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Rachel Marie Gilbert

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**The Thesis Committee for Rachel Marie Gilbert  
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**For the Ears of Babes:  
The Futures of the Federal Theatre Project's Children's Theatre**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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Charlotte Canning

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Omi Osun Joni L Jones

**For the Ears of Babes:  
The Futures of the Federal Theatre Project's Children's Theatre**

**by  
Rachel Marie Gilbert, B.A.**

**Thesis**

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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to Hallie Flanagan, for being a fearless advocate for theatre in a time of great crisis.

## **Acknowledgements**

I owe a deep debt of gratitude to three groups of people: First, to my committee of Charlotte Canning and Omi Osun Joni L Jones for their continual criticism, support, and encouragement. Second, my cohort of Brianna Figueroa, Scott Blackshire, Amy Gunther, Dotun Ayobade, and Abimbola Adduni Adedokun, for growing into the academy with me, and being constant sources of strength. Additional thanks to my colleagues in Performance as Public Practice - especially Lydia Nelson, Natasha Lindsay, and James McMaster - for their sage advice and continual support of my growth as a scholar. Finally, I want to thank my family - Allen, Kathy, Jennifer, and Alison Gilbert - for their constant love, support, and faith in myself and my work, as well as my kitten Scout, who faithfully curled on my lap or just behind my computer as I wrote the majority of this thesis.

## **Abstract**

### **For the Ears of Babes: The Futures of the Federal Theatre Project's Children's Theatre**

Rachel Marie Gilbert, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisor: Charlotte Canning

This thesis examines the various futures presented by the original children's theatre of the Federal Theatre Project. Combining original archival research and play analysis, I investigate four plays from the Federal Theatre's canon: *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1935) and *A Letter to Santa Claus* (1938) by Charlotte Chorpenning, *Revolt of the Beavers* (1937) by Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz, and *Pinocchio* (1938-9) by Yasha Frank. I posit that the futures presented by the four plays allowed the spectators to envision a new American future beyond the Great Depression: of prosperity, of class equality, of individual agency. These futures were in conversation with the larger unspoken political goal of the Project - to produce theatre relevant to its time and place, and thus to its audiences' time and place. By analyzing the plays and their reception by young, adult, and critical audiences, my thesis reveals a critical genealogy, one that can be traced through conservative arts criticism in the 1930s through present-day attacks on national arts such as PBS and the NEA.

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## Chapter 1: Building the Audience of Tomorrow

In the second grade, I played the Princess from the East in my elementary school's pageant of *The Princess and the Pea*. The story, first recorded by Hans Christian Andersen in the early nineteenth century, follows a picky prince as he searches for a princess to be his wife. Our pageant presented three potential princesses, each rejected for not being quite right: I, the Princess from the East, scared the Prince away with a large rainbow clown wig. A mysterious woman appeared in the prince's doorway on a rainy night, and claimed that she was a princess in need of shelter. The prince's mother tested the unexpected guest, sending the 'princess' to a bed with twenty mattresses and twenty feather beds that cover a single pea. In our pageant, the princess climbed to the top of a rolling staircase, hidden behind a painted cardboard flat representing the theoretically uncomfortable bed. In the morning, the princess revealed her inherent sensitivity as she complained to the prince and royal parents about her horrible night of sleep, kept awake by something incredibly hard in the bed. The tale happily ends with the marriage of the prince and princess, and the preservation of the pea in a museum for safekeeping. The pageant presented us young performance with common narrative, wherein the value of a person is determined by their inherent qualities. In this tale, the princess' physical sensitivity reflected her inherent nobility, goodness, purity, or other stereotypical positive feminine traits. The glowing family audience and young performers alike learned a message of tolerance from the pageant, told to resist judging a person before getting to know them, either through conversation or secret vegetable-based trials.



My second-grade pageant existed within the wide parameters of children's theatre. As a practice - which I define as a theatrical event developed specifically for a young audience - American theatre makers have produced children's theatre for almost a century. Often children's theatre is deployed in educational contexts, ranging from the settlement houses of the early twentieth century, which taught immigrant children to be proper American citizens, to the cafeteria-auditoriums of modern elementary schools. Professional and community theatre companies both present theatre for young audiences, inviting youth groups or visiting schools to watch plays about people like themselves. Throughout the past century, children's theatre practitioners and scholars continually strive for the most effective ways to reach the young audience, to engage them in the action onstage, and to impart the specific morals, messages, and hopes for the future envisioned by the productions. The futures are the ideal versions of life, in which the play presents the young audience an empowered alternate reality. *The Princess and the Pea* teaches its young viewers that they can trust their instincts about people when adults misread someone's inherent goodness.

In most children's theatre, the futures are benign, teaching children to accept change or to stand up for new friends. The futures presented in the children's theatre of the 1930s went beyond simply being good children, however, and instead placed the young audience's actions within the larger context of the Great Depression. This thesis examines the various futures envisioned by the children's theatre of the Federal Theatre Project, a Works Progress Administration project aimed at employing out of work theatre practitioners and entertaining new American audiences. Children's theatre experienced an

exponential growth in the Federal Theatre Project, with a new focus on plays that would entertain and educate its young audience. The Project's productions envisioned a new American future beyond the Great Depression: of prosperity, of class equality, of a renewed importance of theatre and the arts. The Project also placed a special emphasis on producing new children's theatre plays, as a way to develop the future audiences for American theatre.

Hallie Flanagan, the FTP's national director, charged the Project as a whole to look towards the future: "In an age of terrific implications as to wealth and poverty, as to the function of government, as to the peace and war, as to the relation of the artist to all these 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 implications of the theatre."<sup>1</sup> Decrying the commercial basis of theatre catering towards stable adults, Flanagan instead urged a shift in focus to the everyday American, particularly in imagining a new future for the struggling country. The rapidly changing world of the 1930s, Flanagan argued, required a theatre that rethought rather than remembered its craft, using modern techniques to address contemporary issues.

In line with this rethinking, I specifically investigate four plays from the Federal Theatre's canon: *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1935) and *A Letter to Santa Claus* (1938) by Charlotte Chorpenning, *Revolt of the Beavers* (1937) by Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz,

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<sup>1</sup> Hallie Flanagan, "Is This the Time and Place?" First Meeting of Regional Directors Federal Theatre Project, Washington, D.C. 08 October 1935, *The New Deal Stage: Selections from the Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939*, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=ftscript&fileName=farbf/00010001/ftscript.db&recNum=3>

and *Pinocchio* (1938-9) by Yasha Frank. The four plays present interesting case studies of the Federal Theatre as work original to the project - either as adaptations (*Pinocchio*), new works (*Revolt of the Beavers*, *A Letter to Santa Claus*), or the first production of the Federal Theatre itself (*The Emperor's New Clothes*). As new productions, each play balanced the demands of contemporary theatre practice with their political messages, using vaudeville and minstrelsy (*Pinocchio*) or expressionism (*A Letter to Santa Claus*) to reach the young audience. Fantastical subjects are common among the four plays - siblings travel to the North Pole or to the woods of Beaverland, puppets come to life, weavers make invisible fabric in an exotic Orient. The fantastic also includes personal and ethical responsibility - the siblings learn about the costs of greed, the weavers expose corruption within the Emperor's palace, the puppet strives to be a fair and just boy. Politically, the plays attempted to empower its young audience, presenting them with young protagonists who made themselves and their communities better by the final curtain. Each play spoke to their audience politically with varying degrees of secrecy and success: While the anti-Fascist *A Letter to Santa Claus* was praised by critics as family friendly holiday fare, the pro-worker *Revolt of the Beavers* was condemned as purely anti-American propaganda. Investigating the four plays' political content and techniques affords children's theatre the same critical privileges of other Federal Theatre productions, placing the children's theatre in greater conversation with the Project's canon.

The significance of my project lies in the theorization of how the Federal Theatre Project's children's theatre spoke to its young audience in the context of the Great

Depression. I posit that the futures presented by the four plays allowed the spectators to envision a better America, one in which every person had the agency to change their lives and the lives of others. These futures were in conversation with the larger unspoken political goal of the Project - to produce theatre relevant to its time and place, and thus to its audiences' time and place. Investigating the children's plays specifically illuminates how the Federal Theatre positioned its American audience, as productions assumed that younger audiences could only glean simple morals from the plays, crystallizing the larger political implications of the work. The futures presented by the Project gave its audience both hopes for the future and calls to action in creating that future, creating potential activists from passive spectators.

In my thesis, I utilize two main categories of scholarship: the first focuses on different forms of theatre history, while the second provides theoretical frameworks for my analysis of the plays themselves. Each study discussed in the following review of literature sets an important precedent for my study. The books on theatre history, both of the Federal and children's theatre, organize their arguments around a collective American identity, as a national, a localized, or a mass-politics America. The theoretical books, which focus mainly on race and childhood in performance, provide models with which I analyze the four main plays and their implications. In focusing on children's theatre, my project enters a larger cultural conversation surrounding the Federal Theatre, as well as bringing the children's theatre into critical discourse surrounding the Project.

Scholarship on the Federal Theatre often focuses on the Project being a 'successful failure,' and experiment in national art that struggled valiantly but was

ultimately ahead of its time. This narrative is most common in earlier histories of the Project, such as Hallie Flanagan's *Arena* (1940), or Jane Dehart Matthews' *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (1967), as well as contemporary Susan Quinn's *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands made High Art out of Desperate Times* (2008). While a convenient narrative, approaching the Project as such oversimplifies the complex set of artistic and political demands placed on the organization. This narrative places conservative politicians and critics as a scapegoat for the end of the Project, positioning them as uncultured and unable to understand the Project's artistic goals.<sup>2</sup> The successful failure model also isolates the Project as a once-off experiment in American theatre, and does little to trace the impact on both the adult and child stages of the postwar twentieth century. Production analysis focuses primarily on the adult stage and notable productions such as Orson Welles' *Voodoo Macbeth* (1936), or Living Newspapers like *Power* (1937) or *One Third of the Nation* (1938).

Other scholarship on the Federal Theatre has moved away from the 'successful failure' model, instead placing the Project within a larger national context. In *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (1992), Loren Kruger examines how different groups utilized theatre to create and reinforce a sense of national identity. Kruger's analysis of the English, French, and American theatres is based in the early twentieth century and traces the role of the

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the often-quoted anecdote from the Dies Committee Investigation of the FTP, in which Congressman Starnes of Alabama asks Hallie Flanagan if Christopher Marlow was a communist, turns Starnes into his own punch line without interrogating why conservatives would find the Project a threatening entity. See Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* pg. 342, for a full account of the exchange.

audience in each nation-building project. Her work on the Federal Theatre positions the Project as activist in the face of the Great Depression, attempting to motivate a mass American audience to save itself from political unrest, a precedent my project tracks through the children's theatre. In a similar vein, Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (1997) places the Federal Theatre within the larger context of the Popular Front in the interwar and post-WWII period. Denning posits that two notions shape our understanding of politics in art; the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies, or the loyalties of the artists and the function of the art's form. Denning deploys the Federal Theatre in his discussion of the Popular Front's musical theatre through Mark Blitzstein's *The Cradle will Rock* (1937), placing the proletarian opera within larger national attempts to collectively organize workers in the steel industry.<sup>3</sup> Most recently, Elizabeth A. Osborne's *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (2011) looks beyond the units in New York City to construct a more nuanced view of identity in the Project. Osborne pulls case studies from Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, Portland, and national tours of the rural South to localize the Federal Theatre's typical practice. Osborne's analysis also focuses on the role of the audience in determining the successes of local productions, highlighting the inherent disconnect between a national organization and decentralized implementation.

Typically, scholarship on children's theatre itself produces a fractured narrative of the field's practice. The numerous methodologies among practitioners, theatres, and

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<sup>3</sup>Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Labouring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Verso, 1997, 286.

educational institutions make it difficult to understand the field as a whole, as current works focus mainly on specific individuals or groups. For example, Nellie McCaslin's 1971 *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History* was the first work to track the development of children's theatre from the turn of the twentieth century through 1970. The chapters divide this history by decade, and *A History* concludes with a final assessment of the field and its future beyond 1970. Each chapter begins with a brief summary of the common trends and ideas of the decade before focusing on the multitude of theatres and community organizations producing children's theatre during that time. This approach provides the reader with the wide spectrum of historical practice, but makes little attempt to synthesize the field as a whole. McCaslin's works position the FTP as an important historical moment in the practice, "a bold experiment which, in addition to its other contributions, gave an unexpected and vigorous boost to the children's theatre movement."<sup>4</sup> Within children's theatre history, the FTP's artistic risks and outreach to new audiences mark it as an important moment of development in both educational and entertaining children's theatre. While *Theatre for Children in the United States* does not place the FTP at the center of its project, the value of the books lies in the encyclopedic knowledge of the children's theatre's practitioners and to the FTP itself within the larger narrative of children's theatre history.

The theoretical works I utilize within this thesis are divided into two subcategories, the first explicitly about the projects of theatre performance, and the

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<sup>4</sup> Nellie McCaslin, *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971: 87.

second about the construction of childhood. Ilka Saal's *New Deal Theatre: The Vernacular Tradition in American Political Theatre* (2007) and Stephanie Leigh Batiste's *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representations in Depression-Era African American Performance* (2011) form this first subcategory. In *New Deal Theatre*, Saal argues that the contemporary political productions of the 1930s attempted to combine the popularity of vernacular tropes with the politics of Bertolt Brecht's didactic theory to teach their audiences. *New Deal Theatre* focuses on the activities of the adult stage, and Saal posits that the vernacular didactic theatre of the 1930s "seeks to stimulate political action by eliciting the audience's identificatory pleasures in the political. It teases out this moment of pleasure with the help of the culinary appeal and visceral affect of forms of popular and commodity culture, which it utilizes for elucidating, animating, and transmitting the political."<sup>5</sup> Utilizing the same lens to read children's theatre within my analysis exposes similar tensions between entertaining and explicit teaching. In a similar vein, throughout *Darkening Mirrors* Batiste investigates how the Great Depression complicated African American performance and its restructuring of racial identity. Batiste asserts that the multiple performances she examines "experiment with black access to or possession of the power to define self and the nation and affect change."<sup>6</sup> In addition to analysis of contemporary African American film, Batiste focuses on three performances of the Federal Theatre Project: the voodoo *Macbeth* (1936) and *Haiti* (1938) as expressions of

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<sup>5</sup> In this quote, I read 'culinary appeal' as pleasurable and enjoyable to experience. Ilka Saal, *New Deal Stages: The Vernacular Tradition in American Theatre*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, 39-40.

