

The Federal Theatre Project: Analyzing Conflict among Relief, Art, and Politics in 1930s America

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Grade Level: Middle/High

Duration of lesson: 1-2 periods

Overview:

The Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939), one of four arts projects created under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), embodied the possibilities and flaws of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's early response to the Great Depression. In addition to providing assistance to show people, the Federal Theatre Project sought to bring meaningful theater to the populace, while simultaneously altering and expanding the relationship between the government and the arts. Similar to other New Deal relief programs, attacks were waged on the Federal Theatre Project by opponents who questioned this growing role of government in the lives of individuals and the art it produced.

In this lesson, students will examine numerous primary sources to learn about the accomplishments of the Federal Theatre Project. Students will evaluate the behavior of key decision-makers to determine the project's ultimate effectiveness as a relief and arts program.

Related [National History Standards](#):

Content Standards:

Era 8: The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)

Standard 2: How the New Deal addressed the Great Depression, transformed American federalism, and initiated the welfare state

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

D. Consider multiple perspectives.

Standard 4: Historical Research Capabilities

A. Formulate historical questions.

C. Interrogate historical data.

D. Identify the gaps in the available records, marshal contextual knowledge and perspectives of the time and place, and construct a sound historical interpretation.

Standard 5: Historical Issues-Analysis and Decision-Making

A. Identify issues and problems in the past.

B. Marshal evidence of antecedent circumstances and contemporary factors contributing to problems and alternative courses of action.

C. Identify relevant historical antecedents.

- D.** Evaluate alternative courses of action.
- F.** Evaluate the implementation of a decision.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will determine the purposes of various New Deal programs.
- Students will identify the purpose and achievements of the Federal Theatre Project.
- Students will evaluate why the Federal Theatre Project failed.

Topic Background

The historian Jane De Hart Mathews begins her history of the Federal Theatre Project by writing, "... the Federal Theatre embodied all of the aspirations, ambiguities, handicaps, and frustrations of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal." While only one relatively small program, the Federal Theatre Project does provide a window for analysis of the New Deal as a whole. In addition to providing work relief for theater people, the Federal Theatre aspired to create something new; it sought to bring meaningful theatre to the people, while simultaneously changing the relationship between the government and the arts. Like the New Deal itself, its goals were rather ambiguous and conflict often flared when its role as a relief agency did not coincide with the attempts of director Hallie Flanagan and others to create a "free, adult and uncensored theatre." Administrative difficulties handicapped the project in its mission to provide relief, while political agendas and attacks frustrated efforts to create theatre which dealt with the issues of the time. Like the New Deal it was experimental in nature, tried to do more than one thing at a time, and was vulnerable to attack. The Federal Theatre Project, then provides a microcosm of the New Deal itself.

To understand the place of the Federal Theatre Project within the multitude of New Deal programs some context is necessary. Those who study the New Deal often make distinctions between recovery, relief and reform programs. Further distinctions are made among the New Deal's relief programs, some of which provided direct relief or "handouts" while others provided work relief through job creation. The Federal Theatre Project was a work relief program in that its fundamental purpose was to provide jobs to unemployed show people. A distinction is also commonly made between the First New Deal, which was the name given to Roosevelt's early programs in 1933 and the Second New Deal, which represented a new wave of programs beginning in 1935. Under the First New Deal Roosevelt had cooperated with business in the interest of economic recovery; however, by 1935 Roosevelt was attacking business leaders for their failure to put the concerns of the country over their own self interest and was advocating programs aimed especially at the working class. As part of that effort, Roosevelt pushed through Congress the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in early 1935. Under this law, the Resettlement Administration established new communities and towns for families struggling through hardship, the Rural Electrification Administration brought electricity to rural areas, and the National Youth Administration provided jobs for young adults and students. The first and perhaps most significant program to be created under the Emergency Relief Appropriations Act was the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The WPA ultimately employed more than 8.5 million people, primarily in the construction of roads, public buildings, bridges, airports and parks. The WPA also, however, provided work for artists, musicians, writers and actors and it is under the WPA that the Federal Theatre Project was created.

The WPA, while notable for its size and impact, also represented a departure from the approach taken during the First New Deal in regard to relief.

