

*Banned In Boston: Censorship and Self-Censorship in Boston's Federal Theatre Project*

An Honors Thesis for the Department of Drama and Dance

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Table Of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: A Tradition of Censorship	5
Chapter 2: <i>No Experiments for Boston!</i> : Play Choice in the Boston FTP	17
Chapter 3: “ <i>Restore Your Faith In America:</i> ” Promoting Created Equal	31
Chapter 4: Eliminating the Red Element: Revisions of Created Equal	46
Conclusion	66
Bibliography	71

### Introduction

From 1935 to 1939, the Federal Theatre Project created jobs for thousands of theatre artists and entertainment for millions of suffering Americans through the ingenuity of the Roosevelt administration. Harry Hopkins, Director of the Works Progress Administration, upheld the novel idea “that unemployed actors get just as hungry as anybody else.”<sup>1</sup> In early 1935 he recruited Hallie Flanagan, Director of Vassar’s Experimental Theatre, to head the Project. Along with the Writer’s Project, Music Project, and Arts Project, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) comprised Federal Number One, the arts wing of the Works Progress Administration. From the summer of 1935 to June 30, 1939, the FTP produced plays, puppet shows, dance programs, and even circus performances for audiences in cities, towns, and military camps from Atlanta to Seattle.<sup>2</sup>

Much of the scholarship on the Federal Theatre, including National Director Hallie Flanagan’s own memoir *Arena*, focuses on New York City as the center of FTP activity. Yet Boston was conceived as one of five major centers of this project. It produced multiple original productions, toured plays across the state, and had thriving Negro and Yiddish Units. Unfortunately, the city’s FTP chapter suffered from a longstanding tradition of censorship put in place decades beforehand by conservative cultural groups and authorities. An early encounter with this censorship apparatus during their first major production, *Valley Forge*, created a poor reputation for the Boston chapter. Though the national FTP strived to produce plays with social and political importance to the

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<sup>1</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 9, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106017214971>.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Ann Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), Introduction.

communities they performed in, Boston's company continually failed to do this because of an established system of censorship. This system both restrained the company externally, through official censorship, and internally, by forcing the company to self-censor their own work.

In order to avoid censorship or controversy, the Boston FTP repressed controversial material through strategic play choice, script revision, and promotion. Their first major production, *Created Equal* was stripped of much of its radical character through multiple revisions and carefully tailored advertising. Ads focused on the play as a patriotic history of the U.S. instead of marketing its political themes, since communists were hunted for in courts across the nation. Revisions and promotion materials toned down depictions of mob uprisings or "communistic tendencies," in a time when Boston was dealing with unemployment demonstrations and strikes. *Created Equal* was posited as a wholesome and uncontroversial production that the Boston FTP could produce without consequences from the censorship apparatus. Because of this, *Created Equal* and other plays like it missed their radical potential and could not carry out the activist goals set by the national FTP, and instead catered to Boston's status quo.

I have relied upon several Federal Theatre scholars for the backbone of the Project's history; Jane DeHart Matthews, John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, Gerald Rabkin, and Willson Whitman have all given detailed overviews of the FTP as a national relief project. Yet these scholars omit Boston in their histories. Historians John Houchin, Neil Miller, and Paul S. Boyer give histories of censorship in Boston and within the Federal Theatre Project, but do not connect Boston's censorship with the FTP chapter there. Consequently, I build

heavily on the writings of Elizabeth Osborne and Angla Sweigart-Gallagher, both of whom write about the Boston FTP chapter and analyze *Created Equal* as it evolved in the Project.

Most of my sources come from two collections; The Federal Theatre Collection at the Library of Congress, and the Clippings Files at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University. Within these two collections I have looked at scripts, Reader Reports, Production Bulletins, Promotion Booklets, correspondence, posters, and newspaper clippings. For my script analysis of *Created Equal*, I have looked at three different versions of the script, housed at the Library of Congress. Through these materials I hope to fill in some of the gaps left in the history of the Boston Federal Theatre Project and look at *Created Equal* anew by analyzing it in terms of the Boston working class.

The Federal Theatre Project faced a difficult situation in Boston. Hallie Flanagan had set up an expectation for the national project of contemporary relevance and experimentation. In other cities, the FTP would achieve this in many ways. In Boston, a city facing regular censorship, conservative leaders, class tension, union strikes and unemployment riots, and communist hunts, the Federal Theatre met many obstacles. Ultimately, they sacrificed their artistic freedom to create a successful unit.

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## Chapter 1

### A Tradition of Censorship

In 1904, the city of Boston passed a law giving mayors the ability to revoke a theatre's license for any reason.<sup>1</sup> This act heralded the decades of heavy censorship leading up to the Federal Theatre Project's production years. Through both cultural institutions and government authorities, Boston developed a censorship apparatus to shut down unapproved artworks. Upper classes and conservative groups used theatrical censorship—along with literary and film censorship—to prevent radicalism, sexuality, anti-religiousness, and political progressiveness. After several prominent censorship cases in the years preceding the FTP cemented the apparatus, the Project's first major production ran into a censorship scandal of its own.