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Leigh Batiste, *Darkening Mirrors: Imperial Representations in Depression-Era African American Performance*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 4.



modernism in performing the Haitian Revolution of 1802, and the popular ‘swing’ adaptation of *The Mikado* (1938) complicated relationship with imperialism and American power. While the children’s theatre plays I investigate do not deal with blackness explicitly, Batiste’s model will help me to examine how the plays position race in their new American futures.

The second subcategory focuses on the contemporary construction of an ideal child: Robin Bernstein’s *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011) and Daniel Thomas Cook’s *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children’s Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer* (2004) investigate both how adults defined children and childhood, and how children operated within those definitions. In *Racial Innocence*, Bernstein examines the ways innocence is coded as lily-white girlhood, in contrast to the violence and mischief of blackness. Bernstein asserts that the assumption of white innocence masked the racist projects within nineteenth and twentieth century play, specifically surrounding adaptations of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and the scripts of dolls. The child, however, is not passive in these projects: Bernstein argues “children expertly field the co-scripts of narrative and material culture and then collectively forge a third prompt: play itself.”<sup>7</sup> Bernstein’s focus on the construction of childhood, the hidden politics of children’s play, and children’s agency within that play provide a model for deeper analysis of the four play’s politics and children’s agency in interacting with the performances. Similarly, Cook’s *The*

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<sup>7</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, 29.

*Commodification of Childhood* examines the ways in which children's clothing manufacturers constructed an ideal, independent child who existed through purchasing consumer goods. Cook uses the concept of pediocularity, or seeing from the imagined viewpoint of a child, to explain the growing focus on the child consumer in the twentieth century: "the consumer child of the twentieth century, somewhat paradoxically, approaches adults, the adult present, and adult desire *through* consumption, all the while maintaining distinctiveness *as* a child - by keeping a child's perspective."<sup>8</sup> While pediocularity originates with children's clothing, the concept helps me to contextualize the Project's construction of its own ideal child to fill its audiences.

To investigate the various futures of the Federal Theatre's children's theatre, my project combines original archival research with play analysis, similar to Dehart's *The Federal Theatre* with a focus on younger audiences. Employing both the archive and the script allows me to develop a detailed context for the four plays, placing the created futures within the Federal Theatre's greater conversation. Throughout my project, I utilize Ilka Saal's understanding of vernacular didactic political performance, that the sympathetic demands of contemporary theatre practice more often than not obscured the messages of political plays, to read the plays and their documentation. Unearthing tensions between vernacular modes and didactic messages within the texts, especially in how the audience decoded them as evidenced in adult reviews and child audience

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel Thomas Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004, 68.

surveys, illuminates how the children's theatre used performance to lead its spectators towards a new American future.

My thesis loosely follows the chronology of the Federal Theatre Project's Children's Theatre throughout its three chapters, tracing the various futures the plays provide for their young audiences. The first chapter focuses on Charlotte Chorpenning's *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1936): as the first children's theatre production, *Emperor's* introduced its audience to a political children's theatre masked by both production spectacle and conservative Orientalism. Chapter two examines two plays, *Revolt of the Beavers* (1937) by Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz, and Chorpenning's *A Letter to Santa Claus* (1938). Both *Revolt* and *Letter* featured a pair of strong siblings, young children who exerted agency over their worlds and attempted to better them with their actions. While the plays share young protagonists, the politics of each are vastly different from the other: *Revolt's* Paul and Mary help lead the oppressed beavers of Beaverland in a coup d'état against the Chief, while *Letter's* Joe and Mary play their way to Santa Claus and use his help to chase away the Shadows - the specters of fascism and injustice - from their innocent world. Chapter three ends with Yasha Frank's adaptation of *Pinocchio* (1937, 1938), the final children's theatre production. *Pinocchio's* popularity - attributed to its use of theatrical spectacle, vaudeville performance, and echoes of minstrelsy in the puppet's wooden body - could not save the production from the end of the Federal Theatre. On June 30, 1939, the final night of the Federal Theatre, *Pinocchio* ended with a funeral march replacing a birthday party, mourning the end of both the Federal Theatre and the audience's temporary escape from the worries of the Great Depression.

*The Founding of the Federal Theatre and its Children's Theatre*

The Federal Theatre Project began on August 2, 1935, as part of Federal One under the Works Progress Administration. The FTP, along with the Federal Writers', Music, and Arts Projects, sought to provide relief for America's out of work artists through employment. The work-relief concept matched the recipient to a job based on their skills: many other WPA projects were 'blue collar' work, such as paving roads or building public parks. Employment on work-relief had two main benefits: one, the recipient would actively work for his wages instead of passively receiving a check, and two, the outcome of that employment would benefit the American people. With these considerations in mind, Hallie Flanagan and the administrators of the FTP strove to use their employees to create a new American theatre. The new theatre would be vibrant, experimental, accessible to a wider audience, and relevant to the times.

To support the formation of a new American theatre, the FTP paid special attention to its youngest audience. Shortly after the founding of the Project, Flanagan and her administrators organized the children's theatre unit of New York City, which served as the national model for other children's theatre units. The Children's Theater's goals were ambitious: as a 1935 proposal promised, the unit would present "drama of high cultural, educational value available at lowest ticket prices to every child at his most impressionable age, and giving useful employment to 220 to 280 actors, technicians, and other workers in New York City, and eventually to hundreds of others all over the United

States in this new and practically undeveloped and much needed field.”<sup>9</sup>The unit’s administrators envisioned the Children’s Theatre as a vibrant group fulfilling FTP’s mission, devoting itself to reaching a wide audience with the best plays possible. To meet this goal, Jack Rennick, the managing producer of the unit, worked closely with the FTP’s Research Department, tasked with investigating the state of children’s theatre at home and abroad, in addition to finding new plays and ways of making theatre for young people. To spread the word about its productions, the New York unit reached out to local youth groups, schools, and settlement houses. A November 1935 survey of local groups and other children’s centers investigated the finances of the young audience, reporting that 10% of the 200,000 children surveyed were unable to pay any admission cost at all, versus the 32% that could pay fifteen cents or less.<sup>10</sup> With this information in mind, many children’s theatre productions had low cost or free admission, and distributed blocks of free tickets to various social groups for underprivileged children. A consulting committee, lead by Dr. Lois Hayden Meek from the Child Development Institute of Columbia University and consisting of local educators and theatre practitioners, lent the unit professional credibility while promoting informed and rigorous decisions about the unit’s productions. In *The Federal Theatre Magazine*, Rennick summed up the ultimate goal of the Children’s Theatre: “In all productions in must be remembered that the young

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<sup>9</sup> Oliver W. Nicoll, “AIM,” Sept. 12, 1935, Box 4 “National Office General Correspondence 1935-39, CA--CO,” folder “Children’s Theatre,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>10</sup> Jack Rennick, “THE CHILDREN’S THEATRE,” August 28, 1936, Box 495 “Correspondence of the New York City Office of the FTP. 1935 - 1939”, folder “The Children’s Theatre,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

auditors is deserving of the best only, and that if we are to have an intelligent and discerning audience tomorrow, we must build it today.”<sup>11</sup>

*The Emperor's New Clothes*, by Charlotte Chorpenning, laid the foundation for the audience of tomorrow as the Children's Theatre's first production. Originally written for the Children's Theatre of Evanston, Illinois, *The Emperor's New Clothes* presented the FTP with a charming adaptation of Hans Christian Anderson's original tale. Chorpenning's play balanced between the two types the Children's Theatre hoped to present, both fantastical and aware of the social context of the Great Depression. *The Emperor's New Clothes* remained faithful to the plot of Anderson's original, but instead recast the weavers as lovable rogues exploring an Oriental city versus scoundrels looking for a quick con. Ultimately, the play presented a hopeful future for its young audience, showing young people how to thrive within the preexisting social order.

*The Emperor's New Clothes* opens with the rogues, Zan and Zar wandering into the Street of the Royal Weavers in the Emperor's city. While anticipating their next adventure, Zan and Zar spot Han, the minister of the Emperor's robes, preparing for a visit to the weavers. Zan and Zar quickly distrust Han, reinforced by the plight of the weavers, who find the rogues in the street and capture them as spies. The crowd's judgment is swift: “Crowd: Beat them! / Ling: The way Han's servants beat me, when I stuck to my price! / Mong: Starve them! The way Han is starving our children!”<sup>12</sup> Despite

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<sup>11</sup> Jack Rennick, “Children's Theatre - New York,” *The Federal Theatre Magazine* 2:3 (1936): 27.

<sup>12</sup> Charlotte Chorpenning, *The Emperor's New Clothes: A Comedy in Three Acts to be played by or for Children*. New York, NY: Samuel French Inc, 1932, 16.

the crowd's fury, an Old Woman saves Zan and Zar after they pledge their loyalty to the weavers, decrying Han's cruelty. Zan and Zar serve as a mirror for the audience: their immediate assessment of who's to blame for the weavers' suffering shows the audience where their sympathy should lay, with the oppressed versus those in power. When Han reappears to select cloth for the Emperor's robes, his bully like behavior further alienates him from the audience. Displeased with the weavers' contempt for him, Han lies to the Emperor, claiming the weavers' are lazy and swapping glass for jewels. With the Emperor's words, Han banishes the weavers, evicting them from their homes and forcing them to leave their goods in the streets. At this injustice, Zan and Zar hatch their plan. Knowing that they can use the Emperor's foolishness and obsession with clothes to their benefit, the rogues present themselves as foreign weavers, who can create cloth with a unique characteristic: "it cannot be seen by anyone who is stupid, or unfit for the position he holds."<sup>13</sup> The Emperor takes the bait, promising Zan and Zar twenty chests of gold and twenty jars of jewels in exchange for the fantastic robe by the next afternoon.

Once in the palace, Zan and Zar begin their scheme in earnest. With a borrowed loom, the rogues mime weaving the cloth, exploiting the foolishness of each visitor, for "every one is a little foolish. Every one will be afraid to tell the truth!"<sup>14</sup> When the General visits, Zan and Zar feed him patterns and colors to report back to Han. Han himself falls for the rogues' trap, pressing them for more details to tell the Emperor about the wonderful cloth. The Empress also visits Zan and Zar, to see the fabric for herself.

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<sup>13</sup> Chorpenning 29.

<sup>14</sup> Chorpenning 46.

The Empress, after fainting twice from anxiety, confesses to the rogues that Han uses his influence with the Emperor to convince him of her stupidity. The Emperor plans to have her view the cloth in his presence, using her reaction to test her suitability as Empress. Taking pity on the Empress, whose sympathy for the weaver's plight proves her inherent goodness, Zan and Zar gently comfort her and help the Empress to identify some of the patterns and colors in the fantastic stuff. Finally, the Emperor arrives with Han to view the cloth for himself. Both the Emperor and Han continue the ruse, the Emperor pleased with the numerous compliments from Zan and Zar on the wonderful figure he cuts in his new clothes. The Empress arrives, and passes the Emperor's test with the help of the rogues, her tears a result of the cloth's astonishing beauty. The rogues trick Han, frantically shooing him off of the Emperor's train, causing him to step all over the garment and tear it to rags. Confronted by the Emperor, Han angrily confesses, "I did not mean to stamp on it! I could not see the stu --- (*He catches himself, clapping his hand over his mouth*)." <sup>15</sup> With the trick complete, Zar and Zan reveal Han's cache of fabric and jewels stolen from the weavers, further removing Han from the Emperor's favor. Rewarded with gold and gems, the rogues send the Emperor away to prepare for the parade, and then rush off into the city to find the weavers before they leave the city.

The final act of *The Emperor's New Clothes* sews up all the play's loose ends. Zan and Zar stumble upon the Street of the Royal Weavers with their gold, but cannot remember exactly where they are. Pressed for time, they hide their gold in the balcony of

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<sup>15</sup> Chorpenning 73.



one of the houses, and rush back to dress the Emperor. Meanwhile, the weavers hide in their houses, having waited too long to leave the city, as the street fills with citizens eager to see the Emperor's new clothes. The Emperor arrives in his full glory, wearing only his crown and an undershirt. The loyal citizens play along, complimenting the clothes after a panicked pause. Zan and Zar quickly realize that they've found the Street of the Royal Weavers, and hatch a new plan. The rogues invite the weavers to come out of their houses and view the Emperor's robes. The frightened weavers bow before the Emperor, hiding their true reactions to his undressed state. The General drags on Han, insolent with his hands bound. After declaring "I see nothing at all. It is to me as if the emperor wore only his undermost garment of all," Han and his unapologetic truth are quickly banished from the city.<sup>16</sup> Zan and Zar promise to teach the weavers the secret of their fantastic craft, and in exchange the Emperor promises the weavers his patronage. The Emperor, confident in his sartorial success, parades away with the citizens, leaving just in time for an outspoken child to cry, "Mother! The emperor has nothing on but a shirt!"<sup>17</sup> With the Emperor a safe distance away, the weavers and the rogues celebrate a successful adventure. The rogues give the impoverished weavers their gold, jewels, and clothes, and leave the city in search of their next adventure righting the wrongs of other foolish people.

*The Emperor's New Clothes* opened at the Adelphi Theatre on June 2, 1936, as the Children's Theatre unit's first production. On a crisp early summer afternoon, an excited audience of adults and children filled the Adelphi's 1,431 seats for the matinee

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<sup>16</sup> Chorpenning 96.

<sup>17</sup> Chorpenning 100.

performance. A souvenir program, printed on large colorful paper, set the scene for the new audience. Charming illustrations of the smiling rogues, a comical emperor, and non-threatening General framed information about the cast and unit administration, enlivening this young audience. Once the curtain rose, the play transported the audience to a fantastic and vibrant Oriental city. Surviving costume designs and swatches indicate the characters were full of color and ornate detail: the Emperor wore a gold cloth coat, festooned with wine velvet flowers, ermine tails, jewels, and lined with white fur. Compared to the Weavers, dressed in ragged grey robes, the Emperor became the personification of excess. Han's costume highlighted his villainous influence: dressed in a long black cape with an oversized collar, a black skull cap, and carrying a tall black staff, Han's dark attire stood in stark and threatening contrast with the riotous color filling the rest of the stage. Zan and Zar wore complimentary costumes, with patchy pants and their names appliquéd on their shirts, distinct from the other characters and uniting the rogues as our heroes.<sup>18</sup> The set for *Emperor's* invoked the sketches of the program, utilizing a black backdrop with buildings outlined in white to bring the Oriental city to the audience, while also letting the fantastic costumes pop against the dark background.<sup>19</sup> The production created an overall sense of fantastic whimsy for the audience, as the colorful costumes and slapstick action helped sweeten the play's social critique for the youngest

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<sup>18</sup> "Emperor's New Clothes" Costume breakdown, WPA FTP National Service Bureau, B.146 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935-39 CR--E, F. Emperor's New Clothes - NYC ;" record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>19</sup>Photograph, "WPA: Federal Theater Project: Children's Theater Unit: "The Emperor's New Clothes," 1936. Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and Museum website; version date 2009. <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/images/photodb/27-0529a.gif>

patrons.