While some work relief programs were established in 1933 such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which provided young men with useful work protecting natural resources and the less popular Civil Works Administration (CWA), which provided temporary “make work” jobs such as leaf raking, much of the relief was in the form of direct aid. In particular, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) distributed about 3 million dollars to the states to use for dole payments. The WPA then represented a change in both the scale and approach of government intervention with the unemployed. Only those deemed unemployable, such as the sick and handicapped, would remain on state relief rolls; the employable unemployed might be offered work based on their skills and experience. This new approach proved far more palatable to Americans who feared that self respect and self reliance was injured by “handouts”.

The Federal Theatre Project was part of an initiative known as “Federal One”, which also included the Federal Music Project, the Federal Art Project, and the Federal Writers’ Project. These programs were established at the insistence of Harry Hopkins, the WPA administrator, who along with Eleanor Roosevelt sympathized with the arts community, which had been suffering even in the years prior to the onset of depression. Film, radio, and other technologies had changed public taste and in the process displaced many people in the entertainment industry. Out of work actors, stagehands, technicians, musicians and performers were forced to compete with unskilled workers in order to make ends meet as the economy worsened in the 1930s.

In the short run, the achievements of the Federal Theatre were impressive. Under the leadership of Hallie Flanagan, the project produced new and relevant dramas and brought the experience of live theatre to many Americans for the first time. What came out of the Federal Theatre took many forms, and perhaps the most controversial plays produced were the living newspapers. Living newspapers dealt with social problems and were designed to be informative and to propose solutions. *Triple-A Plowed Under* addressed the problems that farmers faced during the Depression and the Agricultural Adjustment Act. *Injunction Granted* gave a history of labor unions, while *One-Third of a Nation* exposed the poor housing conditions found in large cities. Another popular play was *Spirochete*, which provided a history of the spread of syphilis. These productions while factual, did tend to editorialize and often blamed social and economic conditions for personal problems.

In addition to living newspapers, history plays were also popular. The Depression had caused many Americans to be reflective and to search for some truths that had been somehow lost in the past. Plays were produced about the lives of historical figures such as John Brown, Davy Crockett, Jefferson Davis, Booker T. Washington, and Abraham Lincoln. Productions were also performed for children by the Federal Theatre, including adaptations of children’s books, marionette shows (which were also made for adults), and circuses.

African- Americans also found a place within the Federal Theatre, although they were organized into separate units that were administered by whites. An adaptation of *Macbeth*, which incorporated African dance and musical forms, proved to be a hit and allowed African-Americans to show they

were capable of performing the classics. New plays were also performed including living newspapers such as *Liberty Deferred* and history plays that explored events such as Napoleon's attempt to recapture Haiti.

Culturally, the Federal Theatre represented a path not taken. Never again would the government play such an active role in promotion and support of the arts. While its official function was to provide work for theatre professionals it also revealed the possibility of enriching the lives of Americans through exposure to the arts. While centered in New York City, the Federal Theater reached out to cities and towns across the country. In addition, the Federal Theatre Project, did not need to limit itself to those productions which appealed only mainstream audiences. Plays could be produced without concern over potential profits. As a result, writers and directors enjoyed unusual creative freedom and quality theatre was both accessible and affordable to Americans in the 1930s.

Despite its achievements, the Federal Theatre Project had a short life. The freedom it enjoyed made it a cause for concern to conservatives in Congress who saw some of the project's productions as mere propaganda. In its quest to produce relevant theatre, the Federal Theatre got close to sensitive issues and tapped the fears of many that the government and the American way of life were being undermined. Membership within the Communist Party had risen during years since the crash and to conservatives the Federal Theatre often seemed a front for communist activity. Hallie Flanagan was eventually called to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to defend the project, in an episode that foreshadowed the attacks launched by Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s.

While no one play is responsible for the demise of the Federal Theatre, Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* signified the beginning of the end for the project. Future Hollywood legends John Houseman and Orson Welles had chosen to produce the play which had a strong pro union message. Government officials saw the play as dangerous in light of violent strikes which were occurring within the steel industry and ordered the play to shut down on the day it was scheduled to open. In an act of defiance, the play opened anyway as Welles led the actors on a march through New York City to a theatre that did not receive government funding. The show went on without costumes, and the actors performed their roles from their seats so as not to violate agreements made by their union. Blitzstein sat alone at the piano on stage.

