, and how to develop technology so that its benefits could be enjoyed by citizens across the economic spectrum. Through the Living Newspapers, the FTP hoped to engage citizens and encourage their active participation in the decisions affecting the civic life of the nation. In her testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938, Hallie Flanagan told the committee that, since 1935, her duty had been to combat “American un-activity (Mathews, *Federal Theatre 1935-1939* 218).” While the comment was lost on committee members, it does offer evidence that the Living Newspapers were firmly a part of what Susman called the “culture of commitment” that characterized the political and social activism of 1930s America.

The Living Newspaper plays were part of four cultural programs of the WPA in theatre, music, art, and writing. In 2012, their cultural legacy is still large in the American landscape, if not always evident. The workers of the WPA cultural programs left myriad documents for study by communication scholars, including theatre and radio plays, life histories, photographs, and thousands of paintings, murals, sculptures, posters, and other cultural artifacts that offer insight to the media of the period and its connection to the larger cultural environment of the 1930s. Scholars have pointed out the roots of the American Living Newspapers of the WPA in the Bolshevik revolution and to the political theatre of 20th Century central Europe. One possible avenue of further research would be to compare the Living Newspapers of the American Depression with its European counterparts, or other political theatre of the era, such as the works of German playwright Bertolt Brecht. Another would be a similar analysis to the one in this study of Living Newspaper scripts that were never performed. An interesting possibility would be to compare *Medicine Show*, a proposal for universal health care, against media, government, and public response to the recently passed federal health care reform.

As Carey said, communication has both a transmission and a ritual role in society. The works of the WPA cultural programs can provide a window to explore the ways in which the media are intricately linked with the larger communication functions of cultural institutions beyond the media themselves, in their roles as agents of change and as keepers of shared cultural beliefs.

I have stated earlier that the legacy of the WPA cannot be easily seen. But that isn't quite true. If I walk by the river near my home in southeast Minneapolis, I will find stone walls built along the river parkway labeled "WPA." On a recent trip to San Francisco, I visited a restaurant near Golden Gate Park, only to walk in the building and see painted murals and mosaics depicting local scenes that were created by workers of the Federal Art Project. And a couple of years ago on a visit to Roanoke Island in North Carolina, I went to see an outdoor play in the park called "The Lost Colony" which was—a Federal Theatre Project play. At the time of this writing, the United States is, the experts say, only beginning to recover from what economists and politicians have called the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression. News reports and columnists reference the New Deal programs—favorably or unfavorably—when seeking causes of and solutions for today's economic crisis. So the WPA influence remains, still contested ground, still culturally significant.

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Appendix A

Figure 1. "...one-third of a nation." Adelphi Theatre

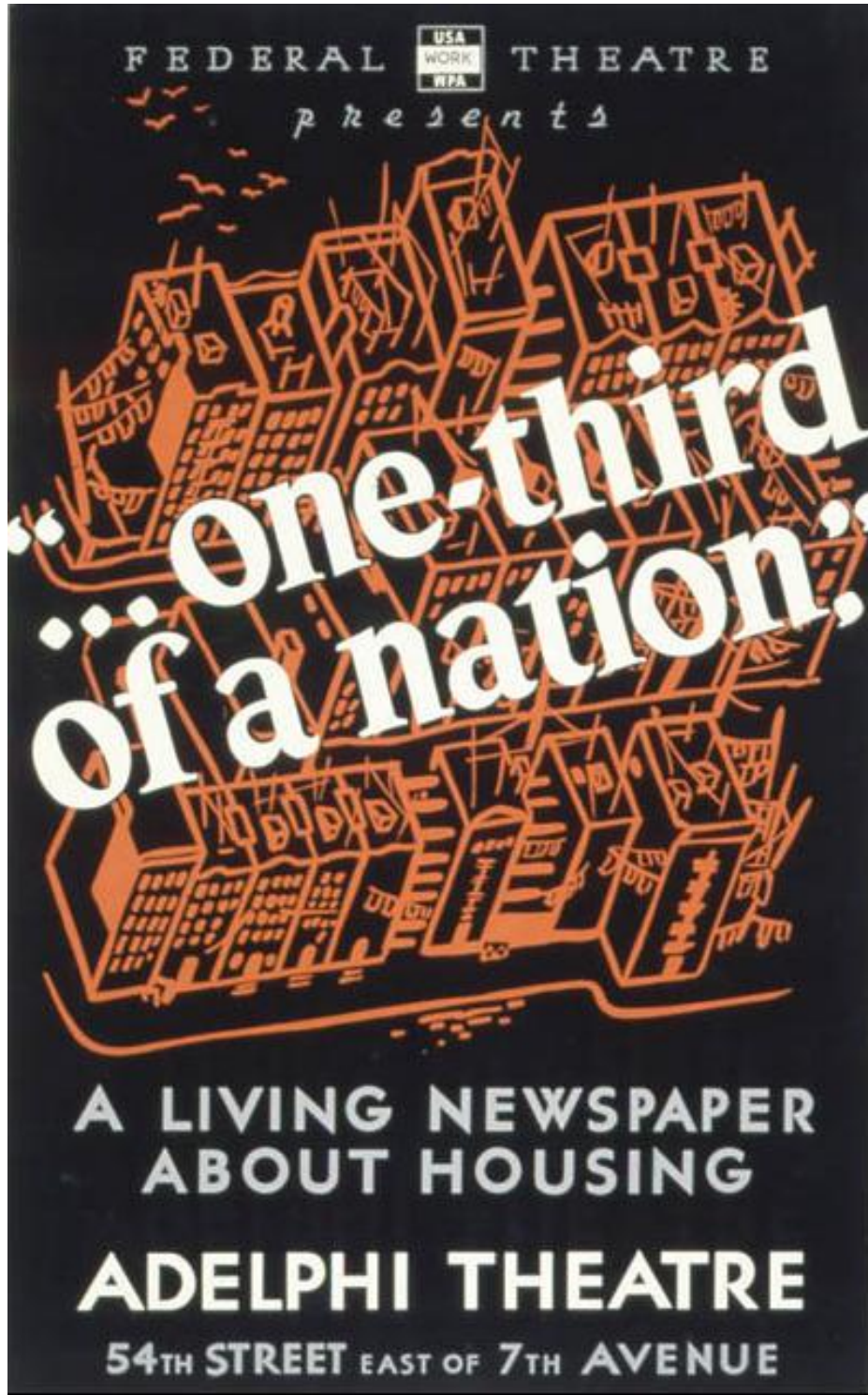



Figure 2. "One Third of a Nation"--Walnut Street Theatre.

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Figure 3. Power—Metropolitan Theatre.



Figure 4. Power—Alcazar.