The play took New York by storm: The first month of *Emperor's* run entertained 106,105 audience members, young and old alike. A review in *The New York American* beamed "It is a lively, playful, and comical tale, all done with an imagination that provides for juveniles every bit of color, tomfoolery and exaggeration that the occasion demands."<sup>20</sup> J.R. Atkins, in Chicago's *People's Press*, deemed *Emperor's* "a humdinger of a play, as colorful as Harlem's *Macbeth*, as satirical as the portrait of the king in *New Gulliver*, as full of adventure as a Wild Westerner, and as funny as W.C. Fields playing Hamlet."<sup>21</sup> In the *New York Herald-Tribune*, Marguerite Tazelaer summarized the implications of the play for the young audience, as *Emperor's* "works out with a proper moral, which every good fairy-tale should have, and even a hint of social equity, which every good WPA play should have."<sup>22</sup> For critics, *The Emperor's New Clothes* showed the promise of the FTP's children's theatre: a delightful play with a slight social significance, entertaining adults and children alike, while employing theatre professionals rescued from the relief rolls.

The public reaction to *The Emperor's New Clothes* was similarly positive. The

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<sup>20</sup> "Federal Theatre Offers Charming Fable at Adelphi" *New York American*, June 11, 1936, B.146 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935-39 CR--E, F. Emperor's New Clothes - NYC. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>21</sup> J.R. Atkins, "Theatre Telescopes," *People's Press*, June 6, 1936. B.146 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935-39 CR--E, F. Emperor's New Clothes - NYC. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>22</sup> Marguerite Tazelaer, *New York Herald-Tribune*, 06/10/1936, B.146 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935-39 CR--E, F. Emperor's New Clothes - NYC. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

play's original six-month run reached 125,031 audience members in both the Adelphi Theatre and several public parks during the Caravan Theatre's summer tour. Letters from happy audience members poured into the FTP's offices. Lester Dix, a director at the Lincoln School of Teachers College, praised the play as "highly enjoyable and I regard it as a highly skillful piece of work with special values for children. Highly evident indeed is the youthful spirit and sympathetic insight into childhood."<sup>23</sup> For others - such as Sarah Clyne, an advisor of the local children's Lotus Circle<sup>24</sup> - *Emperor's* "was like a dream come true, a fairy tale come to life, a real poetic gem beautifully acted."<sup>25</sup> James Farrell, the president of the Parents Organization of East Lower Harlem, entreated the Children's Theatre for tickets, as "we have 450 children on register, and we would like as many of them as possible to see the shows."<sup>26</sup> For an adult audience, *The Emperor's New Clothes* was clean and wholesome entertainment, an inexpensive way to introduce children to theatre via a lovely play with an acceptable moral. The letter writing wasn't just limited to the adult audience, however, as numerous children also wrote the FTP to share their opinions about the play.

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<sup>23</sup> Lester Dix, 'Excerpt from Letters', B. 537 - Press Books of the NYC department of Info, 1936-1938, F - PB - Emperor's New Clothes. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>24</sup> Within the Theosophical Society - a group dedicated to esoteric philosophy investigating the nature of human divinity - Lotus Circles were groups for young children to begin learning about Theosophy, similar to contemporary Christian youth groups. (H. Alexander Fussel, "Lotus Circles Throughout the World," *Lucifer Magazine, January to December 1930*, Google books, <http://books.google.com>)

<sup>25</sup> Sara Clyne, Lotus Circle, 'Excerpt from Letters', B. 537 - Press Books of the NYC department of Info, 1936-1938, F - PB - Emperor's New Clothes. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>26</sup> James Farrell, letter to FTP. B. 537 - Press Books of the NYC department of Info, 1936-1938, F - PB - Emperor's New Clothes. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

The surviving responses, collected in the FTP's records within the National Archives, come from an audience delighted by the magic of the play and the downfall of Han. Ten-year-old Gladys Bibby wrote that she "leapt and cried for great joy when that there Harn fellow who stole from the poor weavers was put in jail. It serves him right for making the poor old weaver get that beating on his back."<sup>27</sup> Nine-and-a-half-year-old Edward Hochberg, who wrote from an ice cream parlor on 6<sup>th</sup> avenue, complimented the play as "a fine show and a very good one too. I could not stop myself laughing all the time because the 2 weavers who followed the emperor like they did were funny fellows."<sup>28</sup> Mary Pappas, an eleven-year-old resident of the East Village, reflected on her first theatrical experience: "I do not know what to say about the 'Emperor's New Clothes.' I liked it so much that I got very much enjoyment of it."<sup>29</sup> For Mary, the play hinged on Han's evil actions and influence over the "poor dope" Emperor, as she emphatically stated that, "I hate that there Harn fellow very much."<sup>30</sup> Lila Slater, a self-proclaimed critic at eleven years old, wrote "This was my first Broadway show and it certainly fulfilled my every expectation. I was fascinated by the grandness and glamour

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<sup>27</sup> Gladys Bibby, letter to FTP. B. 537 - Press Books of the NYC department of Info, 1936-1938, F - PB - Emperor's New Clothes. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Hochberg, letter to FTP. B. 537 - Press Books of the NYC department of Info, 1936-1938, F - PB - Emperor's New Clothes. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Pappas, letter to FTP. B. 537 - Press Books of the NYC department of Info, 1936-1938, F - PB - Emperor's New Clothes. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

of the costumes and jewels.”<sup>31</sup> Lila’s letter mentions her disdain for Han and sympathy for the weavers, as well as her pleas to her older sister to take her to another performance, given that patrons of every age will enjoy the play. In addition to unsolicited letters, the Children’s Theatre unit distributed surveys to the young audience after performances, asking for their opinions about *Emperor’s* and plays in general. The survey revealed a charmed audience: 50% of children surveyed stated they preferred watching plays to movies, while 90% had never seen a play before.<sup>32</sup>

Both the letters and survey uncover a young audience enamored with *The Emperor’s New Clothes*. While a great majority of children had never seen a play, the audience deftly identified the heroes and villain of the story, laying all of their sympathy with the oppressed weavers. The children’s unanimous hatred of Han aligns them with the heroes Zan and Zar, two youthful rogues that constantly better the world around them. Sympathy for the weavers, whose oppression resumed with every performance, could lead to the audience standing up for themselves or others, seeking to make the rogues proud through their good deeds. Zan and Zar’s impression on the children was certainly strong: during a July performance, Zan’s request at intermission insured that every pencil of the 1,000 distributed to the audience were returned with the questionnaires after the

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<sup>31</sup> Lila Slater, letter to FTP. B. 537 - Press Books of the NYC department of Info, 1936-1938, F - PB - Emperor’s New Clothes. Record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>32</sup> Press release, Dept. of Information, “Theatrical Pathfinder,” Nov. 23, 1936. B.146 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935-39 CR--E, F. Emperor’s New Clothes - NYC. Record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

curtain fell.<sup>33</sup>

*The Emperor's New Clothes* proved itself the FTP's most reliable children's play: after it's original run in New York City, which reached 125,031 audience members, *Emperor's* went on to nine additional productions in seven states throughout the rest of the FTP's operation. Each subsequent production adapted the framework laid by the original New York City showings, to enthralled audiences of all ages. In Cleveland, the Theatre for Youth's 1937 production of *Emperor's* toured sixty-eight schools and playgrounds through the summer, in addition to a run at the Cleveland Auditorium. Unlike its 1936 predecessor, the Cleveland production's design skewed farther towards an exotic Chinese effect: wooden screens, tapestries, a statue of the Buddha, and carved dragon decorated the Palace, while painted banners of Chinese text designated the Street of the Royal Weavers.<sup>34</sup> The costumes also relied on an Oriental aesthetic, with rich colors, decorative collars that curled up and away from the body like pagoda roofs, and pale yellow makeup for the Emperor and his court. Han, in vaguely traditional court dress, wears an official's cap in a similar style to those from the Qing dynasty as well as a fu manchou. The rouges Zan and Zar are also in exotic costumes, having traveled from a whimsical India with matching turbans and harem pants in fuchsia and emerald. The costumes and set of the Cleveland *Emperor's*, combined with the suggested Chinese

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<sup>33</sup> Press Release. Dept. of Information, July 28 1936. B.146 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935-39 CR--E, F. Emperor's New Clothes - NYC. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>34</sup> Photographs, Production Bulletin, B.444 - Bound Federal Theatre Project Production Bulletins, 1936-1939. Dragon Zne Zee -- Emperor's New Clothes. Record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

music and dance, created an incredibly orientalist pastiche that ultimately smothered the play's moral.

Many contemporary scholars have exposed the inherent racism and politics of Orientalism and yellowface performance in American theatre. As Josephine Lee argued in *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*, the continued representation of Asian stereotypes trace “a succession of anxieties felt on a national scale: a fear of the ‘yellow peril’ contaminating the racial purity of an American ideologically designated for the ‘lovely White,’ the moral justification of overseas imperialism, and later on, economic neocolonialism.”<sup>35</sup> The performance of these stereotypes outside of a critical or historical context limited the viewer's ability to interrogate the politics onstage, in addition to the perpetuation of racism. Thus for an audience outside of Asian populations, such as a white child in 1930s Cleveland, an Orientalist *The Emperor's New Clothes* reinforced a sense of racial superiority: the Emperor's vanity and foolishness stems from his race, the empress' constant fainting and weeping becomes an expression of inherent weakness. The rogues - who also operate within Oriental stereotypes through their Indian dress - and their intervention lose importance, as Zan and Zar's alien appearance distances the child audience from the moral of their actions. The Orientalist approach to *The Emperor's New Clothes* ultimately limits the effectiveness of the play's message, as the exotic spectacle distracted the child

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<sup>35</sup>Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, 13.



from thinking critically about the politics of the conflict between corrupt Han and the impoverished weavers.

A 1939 production of *The Emperor's New Clothes* in Chicago had a different interpretation of the play, choosing instead to place the action in a mythical Arabian motif. The move away from the strictly Chinese setting exemplified by the Cleveland production allowed the company, as costumer designer Clive Rickabaugh argued, "gives you the freedom of all the orient plus your imagination."<sup>36</sup> The Chicago production, as described in its surviving production bulletin, ran with that freedom to create a highly stylized *Emperor's*. As director William J. Pollard explained to his actors, the "approach to the play was not a realistic one, but one of utter fantasy and they [the actors] must have just as much fun doing it as we expect the audience to receive from watching it and listening to it."<sup>37</sup> Pollard explained that the production's decision to employ heavy stylization was meant to encourage the young audience to mimic the characters' movements and behaviors, continuing the action of the play. As Robin Bernstein argues in *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), a spectator's ability to recreate scenes from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* - based on illustrations from programs and other Tomitudes, as well as tableaux from the numerous stage productions - allowed them to access the play's politics in the comfort of their own

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<sup>36</sup> Clive Rickabaugh, "Costume Notes," Production Bulletin - *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Charlotte Chorpenning [Chicago, June 1939], Box 444 - Bound Federal Theatre Project Production Bulletins, 1936-1939. Dragon Zne Zee -- Emperor's New Clothes, record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>37</sup> William J Pollard, "Director's Notes," Production Bulletin - *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Charlotte Chorpenning [Chicago, June 1939].

home, namely the desirable innocence of Eva and Tom.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the stylization of *The Emperor's New Clothes* in Chicago prompted the young audience to transfer the play from the stage to the playground via their mimicry. In his director's note, Pollard beamed "I have been told by a number of adults that their children were walking and talking in an impersonation of the various characters in the play. To me, this re-action is necessary for the success of plays for children."<sup>39</sup> These re-actions and impressions allowed the enthralled child an embodied experience of *Emperor's*, reinforcing the message of the play - that you should help oppressed people and exploit the foolishness of others - with every stylized movement.

*The Emperor's New Clothes* proved itself a valuable first step for the Federal Theatre Project's children's theatre. The 1936 New York production delighted young patrons and adult critics alike, with a professional aesthetic and subtle social critique. *Emperor's* both presented a justice-driven future for the young audience, it also promised more artistically and politically successes from the children's theatre. Reaching an underserved audience, *Emperor's* toured through public parks in the five boroughs and gave free performances throughout the summer. The play entertained 125,031 audience members by its closing in November;<sup>40</sup> serving as the first hit for the children's theatre. In

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<sup>38</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood Innocence from Slavery to Civil Rights*, New York: New York University Press, 2011, 125-7.

<sup>39</sup> Pollard, "Director's Notes," Production Bulletin - *The Emperor's New Clothes* by Charlotte Chorpenning [Chicago, June 1939].

<sup>40</sup> New York City - Monthly Report of Project Progress, November 20<sup>th</sup> thru December 19<sup>th</sup>, 1936, Box 97 Narrative Reports, 1935-1939 NY--NYC, Folder "NYC - November 20 - December 19, 1936," record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

addition to the approval of young laughter and applause, the surveys and questionnaires distributed to the child audience collected important data for the FTP administrators and advising educators in planning the next children's theatre offerings. While many of the surveys requested more fairy tales, Jack Rennick and the other children's theatre administrators imagined plays with more overt connections to the social and political issues surrounding the Great Depression. The next chapter examines two of the children's theatre's socially conscious plays - *The Revolt of the Beavers* (1937) by Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz, and *A Letter to Santa Claus* (1938) by Charlotte Chorpenning - and how a stronger political tone complicated the young audience's understanding.

## Chapter 2: Precocious Politics, Young Protagonists, and Audience Agency

1937 proved itself a major turning point in the history of the Federal Theatre Project. The previous year and a half saw numerous successful productions: young audiences flocked to *The Emperor's New Clothes* in summer of 1936; twenty-one productions of Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* opened simultaneously across twenty-one states in October 1936<sup>41</sup>; touring companies visited refugee camps throughout the South and Midwest after the disastrous floods of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers of January 1937, using their performances to bring entertainment and moral support.<sup>42</sup> During this time, the Federal Theatre began solidifying its uncertain position within both New Deal relief and American theatre as a whole, growing stronger with each entertained audience. However, the controversy surrounding two New York City performances threatened to undermine the Project's relief and artistic work.