Although it would be another two years before the Federal Theatre Project was shut down (1939), the controversy over *The Cradle Will Rock* epitomized the difficulties faced by the Federal Theatre. The relationship between art and government could not survive when those in power found the plays that were produced too threatening. While many New Deal programs were experimental, broke new ground, and changed the relationship between the government and the people, the level of opposition and controversy that surrounded the Federal Theatre Project made it a unique part of the New Deal.

A study of the Federal Theatre Project will allow students to consider several issues. The responsibility of the government to those who are unemployed is one theme that might be debated or discussed. What problems

arise when the government institutes programs to aid the jobless? Is work relief better than direct handouts to the unemployed? Another theme worthy of analysis is the relationship between government and the arts. How and to what degree should the government subsidize art? When, if ever, is governmental censorship of the arts acceptable? Does government have the right to control the art which it is funding? Lastly, a debate over the effectiveness of the Federal Theatre in accomplishing its goals could be used as a starting point for discussion of the successes and failures of the New Deal as a whole, which continues to be debated among historians. In addition, a study of the Federal Theatre allows for connections to be made between past and present. Most students will have an opinion on the issues surrounding government welfare programs, and, although the Federal Theatre is a somewhat different situation, students are aware of the attempts of government to censor the arts, whether it be an exhibit in a New York City museum or the advisory labels on the CDs they buy.

Annotated Bibliography:

Kennedy, David M. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

The Federal Theatre Project is discussed only briefly by Kennedy, however, an excellent background on the WPA is provided. Issues and controversy, as well as, the political context surrounding the WPA are explored.

Mathews, Jane De Hart. *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967.

This is a truly comprehensive study of the Federal Theatre Project. In addition to background and the bureaucracy surrounding the Federal Theatre Project; Mathews emphasizes the conflict between art, relief, and politics which the theatre sparked.

McDonald, William F. *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration*. Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1969.

This text provides excellent background information on all of the New Deal's art projects including a well balanced critique regarding the cumbersome nature of the growing bureaucracy that the New Deal created.

Vocabulary

Relief Program: A government funded initiative to provide assistance to a segment of the population that is struggling economically, politically or socially.

Boondoggle (boondoggling): An unnecessary or wasteful project or activity.

Teaching Procedures

1. As a motivational activity, ask students to make connections with the present.

Who used to watch Sesame Street?

Identify Sesame Street as an example of government sponsorship of the arts after students respond.

Does government support the arts today?

Does censorship of art happen today?

Why would the government choose to censor art, music, books, or the theatre?

Do relief programs for the unemployed and the poor exist today?

How effective are they?

Transition from this introductory discussion by explaining to students that the day's lesson will focus on relief programs of the New Deal in order to compare different approaches a government may take to help people in times of economic crisis. In addition, the issues of censorship and the government's role in relation to the arts will be explored through a study of the Federal Theatre Project, an attempt during the Depression to provide work for unemployed actors and theatre professionals.

2. Distribute Resource Sheet #1, "Relief Programs of the New Deal: A Comparison." Instruct students to use a textbook to gather information on the relief programs listed in the chart and to briefly summarize the way in which they attempted to provide relief (This may be completed as homework prior to class).

After students have completed the chart, use the follow-up questions to lead a discussion on the difference between direct relief and work relief and the flaws of some of the programs. Ask:

What were some of the criticisms people had concerning these programs?

Why would people have a problem with being given money from the government?

What program effected the most Americans?

3. Transition to the second part of the lesson (Objectives 2 and 3) by explaining to students that the Federal Theatre Project was one of many programs that made up the Works Progress Administration. Use information provided in the Content Narrative to provide students some background and context for the Federal Theatre Project. Specifically, introduce Harry Hopkins and Hallie Flanagan as the leaders of the project and describe the situation theatre professionals found themselves in as a result of technological developments and changing tastes even before the Depression struck. Most information, however, should be discovered by the students themselves through analysis of the primary source documents.
4. Divide students into groups in order to analyze primary documents associated with the Federal Theatre Project. Distribute Resource Sheets #2A-N, one packet per group and Resource Sheet #3, "The Achievements and Problems of the Federal Theatre Project," one per student.