*The Cradle Will Rock*, a musical by Marc Blitzstein and directed by Orson Wells, took its cues from Brecht in its unflinching portrayal of corruption and greed in the fictional Steeltown, USA. The story follows the aptly named union organizer Larry Foreman as he attempts to lead the town against the evil Mr. Mister, who owns the steel mill and the entire town. The musical ends as Foreman stands up to Mr. Mister, implying that the workers of Steeltown USA will join Foreman, rise, and rock the titular cradle. The everyman character of Foreman and the town's rebellion against oppressive business

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<sup>41</sup> Flanagan, *Arena* 115.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth A. Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011, 171.

owners performed a radical model for the audience, one which empowered them to stand up to corruption in their own communities. Steeltown wasn't the only place rocked by the musical: On the afternoon of *Cradle*'s June 16<sup>th</sup> opening, the WPA offices in Washington issued orders to delay the opening of new productions until July 1<sup>st</sup>, the start of the new fiscal year.<sup>43</sup> In the new orders Blitzstein and his production team suspected censorship of their radical musical, and made alternative arrangements for its performance. The evening of June 16, six hundred audience members with tickets for *Cradle* at the Maxine Elliot theatre instead walked twenty blocks up to the Venice Theatre. From this auspicious beginning, *The Cradle Will Rock* transferred from the FTP to private backing and critical success.

*The Revolt of the Beavers* was the other production jeopardizing the Federal Theatre's year and a half of good will. Written for the Project by Oscar Saul and Lou Lantz, two staff writers behind the Living Newspaper *Flight* (1936), *Revolt* proved itself the boldest step towards the new type of children's play the FTP hoped to create. With a colorful cast of characters, a fantastic setting, and plenty of song and dance, *Revolt* introduced its young audience to the class conflicts of Beaverland and the siblings who would set things right. This chapter examines both *The Revolt of the Beavers* and *A Letter to Santa Claus* - written by Charlotte Chorpenning, and produced in December 1938 as a gift to the children of Chicago - and how the productions positioned their politics for their young patrons. While *Revolt*'s Communist undertones made it a lightning rod for

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43 "STEEL STRIKE OPERA IS PUT OFF BY WPA: Many Among 600 Gathered for Preview Charge Censorship Because of 'Radical' Plot," *The New York Times*, June 17, 1937.

conservative criticism of the Project and its inherent un-American ideology, *Letter's* sympathetic politics ensured its positive reception by children and adults alike.

*The Revolt of The Beavers* chronicles the journey of Paul and Mary, a poverty-stricken pair of working-class human siblings who find themselves transported from an unnamed city to the forests of Beaverland by Mr. Wind. The play opens as Paul and Mary walk home from school, collecting scrap wood and pining for a wishing stone. The children hope to use the wishing stone to solve their troubles; Mary plans that “first I would wish my father got a job, and then I would wish for a big piece of chocolate”<sup>44</sup> while Paul wishes that everyone in the world could be nine years old. In this young world, everyone would follow Paul’s logic: “I could go to the candy store, and just imagine. Mr. Berger would be nine years old, and I would say: “Mr Berger, I haven’t got no penny, gimme a piece of candy, will ya,” and he would give it to me, because he would know how I felt if I didn’t have any candy.”<sup>45</sup> While both children address the very real world concern of Depression poverty in this scene, they do so via the vernacular concerns of youth, such as their parents’ wellbeing or wanting sweets. These first innocent wishes subtly introduce the audience to the common economic conflicts that control the remainder of the play, conflicts always addressed with childish innocence.

Once in Beaverland, Paul and Mary discover the woods are not all that they seem to be. The siblings meet the Professor, who declares that there are “no more good times.

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<sup>44</sup> Oscar Saul, Lou Lantz, *The Revolt of the Beavers* 128.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

The chief is making everyone sad.”<sup>46</sup>Paul and Mary also meet Oakleaf, the heroic beaver who started a club for “very sad beavers to become glad” in defiance of the Chief.<sup>47</sup> In retaliation, the displeased chief banished Oakleaf from Beaverland, instructing his Whistling Clubs “if you catch [Oakleaf], hit him until he cries.”<sup>48</sup>The siblings are rightly outraged by the Chief’s tyrannical control of Beaverland. Paul and Mary urge the Professor to take them to the Chief. The siblings plan to convince the Chief of the error of his ways, hoping to take the action into their young hands, modeling an ideal of civic engagement for the young audience.

Later the siblings and the audience meet the residents of Beaverland in their own dire circumstances. The beavers spend their days working at the Wheel: a giant water wheel in the center of Beaverland that powers the conveyer belts, where the beavers collectively strip, clip, stack, and pack tree bark, a fantastic woodland factory. The busy beavers lament that they “work, work, work all day, / But the chief of all the Beavers, / he gets all the bark we make / all he does is pull the levers / while we work until we ache.”<sup>49</sup> Following the song, the audience finally meets the Chief: a rotund bully, zipping around the stage on roller skates and wearing the best blue sweater in all of Beaverland. During the workers’ lunch break, the Chief feasts on turkey and ice cream with his flunkies as the lunch-less workers watch. The Chief, much like Han in *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, is

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<sup>46</sup> Saul, Lantz 135.

<sup>47</sup> Saul, Lantz 140.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Saul. Lantz 143.

immediately coded as a bully for the young audience, an unsympathetic character who represents everything wrong in the world.

When the Professor finally ushers in the siblings, the Chief attempts to show off his power and win Paul and Mary over. However, Paul and Mary see through the Chief's false bravado, and criticize him for his greed and oppression of the other beavers. The Professor is of no help, criticizing Chief with the fact that Oakleaf wouldn't have been banished from Beaverland if all of the beavers had an equal amount of bark.<sup>50</sup> The Chief throws a temper tantrum in response, ordering his Whistling Club to punch the siblings and kick them out of Beaverland. Turning to the remaining restless beavers, the Chief calls the Barkless Beavers back to Beaverland, asking the working beavers "who wants to be the first Barkless Beaver? Where is he? Let him say something."<sup>51</sup> The scene ends with the beavers timidly returning to their work, reminded that the Chief's control of the Wheel and their employment gives him, the bully that he is, ultimate control over Beaverland.

Paul and Mary spend the remainder of the play learning about the beaver's plight and helping them to overthrow the Chief, continuing their modeling of political activism for the young audience. In the woods later that night, the siblings meet a party of working beavers who plan to intercept the Barkless Beavers and keep them from entering Beaverland, forming a line across the border. The Barkless Beavers arrive, with tattered

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<sup>50</sup> Saul, Lantz 147.

<sup>51</sup>Saul, Lantz 148.



clothes and few belongings, looking like “*the last word in dejection and despair.*”<sup>52</sup>

Faced with their common plight, both the working and Barkless Beavers agree to join the club for sad beavers to get glad, pledging in worker solidarity to not work the busy busy without the other. Suddenly, the Chief and the nefarious Scaly Brothers arrive in the woods, and unsuccessfully attempt to get the Barkless Beavers marching into Beaverland. When the unified beavers reveal both their membership to the club for sad beavers to get glad and their loyalty to Oakleaf, the infuriated Chief takes drastic measures; as the Barkless Beavers are chased out of Beaverland, the remaining beavers are threatened with imprisonment for any opposition to the regime, Oakleaf is to be killed on sight, and the children and Professor are arrested. The Chief ominously promises to teach Paul, Mary, and the Professor “the biggest lesson there is and the lesson is, I’m gonna kill them tomorrow lunch time.”<sup>53</sup> The threat of continued execution, while physically impossible, mimics the dangers faced by union organizers and dissenting workers throughout 1930s America, aligning the beavers’ plight with that of the nation’s oppressed workers. In the face of this danger, the beavers reunite with Oakleaf and beginning planning their titular revolt.

The curtain rises on Paul, Mary, and the Professor tied to a stake in the middle of the workspace in the early dawn light. The tension rises as the day breaks: the Chief, nervous about Oakleaf’s return, attempts to exchange the siblings and Professor their freedom for information about Oakleaf. Paul emphatically refuses: “snitching is the worst

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<sup>52</sup> Saul, Lantz 152.

<sup>53</sup> Saul, Lantz 156.

thing in the world, for a human being or a beaver.”<sup>54</sup> Paul’s loyalty, couched in schoolyard experience, echoes both the new loyalty of the Barkless beavers and the audience’s intended loyalty to the common beaver cause. The working day starts as the beavers file in, surreptitiously carrying lunch boxes. As the busy busy begins, the beavers build a barricade between themselves and the Chief. Oakleaf triumphantly emerges and challenges the chief, as “the beavers are sad and they need the wheel -- and it belongs to them. What do you say, Beavers?”<sup>55</sup> With that rally cry, the beavers begin the battle with the Chief and his supporters. The beavers produce their hidden zippo guns from their lunch boxes, free the siblings and Professor, and appoint Paul - the best fighter in his school - their general. During the childish four-hour battle, the Scaly Brothers abandon the Chief while the Barkless beavers join the fight on the working beavers’ side, providing the final push to end the battle. The battle concludes as the Chief flees Beaverland, ending his reign of tyranny. The triumphant beavers begin to celebrate their victory, pledging in their song that:

There’s bark for every beaver / Who swings a cleaver / Or pulls a lever, /  
There’s not a barkless beaver / in all of Beaverland.

We’ll be building every day / Each one helps in his own way. / Every beaver  
has his say / In building our new land.

Always helping one another / Every beaver like a brother. / All the beavers  
help each other / In our Beaverland.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Saul, Lantz 165.

<sup>55</sup> Saul, Lantz 167.

<sup>56</sup> Saul, Lantz 172-3.

The final song provides both an outlet for the beavers' joy as well as a promise to the audience: With the Chief's banishment, the beavers can work together to make their home and themselves the best that they can be.

The titular revolt completed, Paul and Mary wait at the edge of the woods for Mr. Wind to take them home. The beavers arrive to see the siblings off, skating onstage in their brand new blue sweaters, and offer the siblings the chance to stay in Beaverland. Paul, however, politely declines the heroes' welcome: "the most important thing I wanna say is I'm glad all of the beavers are happy and I'm glad that Mary and I could help them."<sup>57</sup> As the beavers triumphantly cheer, Mr. Wind arrives and whisks the children home, where they can continue to help others in their struggles for social justice. *Revolt* ends in a world of equal work and play, promising the young audience that they too can fight for the rights of workers within their community, with or without blue sweaters.

Similarly to 1936's *The Emperor's New Clothes*, the production elements of *The Revolt of the Beavers* drew on the whimsy and wonder of the play's fantastic setting. Vividly painted backdrops framed the stage: a print in *Federal Theatre*, the FTP's magazine, shows a woodland transported from an Art-Deco children's book illustration. The setting's aesthetic is bold and graphic - a tree stands at center stage, its slender trunk gently curving stage left into the bright yellow horizon. The Wheel stands stage right behind low forest green shrubs, and two trees on either side of the stage form a makeshift

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<sup>57</sup> Saul, Lantz 174.

curved proscenium.<sup>58</sup> The beaver's costumes are similarly abstract - each beaver wears a pair of human-like overalls fitted through the torso that then balloon out through the calf, an extended jodhpur. Along with the overalls, a work shirt, a skullcap with felt ears, a jaunty hat, and animal-like makeup - a dark tan wash over the face, with white makeup surrounding the 'muzzle' of the actors' eyes, noses, and upper lips - completed the beaver ensemble for the white cast.<sup>59</sup> Additional costume elements help the audience to identify individual characters: the Professor wears a dark double-breasted overcoat, a tie, and tasseled cap, while the Chief is always in his blue sweater and on roller skates. The actors playing Paul and Mary wear contemporary clothing that is slightly too large, hiding their adult frames in childlike proportions. Unlike *Revolt's* politics, its design deviated little from its FTP contemporaries, creating a whimsical world for the serious action of the play.

*The Revolt of the Beavers* represented a bold step towards the new, socially relevant children's theatre for young American audiences. To ensure the play's successful Broadway reception, the Department of Information drafted numerous press releases about *Revolt* for various NYC newspapers. Each release provided the potential audience

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<sup>58</sup> Federal Theatre magazine Vol. 2, No. 4, B.358 "The Continental Theatre Monthly Bulletin" and "The Theatre Abroad", Oct. 1938-May 1939 & "Federal Theatre" Magazine, 1935-37  
F. Federal Theatre [file 1 of 3], record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>59</sup>Federal Theatre Project, "Revolt of the Beavers, New York City," Photograph 1937, Federal Theatre Project photograph collection, Box 64, folder 26, George Mason University. Libraries, Special Collections & Archives.

with enticing details about the play: A May 12<sup>th</sup> release to the *New York Herald Tribune* charmingly recounts how the company disagreed on the proper way of playing potsie - a form of hopscotch - onstage. Unable to decide upon the regional variations proposed by the cast, and informed by the National Recreation Association that no official rules for potsie existed, the company instead “visited the lower east side to get an authentic New York version and took notes as the street urchins showed them how ‘potsie’ is really played -- with a banana peel.”<sup>60</sup> Similar press releases included humorous anecdotes, such as an actor mistaking a prop snake for a prop stick.<sup>61</sup> In other press releases, the Department of Information took a more serious angle: Announcing the play in March via the *Herald Telegram* tied *Revolt* to a scientific fascination with the beavers themselves, although “naturalists and other interested individuals will be surprised to learn that beavers play hop-scotch, wear blue sweaters and ride around on roller skates. It is also disclosed in the play these amphibious rodents also talk, and have plenty to say, especially when they are overworked by the chief.”<sup>62</sup> While somewhat lighthearted in tone, the March release links *Revolt* to the world outside of Beaverland, promising both playful action and social significance. An April release to the *Daily Worker* makes a

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<sup>60</sup>“Exclusive to Herald Tribune”, May 12, 1937, Box 531 - Press Releases of the Dept. of Information, Folder - Children’s Theatre - 1937, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>61</sup> “Exclusive to Leonard Lyons” - May 24, 1937, Box 531 - Press Releases of the Dept. of Information, Folder - Children’s Theatre - 1937, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>62</sup> WPA Children’s Theatre Investigates the Private Life of Beavers [Exclusive to the *Herald-Tribune*], March 31, 1937, Box 531 - Press Releases of the Dept. of Information, Folder - Children’s Theatre - 1937, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

stronger, significant link to Soviet Russia, revealing the practices of “the Theatre of Young Spectators”<sup>63</sup> as explained by L. Makariev, the theatre’s director. Much like the Federal Theatre, the Theatre of Young Spectators produced plays with “a sharp social theme... the activities of our theatre are not restricted to the staging of different plays but tends to create around every play a corresponding pedagogical atmosphere.”<sup>64</sup> With this atmosphere in mind, the release summarizes the play for the *Daily Worker* reader, enticing them with “the story of two children who come to Beaverland and help the beavers reorganize their lop-sided social system.”<sup>65</sup> The varied press releases surrounding *Revolt* the diverse political audience the FTP hoped to attract. *The Revolt of the Beavers* promised its young audience a new future, one in which children had the agency to take radical action and change their society for the better.

*Revolt* opened the doors to Beaverland at the Adelphi Theatre on May 20, 1937, to mixed critical reactions. *The New York American* praised the play as a pleasing entertainment for all audiences, a “comic-strip as much as it is fantasy ... the settings are bright, ingenious and decorative. The direction is imaginative, and acrobatic to a kid’s delight.”<sup>66</sup> In *The World Telegram*, a less-than-impressed Douglas Gilbert sniffed “It was disappointing - an unclever production for which the Federal Theatre deserves no credit

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<sup>63</sup> “For *Daily Worker* (Sunday)” - April 23, 1937, Box 531 - Press Releases of the Dept. of Information, Folder - Children’s Theatre - 1937, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> J. H., “ ‘Beaver’s Revolt’ Pleasing Fantasy For The Children,” *The New York American*, May 21, 1937, Box 154, Folder “Revolt of the Beavers - NYC,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

... the piece is so devoid of imagination, charm and sensitivity I could endure only one act.”<sup>67</sup> Some reviews included input from the play’s young audience. One Brooklyn child declared after the show via *Life* magazine “I liked the Chief because he made me laugh but I didn’t like the way he treated the beavers,”<sup>68</sup> choosing loyalty to the cause over comedy. Another child who viewed the play could barely contain his boredom in *The Daily Mirror*: “At the end of the first act, we asked Master Thomas Lief, age five years, his opinion, he responded, with a note of boredom worthy of a seasoned dramatic critic or Greta Garbo: ‘Let’s go home.’”<sup>69</sup>

The majority of critics, however, found *Revolt*’s politics more threatening than its aesthetics. In *The Daily Worker*, Robert Cole praised *Revolt* as “a musical with social implications ... it is likely, we think, to exert its greatest appeal for those kiddies past voting age.”<sup>70</sup> In *The New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson swiftly deconstructed the greater implications of *Revolt*: “The style is playful; the mood is gravely gay and simple-minded. Many children now unschooled in the technique of revolution now have an opportunity,

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<sup>67</sup> “Four Weekly Matinees of “Beaver’s Revolt” Play Presented at the Children’s Theatre by the Federal WPA Drama,” May 21, 1937, *The World Telegram*, Box 54, folder “Revolt of the Beavers – NYC,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>68</sup> “Mother Goose Joins the Union - WPA Theatre stages a leftist fantasy called ‘The Revolt of the Beavers,’” *Life*, June 21, 1937, 78, <http://books.google.com/books?id=1UQEAAAAMBAJ&lpg=PA78&ots=IH5twrpbmc&dq=Revolt%20of%20the%20Beavers&pg=PA78#v=onepage&q&f=false> (Accessed April 29, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> Robert Coleman, “Revolt of the Beavers” Forest Fantasy: Workers, Barkers in Conflict,” *The Daily Mirror*, May 21, 1937, Box 154, Folder “Revolt of the Beavers - NYC,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>70</sup> “Revolt of the Beavers Forest Fantasy: Workers, Barkers in Conflict” Robert Coleman, the *Daily Mirror*” May 21, 1937

at government expense, to improve their tender minds.”<sup>71</sup> Editors of *The Saturday Evening Post* in Philadelphia warned its readers that “the Adelphi Theatre is not in Moscow but on Fifty-fourth Street, New York, and that the Federal Theatre Project is a division of Harry Hopkins’ WPA, operated by the Federal Government... and paid for out of relief funds voted by Congress.”<sup>72</sup> The administrators of the NYC Juvenile Aid Bureau rejected fourteen hundred free tickets to *Revolt*, and returned them to the FTP due to the supposed radical political content of the play.<sup>73</sup> In the face of this criticism, *Revolt* closed on June 19<sup>th</sup>, with seventeen performances preaching the morals of Beaverland to 8,395 audience members.<sup>74</sup>

The backlash surrounding *Revolt* stemmed from multiple sources - anti-New Deal conservatives, a growing fear of communism and other leftist politics, and a general disagreement over how media should address young people. The technological developments of the early twentieth century, combined with the rise of child-labor laws, created a new class of young consumer, one that increasingly chose to spend its time and

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<sup>71</sup> “The Revolt of the Beavers” or “Mother Goose Marx” Under WPA Auspices, Brooks Atkinson, *The New York Times*, May 21, 1937, box 154 - Vassar collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935 - 1939, Folder - Revolt of the Beavers - NYC, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>72</sup> Ed. Wesley Winans Stout, “Once upon a time,” June 26, 1938, *The Saturday Evening Post*, Box 54, folder “Revolt of the Beavers – NYC,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>73</sup> “Police Gnaw at W.P.A. Over Beaver’s Play - Criticize Subject Matter of Federal Theatre Offering for Child Audiences - Fear Revolutionary Ideas - Children find it Delightful, Director Answers,” *Press Digest*, June 2, 1937, Box 154, Folder “Revolt of the Beavers - NYC,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>74</sup> Federal Theatre Report Department, “Summary of Attendance and Receipts During the Fiscal Year 1936-1937 (July, 1936 - July 4, 1937),” Box 501 - Correspondence of the New York City Office of the FTP 1935-1939 Reports, Folder “Reports - Facts, 1938 (No. 2),” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.



money on modern entertainment.<sup>75</sup> The early twentieth century witnessed a shift from child producers to child consumers, an isolation from industry into a natural state of ideally middle-class childhood. In the 1920s and 1930s, the rise of child development in popular magazines moved consumers towards an ethos of beneficial consumption: good children's items, such as clothes or toys or plays, helped the child in their individual growth towards adulthood.<sup>76</sup> The 'new type' of children's theatre play the FTP strove to create attempted to aid the young audience's natural growth. In *Revolt*, this development was expressly political, as the play introduced the audience to contemporary economic and labor concerns. With this context, the conservative backlash against the play continues the debate over how art helps or hinders natural child development, with critics firmly placing the political *Revolt* as hindering the young audience.

In June, towards the end of *Revolt's* controversial run, the Research department of the Children's Theatre began a survey of the play's young audience. Under the supervision of Dr. Francis Holden, a professor in the Department of Psychology at New York University, graduate students visited groups of children who had seen the play in public schools, welfare foundations, and settlement houses. Armed with a common survey for each group, the interviewers were to gather both practical and political information: Could the child see and hear the performance? Who were the children's favorite characters? Did the child understand the play's message, and what was the main

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<sup>75</sup> For more on the crisis of modernity in children's media, please see Nathalie op de Beeck, *Suspended Animation: Children's Picture Books and the Fairy Tale of Modernity*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

<sup>76</sup> Cook, *The Commodification of Childhood: The Children's Clothing Industry and the Rise of the Child Consumer*, 11.

idea they took away from it? Would the child like to see similar plays in the future? After compiling the interviews, Dr. Beryl Parker, another faculty member at New York University, concluded “a child gets nothing of a labor angle in the play or any social implications. The children see it as taking sides, as a game.”<sup>77</sup> In the wake of *Revolt*’s conservative controversy, the child’s superficial understanding of the play allowed the Project’s administration to minimize the politics of the play. Thus Hallie Flanagan could safely write in *Arena*, her 1940 memoir of the Federal Theatre, “it seemed to me natural that in the fairy-tale pattern brought up to date the beavers had a bad beaver king whom they drove out so that all the beavers could eat ice cream, play, and be nine years old.”<sup>78</sup> While the fairy-tale carried a contemporary message, negating the politics to child’s play allowed the Project to continue its work.

Digging deeper into the audience analysis, however, reveals young people savvy enough to understand the story on their own terms. At the Association for the Improvement of the Conditions of the Poor, one child connected the arc of *Revolt* to the Spanish Civil War, recasting the Chief as General Franco.<sup>79</sup> Two young girls at the Children’s group in the Christodora House linked the play to contemporary strikes: ten and a half year old Anita posited the main idea of the play as “that we should not be

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<sup>77</sup> Audience Analysis - Revolt of the Beavers Research Department Children’s Theatre [June 24, 1937], B. 225 - National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, 1936-1939, Folder - “Revolt of the Beavers,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>78</sup> Flanagan, *Arena* 201.

<sup>79</sup> “Visit to the Association for the Improvements of the Conditions of the Poor (AICP) at 401 Newel St, Brooklyn,” Audience Analysis - Revolt of the Beavers Research Department Children’s Theatre [June 24, 1937

afraid to demand our rights, and not to have anybody rule over us,” while eight year old Margit disliked strikes in general but still supported the oppressed beavers.<sup>80</sup> Children at the Heckscher Foundation, although tempted by the slapstick comedy of the character, saw through the Chief with the common complaints of “‘he was mean to the working beavers,’ [and] ‘he didn’t give the beavers any ice cream.’”<sup>81</sup> Overall, the young audience of *Revolt* deftly understood the social cues of the play. The Chief was the villain primarily for being mean and secondarily for the economic oppression of his fellow mammal. Oakleaf was the hero for helping all of Beaverland join his happy club, an act leading directly to a social revolution. Placing the action within the bully versus good guy dichotomy spoke to the politics of *Revolt* through the language of childhood. For the young audience, *Revolt*’s anti-bully message made the play’s politics accessible, whether or not adults were ready for the children to learn from the play.

In the winter of 1938, the FTP presented a very different set of politics for its young audiences. *A Letter to Santa Claus* premiered at the Blackstone Theatre in Chicago on December 14, 1938. Charlotte Chorpenning wrote the play as a gift to the children of the city, who enjoyed eight free performances before its closing on December 22, 1938.<sup>82</sup> Like *Revolt*, the play gave its audience a glimpse of a new American future. However, A

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<sup>80</sup> “Report of Discussion of The Revolt of The Beavers by Children’s Group in the Christodora House, 147 Avenue B., Man.” In addition to recording Margit’s answers, the interviewer notes her German heritage and links her anti-labor sentiment to her love of German cinema and possible Nazi background.

<sup>81</sup> “Heckscher Foundation” Audience Analysis - Revolt of the Beavers Research Department Children’s Theatre [June 24, 1937]

<sup>82</sup> “Federal Theatre in Illinois,” May 16, 1939, Box 96 Narrative Reports, 1935-1939 IL--NJ, Folder IL - 1938 & 1939, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

*Letter to Santa Claus* allowed children to change the world by simply being good children versus taking the stronger political action characterized by *Revolt*. The play positioned the values of a natural childhood - namely innocent, Christian, and white - against the growing specter of fascism and war.

*A Letter to Santa Claus* was equal parts Christmas pageant and antiwar protest. The play follows Joe and Mary,<sup>83</sup> a pair of siblings twelve and eleven respectively, as they try to give Santa Claus the titular letter at midnight on Christmas Eve. The letter, as Joe explains in the first scene of the play, is about the ‘shadows’ that plague his world. As if on cue, “*A shadow of a SOLDIER (not nationalized), a little larger than life, and not too black, appears and move across the silver screen. A faint drumming gives the beat of his walk, and a muffled shot or two punctuates his pauses.*”<sup>84</sup> Joe elaborates that the shadows also cause him to hear strange things, “you think it’s Mother crying, and it’s lots of people crying. You think it’s just the milkman quarreling with the man that pays him, and it’s lots of people quarreling.”<sup>85</sup> The shadows represent the evil of the world: *Letter* abstracts those evils within a universal language of childhood, tying the issue to home without scaring the young audience out of their seats. Joe and Mary’s clear distrust and fear of the shadows mirrors the intended reaction of the young audience. Joe hopes that he has the solution in his letter, which asks Santa Claus for a big light to drive away the

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<sup>83</sup> According to the Social Security Administration, Mary was the most popular name given to girls during the 1930s. While both sisters in *Revolt* and *Letter* shared the name, in *Letter* Mary’s name could also refer to the Virgin Mary in keeping with the Christmas theme. U.S. Social Security Administration, “Top names of the 1930s,” May 14, 2012, <http://www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/decades/names1930s.html>.

<sup>84</sup> Charlotte Chorpenning, *A Letter to Santa Claus*, 179

<sup>85</sup> Chorpenning 180

shadows. On the roof of their apartment building, the children wait for Santa Claus and fall asleep instead. As they sleep, Santa Claus arrives to deliver presents, but the appearance of the shadows stops him in his tracks. The larger-than-life shadows project their quarreling and bickering across the stage, transitioning into “*half-clad children, women stumbling with weakness, people weeping, who’s sound is under the other cries.*”<sup>86</sup> Angered by the cruelty of the shadows, Santa Claus packs his presents away and delivers an ultimatum to the crowded city: “I don’t like the world you’re making with the things you think and feel. / And so I go away! / Have your Christmas without Santa Claus. / I don’t like it here.”<sup>87</sup> Santa Claus calls the Christmas wind and disappears, chased by a desperate crowd. Undefeated by the sudden turn of events, Joe and Mary call the Christmas wind and begin their journey towards “Santa Claus’ house in the polar snows.”<sup>88</sup>

The Christmas wind first takes Joe and Mary to the North Pole, depositing them with some polar bears in a flurry of snow. The polite polar bears, which belong to Santa Claus, introduce themselves to the siblings and show Joe and Mary into Santa’s igloo. As the children explore out of earshot, Santa contacts the polar bears through his magic radio. Informed of Joe and Mary’s arrival, Santa orders the polar bears to “keep them there. Play with them. And don’t shut me off. I shall be listening. I want to know whether they share things fairly or want to get the most and best of everything.”<sup>89</sup> To test the

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<sup>86</sup> Chorpenning 182.

<sup>87</sup> Chorpenning 183.

<sup>88</sup> Chorpenning 185.

<sup>89</sup> Chorpenning 188.

children's goodness, the omnipresent Santa instructs the polar bears to present them with the extra presents; the children can have whatever they choose, while the polar bears get the remainder. Reemerging from the igloo, Joe and Mary are astounded by the variety of presents. Given a large candy cane, colorful fuzzy coats, money, and fiddles, the children are first too enraptured with their gifts to notice the polar bears' sadness, performed as a sad slapstick for the audience. In each instance, however, the children ask the polar bears if they too would like the gifts and happily share them; Joe breaks the candy cane into multiple pieces, Mary helps the polar bears into their new fuzzy coats, and both divide up the money among the group. Pleased by Joe and Mary's generosity, Santa Claus speaks to the children, promising that he will help them if the children can find him at the South Pole, for "no one can find Santa Claus without a game of hide and seek."<sup>90</sup> With the first test complete, Joe and Mary bid farewell to their new polar bear friends and continue their journey.

The Christmas wind takes the siblings safely to the South Pole, as a fantastic snow ballet creates the frozen landscape. The snow settles, revealing Santa's home and a group of happily playing penguins, taking turn flying down two ice slides on their stomachs. A policeman penguin and a stoplight govern the play, with all the penguins stopping or starting in an orderly fashion according to the light.<sup>91</sup> The eight penguins notice the fascinated children, and invite the siblings to join in their play. Joe and Mary decline, insisting on finding Santa first, to the amusement of the penguins:

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<sup>90</sup> Chorpenning 193.