Inform students that their task is to work with their group to identify both achievements and problems which led to the demise of the Federal Theatre. They will record their findings in the chart provided, citing the document used for each achievement or problem which they identify. All documents should be analyzed.

5. After the students complete their charts ask the following questions for class discussion:

Should the Federal Theatre Project have been ended by Congress? Why or why not?

Who or what was to blame for the failure of the program?

Does the government have a right to control or censor some types of artistic expression?

Is censorship permissible if the government is funding the art?

Is it a reasonable to expect art, theatre or music to remain neutral in terms of politics, economics, and social issues?

When answering these questions have students cite the sources they are basing their opinions upon.

6. Ask students to identify sources which contradict or support each other. Ask students to explain why some sources may be more credible than others.

Do photographs or written documents provide better source material when trying to construct an historical narrative?

7. As a tool to assess students understanding of the controversy and issues surrounding the Federal Theatre Project distribute Resource Sheet #4, "Assessment."
8. An extension activity could include a critique for historical accuracy of the film *The Cradle Will Rock* (1999).

Primary Source Annotation:

Bentley, Eric. "Suspicion of Subversion: Congressional Conservatives Attack the Federal Theatre Project." *Thirty Years of Treason. Excerpts from Hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968.*
<http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu/d/131> accessed July 20, 2003.

Excerpts from Hallie Flanagan's testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, where she attempted to defend the Federal Theatre Project against accusations of being a communist organization. Conservative congressmen accused Christopher Marlowe and Greek dramatists of being communists. This source illustrates the conflict between politics and the arts (Resource #2K).

Meltzer, Milton and Stevens, Elizabeth C. " 'It Was a Wildly Exciting Time' : Milton Meltzer Remembers the New Deal's Federal Theatre Project." *Columbia Oral History Research Office, Columbia University.*
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/132> accessed July 20, 2003.

An excerpt from an interview of Milton Meltzer who was employed by the Federal Theatre Project; Meltzer gave a first hand account of the canceled premiere of *The Cradle Will Rock*. This source gives some background on perhaps the defining event related to the controversy over the Federal Theatre (Resource #2L).

The New Deal Stage: Selections From The Federal Theatre Project 1935-1939
<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/ftthome.html>

Online exhibit on the Federal Theatre Project by the Library of Congress. Full play scripts may be found on this site. Resource #2C was taken from this collection.

Photos of the Great Depression and the New Deal
<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/gdphotos.html>

The Franklin D. Roosevelt presidential library web site includes photographs of Federal Theatre productions. Resource #2D, #2H and #2I were taken from this collection.

Flanagan, Hallie. *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre*. New York: Benjamin Bloom, 1940.

The director of the Federal Theatre Project's account of the struggles, controversy and ultimate demise of the program. An excerpt from a speech entitled "Is This the Time and Place?" is used as Resource #2A. Speech may also be found online at : <http://newdeal.feri.org/ftp/ftp001.htm>

Hallie Flanagan, "Theater as Social Action," in Piere de Roban, ed., "First Federal Summer Theater: A Report," *Federal Theatre*, June-July 1937: 36 (A project newsletter available in Federal Theatre Project collection, Library of Congress).

Speech by Flanagan where she stated the purposes and goals of the Federal Theatre Project (Resource #2J). This speech can be found on the History Matters website,

<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5103>

The New Deal Network

<http://newdeal.feri.org/>

The New Deal Network website includes many documents and photographs related to the Federal Theatre Project. Articles from *The Nation* (Resources #2B and #2E) are taken from this site. These articles highlight both the accomplishments of the Federal Theatre Project and the controversy over government censorship of plays dealing with the issues of the time. Resources #2F and #2G are photographs included to show the variety of projects which were funded as part of the Federal Theatre Project. Resources #2M and #2N are excerpts from testimony given before the House Committee on Un-American Activities clearly showing that many in Congress suspected that the Federal Theatre Project was a communist organization.