<sup>91</sup> Chorpenning 194.

“You have to have fun to find Santa Claus.”<sup>92</sup> The penguins explain that play is their main connection to Santa, as he goes where people - or penguins - are doing the things he likes. Thus informed, the children and penguins begin to play of the slides together. Filled with Christmas spirit, Joe grabs his fiddle and begins to play as the penguins join in with instruments from Santa’s house, forming an impromptu orchestra. Noel the penguin takes up the baton and directs the group as he “*begins to improvise. There is a pizzicato variation, which they play with their bills and NOEL conducts with the tips of his wings.*”<sup>93</sup> After the joyful concert, Joe and Mary notice Santa’s palace and go to explore, providing Santa the cover he needs to arrange another test for the siblings with the penguins.

Although Joe and Mary’s consistent kindness impressed Santa, the siblings still need to prove themselves. Santa asks the penguins to play London Bridge with the children, skewing the results so Joe and Mary are on one side versus the rest of the penguins. Within the ensuing tug of war, Santa explains, “I want to see if they can pull hard enough and long enough to win a tug of war against such odds. If they win, I’ll come out and join the celebration.”<sup>94</sup> Santa hides as the children return and begin the game - Joe forms one half of the arch and Noel the other, as the remaining penguins don costumes of different contemporary society characters. As they play, each penguin answers, “Who will build it up again, up again, up again? Who will build it up again, my fair lady?” as their

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<sup>92</sup> Chorpenning 196.

<sup>93</sup> Chorpenning 198.

<sup>94</sup> Chorpenning 199.

characters, giving the responsibilities to the “Richman -- Poorman / Beggerman -- thief / Doctor -- lawyer / Merchant -- chief / Worker -- teacher / Courts -- relief.”<sup>95</sup> Only Mary shares the responsibility - “Why, I think it would take everybody, everywhere, working as hard as they can”<sup>96</sup>- and joins Joe’s side. Against all odds, Joe and Mary pull the penguins over the line to win the tug of war, and celebrate together with the penguins. Finally convinced of the siblings’ inherent goodness, Santa Claus reveals himself. However, the voices and shadows still march around the world and even Santa cannot stop them: “Nothing will blot them out but the Christmas light. And it can’t come from me. It must come from the same place as the shadows do.”<sup>97</sup> Joe and Mary must return to the city to lead the charge against the shadows themselves. Armed with a charm from Santa Claus, who promises that he’ll be listening for the siblings, Joe and Mary ride the Christmas wind back to their roof.

In the cold dawn of the city, a depressed populace roams the street, mourning the end of Christmas as they know it. As the people complain, the shadows grow, feeding on their negative thoughts. Frantically, Joe and Mary begin to chant the charm from Santa Claus, imploring the people bellow to “Open your heart / And shut your eyes / And I’ll give you something / To make you wise. / Your heart shall be / The heart of a friend, / Your eyes shall see / How love should end. / And now I have made you wise.”<sup>98</sup> As more shadows arrive in the city, Joe and Mary confront each group with the charm, and the shadows

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<sup>95</sup> Chorpenning 200.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Chorpenning 201.

<sup>98</sup> Chorpenning 202.



*“undergo a change, lifting their heads, their faces light up ... a slender pencil of light shoot across the shadows.”*<sup>99</sup> With each repetition of the charm, the light grows brighter across the stage and shadows. The strongest shadow appears, a larger-than-life soldier flanked by two people with raised fists. Joe and Mary are only so loud, and turn to the audience for their help. With the audience’s chant adding to the siblings *“the threatening MAN looks up and out at them, and slowly drops his arm. The fallen ones also look up and out and also drop their fists. The first reaches a hand to help the others up as the voices reach the end. The last SHADOW is blotted out by the streaming Auroras.”*<sup>100</sup> As the final shadows vanish, the Christmas lights flood the stage and Santa Claus appears, wishing the whole world a very merry Christmas at the end of the play.

The production design of *A Letter to Santa Claus* created a fanciful winter world onstage, underscored with just a hint of expressionism and modern anxiety. Each of the three backdrops - the city, the North Pole, and the South Pole - were painted in vivid colors, the depressed city street in dark red and purple hues creating a stark contrast with the joyful corals, aquas, and lilacs of the Poles.<sup>101</sup> The backdrops create a skewed sense of scale for the audience: the angular lines of the city buildings move towards a vanishing point in the top of the backdrop, as if the audience were craning their necks to catch a glimpse of Santa Claus in the sky. At the poles, the gently sloping igloos also place the

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<sup>99</sup> Chorpenning 204.

<sup>100</sup> Chorpenning 205.

<sup>101</sup> Clive Rickabaugh, set designs, Production Bulletin - *A Letter to Santa Claus* by Charlotte Chorpenning [Chicago, December 1938], box 455 - Bound Federal Theatre Project Production Bulletins, 1936-1939. Last Warning -- Libel, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

audience as a younger viewer, dwarfed by the pale blue and purple ice. In contrast, the costumes for *Letter* were either pulled from the ensemble's closets in the city, or black and white at the Poles. The simplicity of the costumes gave the characters a sense of universality - the crowds could belong to any American city, the stylized polar bears and penguins resembled contemporary illustrations. The cast of *Letter* also added to the whimsy of the play, as performers from the vaudeville and circus units made up the majority of the company.<sup>102</sup> The cast also included two unique additions: fourteen year-old Frank Pacelli and eleven year-old Betty Baumbach played Joe and Mary respectively. While the Federal Theatre worked primarily with adult actors on relief, the inclusion of the young professionals brought what director Kay Ewing considered an important vitality to the play. As Joe and Mary, Pacelli and Baumbach were "highly imaginative and sensitive. The director feels that younger children could not possibly have sustained such heavy parts and adults, even as young as sixteen could never have given the necessary illusion."<sup>103</sup>

Casting the young protagonists with actual children provides an interesting glimpse into the politics of *A Letter to Santa Claus*. The play, via Joe and Mary, gives the young audience a glimpse of a future in which they have the power to stop the rising tide of war and misfortune simply by being good. In their pursuit of Santa and his magic, the siblings play fair and share what they have with their new Arctic friends, demonstrating a natural

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<sup>102</sup> Kay Ewing, "Director's notes," Production Bulletin - *A Letter to Santa Claus* by Charlotte Chorpenning [Chicago, December 1938]

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

innocence and care for their greater community. The shadows, although abstracted, represent adult anxieties about the modern world, primarily the rise of fascism. Joe and Mary, by acting as innocent children, ultimately banish the shadows as conduits for the audience's hope and faith in the just democracy the siblings represent. While whimsical, *A Letter to Santa Claus* places its young protagonists in the center of a fight much larger than themselves, one which ultimately pits their democratic innocence against modern suffering. As Leslie Frost observes, "no other FTP children's play asked so much of its contemporary protagonists outside of a distancing dream narrative or framework of comedy. No other FTP children's play broached the topic of war and the Depression realities of hunger and strife outside the framework of comedy."<sup>104</sup>

Both *The Revolt of the Beavers* and *A Letter to Santa Claus* utilized the idealized young protagonists to embody a potential new American future. With zippo guns and wishing stones, Paul and Mary stood up to a bully and helped the oppressed beavers regain control of their home, creating a utopian collective by the end of *Revolt*. Riding the Christmas wind and armed with a magic chant, Joe and Mary believed strongly and played fairly in *Letter*, using the tropes of innocent childhood to re-convince a weary adult audience of a just American society's limitless potential. The successful communication of these futures depended on the bodies of children, and their ability to

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<sup>104</sup> Leslie Frost, "Shadows of War: Fascist and Anti-Fascist Representations of Childhood in *Triumph of the Will*, *A Letter to Santa Claus*, and *The Little Princess*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 33:1 (Spring 2008): 85.

transfer their assumed innocence to the surrounding event.<sup>105</sup> In this respect, *Letter* succeeded where *Revolt* failed, as the young people playing Joe and Mary masked the radical politics of the play - namely that children should do whatever they can to help end modern misfortune - as games and natural fun. The adult body, however, has less success in transferring innocence: the adults playing children in *Revolt*, among many other aspects of the play, lead to conservative accusations of communist propaganda and the brainwashing of young minds. The bodies onstage in both plays used childhood and its innocent potential to advance a liberal version of the future in the face of the Great Depression. In the following chapter, the Federal Theatre presents a thing instead of a body for the young audience, using Pinocchio the playful puppet to reinforce a sense of normalcy in the chaos of the late 1930s.

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<sup>105</sup> Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*, New York: New York University Press, 2011, 6.

### Chapter 3: The Moral of the Middle Class Penny

On June 30, 1939, the Federal Theatre Project's final curtain fell. Disbanded and stripped of its funding by an Act of Congress, subjected to a frustrating six month investigation by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and demonized by numerous conservative critics, the Federal Theatre's last performances became a final protest against the FTP's closing. In New York City, three productions created new endings to revise their previously happy resolutions and reflect the FTP's end. The ensemble of *Sing for Your Supper*, the satirical musical about living on government relief, sang the triumphantly joyful "Papa's Got a Job" with a stage full of celebrating neighbors, but producer Morris Ankrum cut the fun short, informing the audience from the footlights that "Yes, 'Papa' had a job - but they're taking it away from him at 12 o'clock tonight!"<sup>106</sup> The tragic death of the hero in George Sklar's *Life and Death of an American* - a drama following the life of Jerry Dorgan, the first child born in the twentieth century - reverberated beyond the walls of the Maxine Elliot theatre, as producer Charles K. Freeman intoned that Jerry and the Federal Theatre both only wanted "the right to live as a decent human being."<sup>107</sup> The most dramatic change, however, came from the Ritz Theatre: Yasha Frank's *Pinocchio*, a whimsical fantasy for children and the young at heart, normally ended with the puppet protagonist triumphing over human greed and selfishness, transformed by the benevolent Blue Fairy into a real human boy at his first birthday party. On June 30, however, a funeral replaced the birthday party: As stage

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<sup>106</sup> "3 WPA SHOWS CLOSE AMID HOT PROTESTS," *The New York Times*, July 1, 1939.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

hands struck the set in full view of the audience, the ensemble placed Pinocchio in a wooden coffin bearing the epitaph “BORN DECEMBER 23, 1938; KILLED BY ACT OF CONGRESS, JUNE 30, 1939.”<sup>108</sup> The company mournfully sang “So let the bells proclaim our grief / that [Pinocchio’s] small life was all too brief,”<sup>109</sup> and playwright Yasha Frank denounced the Project’s unjust closing. In a public finale, Living Newspaper producer Mathieu Smith lead one hundred demonstrators on a protest-cum-funeral-march from the theatre to Times Square, where six hundred protestors gathered to plead for the Federal Theatre’s resurrection.<sup>110</sup> Neither the puppet nor the protestors succeeded.

The final chapter of this thesis examines Yasha Frank’s adaptation of *Pinocchio*. Arguably the FTP’s most successful children’s theatre play, the spectacular nature of *Pinocchio* presented middle class assimilation as the solution to America’s uncertain future. As such, the play taught its young audience that listening to your parents and conquering human greed were the essential steps to becoming a ‘real boy,’ a truly good American. The fantastic elements of the play - including a storybook setting, the charming performance of the vaudevilles ensemble, and a pickaninny puppet protagonist - created a temporary retreat from the realities of the Great Depression for both the child and adult audience. The closing of both *Pinocchio* and the FTP, this chapter concludes, continues a genealogy of distrust surrounding government sponsorship of the arts, and the affect of that art on young audiences.

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<sup>108</sup> Flanagan, *Arena* 365.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> “3 WPA SHOWS CLOSE AMID HOT PROTESTS,” *The New York Times*,

Yasha Frank, the director of the Los Angeles Children's Theatre unit, wrote and directed the original production of *Pinocchio*, opening in June 1937 in Los Angeles and its transfer to New York in December 1938. With a background in movies and a Doctorate in psychology from New York University, Frank created theatre that coached the young audience to follow or mimic certain behavior patterns.<sup>111</sup> In conversation with Hallie Flanagan, Frank elaborated: "Children are by nature dramatists and actors, they intuitively prepare themselves for their impending conflicts with society by dramatizing their problems and fortifying themselves with the aptitudes thus arrived at."<sup>112</sup> Frank pulled on his film background to craft theatre for his young mimics audience, using minimal dialogue in favor of lush technical elements and entertaining pantomimes. Both a technical spectacle and a rhyming morality tale, *Pinocchio* ultimately performed a script of middle class assimilation, using the puppet's charming adventures to steer the young audience away from tempting entertainments and greed.

*Pinocchio* opens in Gepetto's cottage, as the woodcutter's cat whines for his dinner of milk. The cat provides the first bit of slapstick comedy for the audience, tying his own bib before devouring his milk, and failing spectacularly to catch the clever mice that drop a cuckoo clock on his tail.<sup>113</sup> These moments teach the young audience the primary languages of *Pinocchio*, pantomime and violence, coding the cat's pain as enjoyable comedy enacted on an othered animal body. A young father soon visits Gepetto

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<sup>111</sup> Doreen B. Heard, "Pinocchio: An Examination of the Productions by Yasha Frank for the Federal Theatre Project," *Children's Theatre Review* 31:02 (Spring 1982): 11.

<sup>112</sup> Flanagan, *Arena* 299.

<sup>113</sup> Yasha Frank, *Pinocchio* 210.

to pick up a cradle for his infant son, prompting the woodcutter to ruminate: “Well, I’ve made cradles by the score. / I wish I might have made one more. / That would have been a pretty one / That I’d have made for my own son! / Ah, me! I envy you the joy / Of watching o’er a growing boy!”<sup>114</sup>As the embarrassed young father leaves, Gepetto begins to clean his workbench and surreptitiously assembles a body: wood scraps become legs, a head of cabbage transforms into another head, a basket is repurposed as a chest. Gepetto slowly hammers away on his creation, until the living actor replaces the collection of objects on the bench. Fully assembled, Gepetto teaches his newly collected son to walk and dance, with Pinocchio frequently falling but “*as he becomes more confident, PINOCCHIO experiments alone. HE executes a stiff, jerky dance, at the end of which he collapses.*”<sup>115</sup>Exhausted by the dancing lesson, Gepetto puts his puppet son to bed, who sleeps peacefully until the following morning.

The morning continues much as the previous evening: Pinocchio and his new stiff joints need Gepetto’s assistance and mending to move around the cottage. Full of filial devotion, Pinocchio promises Gepetto that “I’m sure that if I’m very good, / We’ll someday know the joy / Of actually seeing me / Become a proper boy... And so I pledge myself to try / To be a son to you.”<sup>116</sup>Overcome with joy, Gepetto hugs his son, removes an errant splinter from his finger, and leaves to find a spelling book for Pinocchio. Left alone in the cottage, the jealous cat chases Pinocchio around the cottage until the later

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<sup>114</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 211.

<sup>115</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 213.

<sup>116</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 214-5.



takes refuge on the stove, nearly burning off his feet without registering pain. Gepetto returns in time to rescue Pinocchio and fashion him new feet, scolding all the while “It’s not a very lucky start / For one who pledged with all his heart / To be a model little man!”<sup>117</sup> Pinocchio’s scorched feet are a warning: behave poorly and suffer bodily harm as the consequence. With this new lesson, Pinocchio and the audience set off through the tempting outside to reach the village schoolhouse.

In *Pinocchio*, the titular character is best described as a thing: an object that prompts the user to interact with it in a specifically scripted way. Robin Bernstein develops the thing concept in 2011’s *Racial Innocence: Performing Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*. Focusing on the interplay of dolls, children, and race, Bernstein argues that things carry scripts, or a set of required interactive behaviors, that distinguish them from passive objects. The picture book scripts the reader to proceed from left to right, creating a sense of orderly progression while flipping the pages<sup>118</sup>: the topsy-turvy doll invites the child to continually flip between one poll or another, “to position neither black nor white permanently on top; the competent user received the thing’s message that the hierarchy could - and *should* - flip.”<sup>119</sup> Dolls themselves carried a multitude of scripts, both of love and violence: the topsy-turvy doll cuddled in a white child’s arms became an ironic joke on plantation life, while the stiff black rubber dolls or eternally smiling Raggedy Anne invited servitude to or violence at the hands of innocent white children.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 215.

<sup>118</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 75.

<sup>119</sup> Bernstein 88.

<sup>120</sup> Bernstein 201.

In this analysis, I extend thing-ness to Pinocchio: a constructed thing, Pinocchio's inability to feel pain continually asks the play, and by proxy the audience watching the play, to enact violence on his wooden body. While a white actor performed the ostensibly white character in both the LA and NYC productions, Pinocchio's unfeeling body mimicked Topsy's violence before it could attain the goodness of little Eva. As Bernstein argues throughout *Racial Innocence*, minstrelsy and violence haunted the American stage throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; from Topsy's gleeful embrace of wickedness in George L. Aiken's stage adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,<sup>121</sup> to the dancing Raggedy Andy and Ann dolls of minstrel performers Fred and Dorothy Stone.<sup>122</sup> Cloth dolls and wooden puppets, as things and performing bodies onstage, carried racist scripts that naturalized violence against othered, generally African American, bodies via the assumption of innocent play. Throughout *Pinocchio*, the puppet protagonist's actions are continually met with physical harm, imploring the audience to avoid a similar fate with every blow.

In the following pantomimed scenes, Pinocchio fails to resist temptation on his way towards the schoolhouse. The puppet stage in the village square comes first, and Pinocchio delays his journey to dance with the Pretty Girl Puppet and repair her broken strings.<sup>123</sup> Shooed away from the dance by the puppeteer and school bell both, Pinocchio continues onward and encounters the beggar women at the crossroads between school

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<sup>121</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 49.

<sup>122</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 167.

<sup>123</sup> Frank, *Pinocchio* 217.

and Boobyland. The ragged women beg for the alms of the passing children, imploring “surely you can spare a penny / You are rich. You have so many, / Pity us, we haven’t any.”<sup>124</sup> When Pinocchio arrives at the crossroads, his jingling pennies prompt the beggars to move with increasing frenzy, their grotesque gestures characterizing the embodiment of greed and envy. Terrified, Pinocchio swallows his pennies: in retaliation, the beggar women corner the puppet under the nearby tree, and at the right moment “*the noose drops over his head, and [the beggar women] gleefully string him up. Being made of wood [Pinocchio] dangles there harmlessly.*”<sup>125</sup> While immune from pain, the suspended wooden body offers a stark consequence of behaving uncharitably to the young audience. The hanging also references Raggedy Anne, the sentient cloth doll whose stories often included hangings at the hands of her white owners. The scenes occur as Raggedy Anne is cleaned up from a fun adventure, the clothesline assumed a racially innocent substitute for the tree branches of lynched African Americans in the early twentieth century.<sup>126</sup> While Pinocchio didn’t emerge from the boiling washtub, his hanging results in a moral cleanliness.

In a flash of light the beggar women disappear, replaced by the Blue Fairy, the puppet’s self-proclaimed guardian angel. Chiding Pinocchio for his poor decision-making, the Blue Fairy reveals the beggar women were evil spirits, set as a trap for the wooden puppet. The Blue Fairy proclaims that human greed is Pinocchio’s greatest

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<sup>124</sup> Frank, *Pinocchio* 219.

<sup>125</sup> Frank, *Pinocchio* 220.

<sup>126</sup> Bernstein, *Racial Innocence* 191.

obstacle on his quest to become a real boy and Gepetto's true son. She thus warns the still-hanging puppet that "If you have not, by word or deed / conquered all trace of Human Greed, / You'll never, never know the joy / Of being a living, breathing boy. / A wooden puppet is all you'll be / From then throughout eternity."<sup>127</sup> Pinocchio, his head violently twisting and turning in the noose,<sup>128</sup> only has three chances to make mistakes, with the beggar women already taking one the puppet must make his way to school carefully.

However, no sooner than Pinocchio puts his feet on the ground than two rogues accost him. At the base of the tree, the fox and the cat plant carrot seeds and play their magic garden flute, as four carrots rapidly growing to the tune. Enchanted by the trick, Pinocchio approaches the rogues and offers his four pennies: the fox plants the coins, and sends the puppet off to fill the watering can. Gleeefully unearthing the coins, the fox divides them between himself and the cat, cackling that "very soon that boy will see / In this world there's nothing free."<sup>129</sup> With Pinocchio's return, the rogues water the empty ground and instruct him to dance, sneaking off as Pinocchio excitedly moves in anticipation of his bumper crop. As he continues the dance, Pinocchio suddenly realizes he is alone and frantically digs up his coins, finding only empty earth. With the second mistake made, the Blue Fairy reappears and scolds Pinocchio for failing yet another test. Before departing, she offers the despondent puppet one last piece of advice: "Share your

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<sup>127</sup> Frank, *Pinocchio* 221.

<sup>128</sup> "Anxious to prove that HE understood, PINOCCHIO shakes his head eagerly. His head is twisted far to one side, and his face is distorted grotesquely." Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 222.

pennies with the needy. / This is the lesson of the penny: / Some have too few; some have too many; / And there are some who haven't any!"<sup>130</sup> Armed with this new moral and drive to be good, Pinocchio is snatched up by the Jolly Coachman and stolen away to Boobyland.

The Coachman and joyful children promise that Boobyland is a child's paradise, full of toys and free of meddling teachers, imploring Pinocchio and the young audience to "come alone, please, / and don't bring a grown up, / For they'd misconstrue / The spirit of Boobyland."<sup>131</sup> Once the group arrives in Boobyland, however, the children march with military precision and take Pinocchio their prisoner. Unveiling a strange cabinet with many dials and levers, the children force the puppet inside, transforming Pinocchio into a mule. The Jolly Coachman then sells his new beast of burden to the circus Ringmaster; Pinocchio replaces his old mule, as the Ringmaster "worked him much too hard, I fear / Yesterday he died, poor dear!"<sup>132</sup> As the puppet-mule contemplates his grim fate, the Ringmaster invites the children to his circus, to witness Pinocchio's first performance.

The spectacle of the circus closes the second act of *Pinocchio*: of the large ensemble, fifty members were former vaudevillians who retrained themselves to use the craft of an earlier stage for the new audience contemporary children's theatre.<sup>133</sup> Thus the circus is full of tricks: a mischievous lion hypnotizes his trainer; a dexterous musician

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<sup>130</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 223.

<sup>131</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 224.

<sup>132</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 225.

<sup>133</sup> Heard, "Pinocchio: An Examination of the Productions by Yasha Frank for the Federal Theatre Project," 11.

who plays both the bicycle pump and toy balloon with finesse<sup>134</sup>; the talented Mademoiselle Fifi defies death as a doll flies down a zip line from the back of the house through the curtain, replaced by a smiling actress who steps to the footlights and graciously bows.<sup>135</sup> Pinocchio the mule makes his debut, executing a series of difficult dance tricks to the delight of his audience, until he tragically breaks his leg. The furious ringmaster orders Pinocchio's execution, and the circus clowns rush to oblige. The clowns proceed to fail spectacularly at their task: first the barrel of the rifle goes limp before the clowns pull the trigger, and then the cannon wheeled onstage jams repeatedly. The delayed execution, played as a slapstick routine by the clowns, continues to position the violence enacted on Pinocchio's wooden and animal bodies as playful fun, naturalizing the pain of an othered body for the young Federal Theatre audience. Unable to complete the execution, the clowns instead drag Pinocchio to a cliff and as the Ringmaster declares the circus' grand finale throw the puppet mule into the sea.<sup>136</sup> This disposal is the final violence enacted on Pinocchio's wooden body, a thing made for human consumption and destruction, denied the agency to change its waterlogged fate.

In the third act of *Pinocchio*, however, the puppet's luck begins to turn around. As Pinocchio descends to the bottom of the sea, the waters transform him back to his original form. Restored to his wooden body, Pinocchio joyously cavorts with the many schools of fish on the ocean floor, saving his new friends from biting the bated hooks of the

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<sup>134</sup> Brooks Atkinson, "THE PLAY: Uncle Sam Produces 'Pinocchio' Primarily for the Citizens of Future Generations," *The New York Times*, January 3, 1939.

<sup>135</sup> Frank, *Pinocchio* 227.

<sup>136</sup> Frank, *Pinocchio* 228.

fishermen on the surface and using a passing swordfish to cut the dangerous fishing lines.<sup>137</sup> Just as everything seems to be looking up for Pinocchio, a monstrous whale suddenly appears and swallows him whole. Inside the whale's stomach, the terrified puppet stumbles upon Gepetto: happily reunited with his son, the woodcutter recounts his foiled quest to find Boobyland and rescue Pinocchio. Trapped for a year, Gepetto plots numerous escapes but the whale "watches me both night and day. / He swims about. He floats and leaps. / The wretched creature never sleeps."<sup>138</sup> Resigned to their fates, the father sings his son a lullaby, charming both Pinocchio and the monstrous whale to sleep. Unable to believe his luck, Gepetto wakes his son and the family escapes through the whale's snoring mouth.<sup>139</sup>

Gepetto and Pinocchio return to their cottage after the exciting year of adventures much as they left it: the cat still chases the clever mice, with the aid of his four young kittens.<sup>140</sup> Excited by the Blue Fairy's promise - that Pinocchio will become a real boy if he conquers human greed in a year - Gepetto plans a birthday party for the puppet, counting out the coins for his shopping. With four coins remaining, Gepetto gifts them to Pinocchio, imploring him to "take them! Take them! Here, my boy. / Get yourself some sort of toy,"<sup>141</sup> and leaves for the market. Shortly after Gepetto's exit, a blind beggar woman knocks at the cottage door, asking for charity and pity from the unseen puppet

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<sup>137</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 229.

<sup>138</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 230.

<sup>139</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 231.

<sup>140</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 232.

<sup>141</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 233.

and cat. Pinocchio, however, is indecisive: “Shall I give her a penny? / Shall I give her two? Shall I give her all of them / Or shall I keep a few? / Shall I not give her any? / Wish I knew. / What would you do?”<sup>142</sup> After the cat fails to answer, Pinocchio turns and asks the audience what they would do in his place. The climatic moment prompts the children in the audience to ideally share Pinocchio’s coins with the beggar woman. While actual results were mixed - in his review of the New York production, critic Brooks Atkinson noted that the young audience “screamed their opinions, some of which were distinctly on the covetous side”<sup>143</sup> - Pinocchio follows the best advice and gives all four pennies to the blind beggar woman, displaying an ideal model of charity for the young audience to mimic outside of the theatre. With the coins in hand, the beggar woman removes her disguise, as the Blue Fairy emerges, joyful that the puppet passed his final test. Promising a miraculous transformation the next day, the Blue Fairy tucks Pinocchio into bed and leaves to orchestrate the party. The night quickly passes and in the next morning Pinocchio awakes for the party. The entire company floods the stage with joy and well wishes - the young father, the dolls from the country fair puppet stand, the schoolchildren, the clowns from the circus, and more - as Gepetto presents Pinocchio with his first birthday cake. Pinocchio blows out the candle, and the stage dims as the Blue Fairy appears, declaring that Pinocchio “learned the lesson of the penny: / Some have too few -- some too many -- / But give to those that haven’t any, / So let the bells

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Atkinson, “THE PLAY: Uncle Sam Produces ‘Pinocchio’ Primarily for the Citizens of Future Generations.”



proclaim our joy / While you become a human boy / And since you've been so very good / I'll free you from your bonds of wood.”<sup>144</sup> At this news, Pinocchio begins to triumphantly dance around the stage and his wooden legs fall away, triumphantly revealing his true boy form.<sup>145</sup> After a joyous curtain call, the newly human Pinocchio leaps from the stage, inviting the young audience to touch his limbs and verify they are not wood but flesh.<sup>146</sup> This final act of the play, coupled with Pinocchio leading the audience in clapping to his theme music, demonstrates for the young audience the benefits of good behavior: a joyful and supportive community, with a positive transformation into ones true self.

The politics of *Pinocchio* lead the young audience to a progressive, middle class American future. For the puppet protagonist, becoming a real boy hinges on attending school and giving charity to the less fortunate, both pet progressive projects. Armed by both Gepetto and the Blue Fairy with advice and the moral of the penny, Pinocchio must navigate the world on his own. Pinocchio's journey, on its own and an allegory for that of American children, touched on modern parental anxiety. For the Great Depression audience, as Nicholas Sammond notes, “the easy road to a better life seemed narrower; in popular imagination, personal initiative and hard work were still the best bet for improving one's tighter odds of getting through, but relative scarcity made that passage a

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<sup>144</sup> Frank *Pinocchio* 234 - 5.

<sup>145</sup> Frank, *Pinocchio* 235.

<sup>146</sup> Heard, “Pinocchio: An Examination of the Productions by Yasha Frank for the Federal Theatre Project,” 11.

less certain proposition.”<sup>147</sup> Pinocchio’s three tests reflect this tension, performing the adult anxiety of youth wasting themselves with mass amusements and foolish choices. The puppet stumbles with the rogues and his ill-fated trip to Boobyland, and his transformation into a mule warns the young audience of the high cost of cheap thrills. In the third act, however, Pinocchio proves himself a good boy, both by saving the fish from the fishermen’s hooks and giving his pennies to the blind beggar woman. The reassuring narrative, in which the misguided youth regains control of himself and his future by the final curtain, earned the loyalty of audiences both young and old.

The first production of *Pinocchio* premiered on June 3, 1937 at the Beaux Arts Theatre in Los Angeles, California. The whimsical spectacle quickly drew a devoted audience, with adults filling two-thirds of the audience for the supposedly children’s play. As Frank elaborated in a souvenir program, “It was quite normal for adults to see the show four or five times. Children often returned seven or eight times. The record for repeat attendance was shared by two youngsters who paid 13 return visits to the theatre.”<sup>148</sup> An audience survey from the first two weeks of July reported that housewives were the greatest adult demographic group, “which is understandable, since this was a children’s production,” seeking wholesome entertainment on a summer afternoon.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Nicholas Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child, 1930-1960*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 33.

<sup>148</sup> Dept. of Information, *Pinocchio* souvenir program 1938, Box 538 “Press Books of the New York City department of Information, 1936-1938” Folder “Pinocchio,” record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>149</sup> “Pinocchio Audience Survey Report Los Angeles, Cal - 7/1/37”, National Play Bureau / Robert Russell, 7/1/37, Box 255 National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, 1936-1938 P-Z, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

Other adults in the audience included a geologist, a mortician, five physicians, a mail carrier, eleven actors, a bartender, eight clerks, an insurance broker, twenty-five students, an accountant, fifty-one unemployed people, and a farmer, among others.<sup>150</sup> Walt Disney, one of the most notable adults of the early twentieth century, was also a frequent audience member for *Pinocchio*: In a December 1937 letter to Yasha Frank, Disney congratulated the young director on “the excellence of the productions your Federal Theatre groups have staged in Los Angeles and Hollywood. We were especially interested in your delightful “Hansel and Gretel” and “Pinocchio.” As you probably know, “Pinocchio” is to be our next feature-length picture.”<sup>151</sup> Numerous reports and reviews repeat the refrain: adults found just as much joy and wonder in the play as children.

In “Old Toys,” German critic Walter Benjamin ruminates on an exhibition of early nineteenth-century toys at the Märkisches Museum in Berlin. The toys themselves, however, are not the main focus: instead, Benjamin focuses on the interaction of adults with the toys. The adult who, as Benjamin argues, “finds himself threatened by the real world and can find no escape, removes its sting by playing with its image in reduced form.”<sup>152</sup> Play thus allows the adult momentary relief from modern life, a return to the

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<sup>150</sup> “A. Occupational Classification.” “*Pinocchio* Audience Survey Report Los Angeles, Cal - 7/1/37”.

<sup>151</sup>The animated feature-length *Pinocchio* opened in Feb. 1940: while ostensibly adapted from *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, Carlo Collodi’s 1883 book, many of the film’s visual elements draw heavily on Frank’s stage adaptation. --- Walt Disney, Letter to Yasha Frank, December 30, 1937, Box 153 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935 - 1939 [One --- PL] Folder - Pinocchio - CA - Los Angeles - photographs, record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>152</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Old Toys: The Toy Exhibition at the Märkisches Museum,” Ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 100.

imagined ‘innocence’ of a simple childhood. While the adult audiences of *Pinocchio* did not physically play with the titular puppet, watching his journey from Gepetto’s workbench to real boyhood afforded a similar respite. While *Pinocchio* stumbled throughout the play, each incident stemmed from his innocence and naiveté versus an inherent wickedness, and gave his redeemed human transformation more resonance. *Pinocchio*’s journey mirrored that of many Depression era children: “The world in which *Pinocchio* must be brave, truthful, and unselfish lies between his front door and school, along the path every child must follow. Gepetto, his creator, can only see him out the door and hope for the best.”<sup>153</sup> For adults and parents in the audience, the play promised that the child would successfully grow up, even if they strayed along the way, relieving modern anxiety about the future of younger generations. In *The Morning Telegraph*, Robert Rice noted the New York production of “*Pinocchio* is great fun for the kiddies. But it is more than that... there is, in fact, that kind of simple, imaginative fantasy running through the production that not only delights a child’s heart but touches responsive chords in the minds of an older and ostensibly wiser generation.”<sup>154</sup>

As *Pinocchio* began its run in New York in December of 1938, the Federal Theatre confronted another expression of Great Depression anxiety with the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Faced with unstable economy and rapidly changing society, many Americans returned to the specter of Communism as the source

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<sup>153</sup> Sammond, *Babes in Tomorrowland*, 33.

<sup>154</sup> Robert Rice, *Morning Telegraph* Jan. 1939, “Approaches Walt Disney,” Box 153 - Vassar Collection of Programs and Promotional Materials, 1935 - 1939 [One --- PL], Folder - *Pinocchio* - NYC record group 69, “Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project,” National Archives, College Park MD.

of their woes. In May 1930, an alarmed Congress passed a resolution allowing any investigation of “all entities, groups or individuals who are alleged to advise, teach or advocate the overthrow by force or violence of the government of the United States, or attempt to undermine our republican form of government by inciting riots, sabotage, or revolutionary disorders.”<sup>155</sup> From this broad base, Congress formed the Committee in July 1938 to investigate any person, organization, or idea considered “un-American.”<sup>156</sup> The Committee’s first targets came from the New Deal, specifically the arts relief organizations of Federal One. Representative J. Parnell Thomas, a Republican from New Jersey, drew the first blood in a very public attack on the Federal Theatre, published in *The New York Times*. Thomas claimed, among other things, that “the Federal Theatre Project not only is serving as a branch of the communistic organization but also is one more link in the vast an unparalleled New Deal Propaganda machine,” and that it “seemingly is infested with radicals from top to bottom.”<sup>157</sup> While much of the criticism surrounded Hallie Flanagan and *Shifting Scenes* - her 1928 book surveying the current state of European theatre and praising the arts of Soviet Russia - the committee drafted a list of eighty-one plays from the Federal Theatre’s eight-hundred-thirty for critique, including *Revolt of the Beavers* (1937).

After a summer of furiously petitioning to testify, the Committee called Hallie Flanagan to the Senate floor to defend the Federal Theatre Project on December 6, 1938.

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<sup>155</sup> Walter Goodman, *The Committee – The extraordinary career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Inc., 1968, 6.

<sup>156</sup> Goodman, *The Committee*, 16.

<sup>157</sup> “Theatre Project Faces an Inquiry – Representative Thomas will Tell House Committee It Is ‘Communist Hot-Bed,’” July 27, 1938, *The New York Times*, 19.

Much of Flanagan's testimony surrounded the numerous accusations of Communist sympathies within the Project's administration and employees. After clarifying that Christopher Marlow was not a communist but "the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare,"<sup>158</sup> Flanagan attempted to neutralize *Revolt's* impact, citing the extensive audience surveys completed for the production. The play was not baby's first political propaganda, but instead a pleasing fantasy: the audience surveys recorded "only favorable reactions from children such as 'teaches us never to be selfish,' - 'it is better to be good than bad' - 'how the children would want the whole world to be nine years old and happy.'" <sup>159</sup> Couched as a fairytale with a positive moral, Flanagan hoped to remove some of *Revolt's* radical sting by hiding the politics in the assumed innocence of childhood. Regardless of audience input and Flanagan's impassioned defense of the Project, the Committee continued its hunts for communists among the arts projects. On January 3, 1939, the Dies Committee filed their final report with the House of Representatives:

We are convinced that a rather large number of the employees of the Federal Theatre Project are either members of the Communist Party or are sympathetic with the Communist Party. It is also clear that certain employees felt under compulsion to join the Worker's Alliance in order to retain their jobs. <sup>160</sup>

While the Dies Committee's findings were vague, they did their damage and cemented the Federal Theatre Project as a New Deal scapegoat, an easy target for conservative ire.

In 1939, the House Committee on Appropriations launched another investigation on the

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<sup>158</sup> Flanagan *Arena* 342.

<sup>159</sup> Flanagan *Arena* 342-343.

<sup>160</sup> Flanagan, *Arena* 347.

Works Progress Administration, much to the same effect as the Dies Committee's, finding Communism in the Federal Theatre's people and plays. As Congress debated and deliberated over the 1940 Relief Act, the Federal Theatre became the main battleground. Conservative critics rallied against the high cost and low profits of the Project, while its supporters petitioned for its continued survival based on the high number of jobs created - averaging 10,000 per year<sup>161</sup> - and the merit of its art. The Federal Theatre produced new American theatre, plays and musicals that spoke both to the context of the Great Depression and a hopeful vision of the American future. For adult and young audiences both, the Federal Theatre highlighted the radical possibility of the individual, teaching that it only takes one good person - like Joe in *A Letter to Santa Claus* or Oakleaf in *Revolt of the Beavers* - to start making a difference in the world. The individual's empowerment, however, was not enough to save the Federal Theatre: On June 30, 1939, Congress passed the 1940 Relief Bill, legislation that drastically altered the structure of the WPA. Renamed the Work Progress Administration, the Relief Bill placed strict limits were placed on the hours and wages of WPA employees, requiring local communities to fund 25% of their WPA projects.<sup>162</sup> At the Bill's passing, the Federal Theatre cost the government \$40,000,000; it employed 11,855 workers; performed for 29,152,157

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<sup>161</sup> Flanagan *Arena* 355.

<sup>162</sup> "Relief Curbs Stay, President Gets Funds He Asked For but Provisions Balk 'Waste,'" July 1, 1939, *The New York Times*.

audience members, 75% of which were admitted for free<sup>163</sup>; and performed 60,577 times during its four-year existence.<sup>164</sup>

On the evening of June 30, 1939, six hundred people took to the streets of New York City bearing a dead puppet in a cheap pine coffin. Pinocchio's funeral march was the Federal Theatre Project's last performance, dedicated to an uncertain American future for the arts. The funeral also lay to rest *Pinocchio* the play, and the temporary respite from Great Depression anxiety it provided for all audiences. In three acts, *Pinocchio* traced the journey of the modern American child from birth through adolescence, a morality tale that promised success for children who gave to charity and went to school, even if they stumbled once or twice along the way. From 1935 to 1939, the Federal Theatre Project's children's theatre strove to prove to its young audience that a promising new American future waited beyond the Great Depression, one which children could help to bring to fruition. In *The Emperor's New Clothes*, Zan and Zar helped the impoverished weavers keep their livelihoods by teaching them the secret of their magic cloth and the foolishness of those who pretend to see it. Paul and Mary saw injustice in the woods of *Revolt of the Beavers*, and sought to help the beavers take control of their lives and labor. Joe and Mary chased Santa Claus from the roofs over their city to both ends of the earth in *A Letter to Santa Claus*, hoping St. Nick could help dispel the shadows from their

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<sup>163</sup> Julius Davidson, Memo to J. Howard Miller, June 24, 1939, box 79, folder "FTP Statistical summaries," record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.

<sup>164</sup> Recapitulation of Federal Theatre Project Cost, Attendance Figures and Performances, by Regions, from Inception, November 11, 1935 to February 28, 1939, Finance office, Federal Project # 1, 1939, box 79, folder "FTP Statistical summaries," record group 69, "Works Progress Administration - Records of the Federal Theatre Project," National Archives, College Park MD.



world, only to find that the light resided in themselves. The wooden protagonist of *Pinocchio* struggled with human greed in an unsafe world, but learned the Moral of the Penny and shared his wealth to become a real boy. Each play provided a space for the young audience to exert their agency in the world - either through approval of the young characters' actions, or through direct interaction with the play<sup>165</sup> - empowering them to see how they could change the American future for the better. In ending the Federal Theatre Project, conservative critics closed that avenue for young people to re-imagine the future.

The evolution of children's theatre continued after the Federal Theatre much in the same way as it had before: in fits and starts, tied to educational institutions, community and recreation centers, and some social relief groups. During its operation, the Project introduced thousands of children and communities to live theatre who did not previously have access to it, creating new American audiences for the art.<sup>166</sup> As such, the 1940s saw a strong growth for professional theatres and an overall trend of professionalization in the 1950s, spearheaded by Children's Theatre Conference of the American Educational Theatre Association.<sup>167</sup> The creation of the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities respectfully in 1965 continued the institutionalization of

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<sup>165</sup> For example, the audience could join Joe and Mary's chant to brighten the Christmas light in *A Letter to Santa Claus*, or advise Pinocchio to share his pennies with the Beggar Woman / Blue Fairy in *Pinocchio*.

<sup>166</sup> Nellie McCasslin, *Theatre for Children in the United States: A History*, 87.

<sup>167</sup> McCasslin 163.

theatre, especially for young people, as part of the public good,<sup>168</sup> a trend that continues into the present day.

The Federal Theatre Project's children's theatre saw itself as a force of public good, using its art to entertain and introduce political issues to the young audience. *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1936), *Revolt of the Beavers* (1937), *A Letter to Santa Claus* (1938), and *Pinocchio* (1937, 1938) each spoke to their Great Depression context through the languages of childhood, relying on tricks and games to defeat the bullies of the world. The four plays empowered the young audience to work towards the hopeful futures they created, either through young protagonists modeling ideal behavior or the audiences' repetition of charms and advice. In this empowerment, the plays approached the young audience not as a passive group of children needing a mindless occupation, but as complex individuals with agency and unique life experience. This agency, coupled with progressive politics and the desire to change American society, was the truly radical aspect of the Federal Theatre. A relief project based in the arts, the Federal Theatre used performance to lead the Great Depression audience both young and old beyond the anxious present and towards a hopeful future. The furor with which conservative and anti-New Deal critics fought the Federal Theatre speaks to the power of its performance, as the bodies onstage whispered to the watching eyes and ears of babes the promise of a better American tomorrow.

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<sup>168</sup> McCasslin 214.

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## Vita

Rachel Gilbert is a scholar and theatre maker in the Performance as Public Practice masters program. Originally from Maryland, Gilbert graduated *summa cum laude* from Susquehanna University (Selinsgrove, PA) in 2011 with B.A.s in Theatre Performance, and History. Gilbert presented her scholarship in May 2012 at the IVth International Conference on American Theatre and Drama in Seville, Spain. As a dramaturg, Gilbert works both in the Department of Theatre and Dance and Austin at large to promote new plays and classic productions. Favorite collaborations include *The Cataract* (Dir. Will Davis), *Rabbits* by Sarah Saltwick, *Twelfth Night* (Dir. Ann Ciccolella) and *Love's Labour's Lost* (Dir. John Langs). Gilbert is also the creator, writer, and performer of *Ish*, an auto-biographical solo performance exploring the construction of Jewish identity, which opened in the 2013 Cohen New Works Festival - Presented by the University Co-op.

Permanent email: [rachelmgilbert@gmail.com](mailto:rachelmgilbert@gmail.com)

This thesis was typed by Rachel Marie Gilbert.