Brahmins, Boston's social elite descended from early colonial settlers, had long arbitrated the city's culture. Other social groups, like the less affluent "Yankee" British stock, looked to the Brahmins for taste in art, literature, and theatre.<sup>2</sup> In the early twentieth century, this select group turned to traditional values in an attempt to retain prominence it was losing in the political arena, as Yankees and new immigrant groups such as the Irish and Italians gained much political power. New generations and social groups brought current business techniques and introduced boss politics, as well as modernism in the arts

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110.

<sup>2</sup> Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2nd ed, *Print Culture History in Modern America* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 169.

and sciences, but the Brahmins refused to engage in modern values.<sup>3</sup> As social historian Frederic Cople Jaher explains, “in politics, as in education and business, those who embraced contemporary values opposed those who recoiled to the refuge of class pride . . . Better to yield the field than to adopt the policies of encroachers; better to be the victims of class virtue than victors by class compromise.”<sup>4</sup> Though the Brahmins lost political ground, they continued to dominate as leaders of cultural institutions, and their anti-modernism stunted Boston’s artistic growth.

To maintain superiority, Brahmins looked back to the eras that had given them fortune and prominence, entrenching their culture in those traditions. By emphasizing their “golden years” and reminding others of their past success, the Brahmins could maintain societal esteem. In literature, they favored venerated writers of the nineteenth century—a time of Brahmin prosperity—such as James Russell Lowell and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.<sup>5</sup> They also continued to value the classical virtues of Humanism and Hellenism, including reason, restraint, and tradition.<sup>6</sup> Such ideals kept Brahmin culture, traditions, and morality, connected to the past. Consequently, the Brahmins spurned modern intellectual and artistic movements. They not only condemned the entrepreneurial capitalism that usurped old wealth, but also socialism, unionization, and immigration. Brahmins saw progressive social movements and the art that emerged alongside them as the “potentially fatal malaise of modern times;” their Watch and Ward Society banned

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<sup>3</sup> By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Irish immigrants had begun dominating the Democratic Party in Massachusetts. They operated a political “machine” with ward leaders, and loyal party members were often rewarded with political positions.; Charles H. Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal* (Boston: Oxford University Press, 1977), 41–42.

<sup>4</sup> Frederic Cople Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Boyer, *Purity in Print*, 169.

<sup>6</sup> Jaher, *The Urban Establishment*, 105.

hundreds of “inappropriate” books from Boston shops.<sup>7</sup> As nostalgia for mightier times propped up their current image, the Brahmins successfully maintained cultural leadership—particularly over Boston’s Yankees—and led the crusade against modern “evils.”

The other dominant communities in Boston, the Irish and Italian immigrants, shared the Brahmins’ aversion to contemporary art. Both groups tended to be strongly Catholic, with a firm allegiance to the Church. So when the archdiocese, Boston Cardinal William O’Connell, began denouncing modernism and supporting censorship in the city, a substantial portion of the city followed his lead. Much like the Brahmins, O’Connell counted on some type of “tradition” to strengthen the Church, its people, and society; in his biography of the Cardinal, James M. O’Toole describes O’Connell’s conviction that “the unrelenting antiworldliness and antimodernism of traditional Catholic belief would certainly win out; by being so rigorously countercultural, Catholicism would save culture.”<sup>8</sup> He pushed for the creation of Boston’s Legion of Decency chapter—a Catholic censorship board that monitored movies—and supported many censorship cases in the city.<sup>9</sup> Some also accused O’Connell of influencing censorship more indirectly, such as Reverend John Haynes Holmes who declared in a public speech that the Cardinal’s actions were “an attempt by the Catholic Church in Boston to impose its own standards of decency on all.”<sup>10</sup> Still, thousands of Irish, Italian, and Yankee Bostonians followed Cardinal O’Connell’s

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 120.; Boyer, *Purity in Print*. Boyer’s book gives a full account of the Society’s power in Boston.

<sup>8</sup> James M. O’Toole, *Militant and Triumphant: William Henry O’Connell and the Catholic Church in Boston, 1859-1944*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 228.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 241.; Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> “Cardinal Assailed As Indirect Censor: Reverend John Haynes Homes Hits Local Play Bans,” *Boston Globe*, April 6, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

decency campaigns, leading many in Boston to publicly embrace modesty, tradition, and anti-modernism.

With numerous Bostonians embracing modest values and traditional cultural institutions since the early twentieth century, government authorities also began to act against “inappropriate” material. Throughout the ‘20s, the mayor’s office and state government strengthened their roles as protectors of Boston morals. The state obscenity statute—applied to literature and entertainment—was one of the strictest of its time, outlawing all publications “manifestly tending to corrupt the morals of youth” and books “containing obscene, indecent, or impure language.”<sup>11</sup> In Boston, John Casey was appointed the mayor’s “theatrical advisor” in 1904 and remained in the position through the ‘20s, maintaining, “nothing should be placed upon the stage of any theatre anywhere to which you could not take your mother, sweetheart, wife or sister.” During his tenure, Casey instituted an eight-point “Code of Morals” for theatrical productions, which forbid “lascivious dialogue, gestures, or songs intended to suggest sexual relations; performance in the aisles or auditorium; bare female legs; one-piece union suits worn by women; depictions of drug addicts; all forms of ‘muscle dancing’; profanity; and the portrayal of a moral pervert or sex degenerate, meaning a homosexual.”<sup>12</sup> After cultural leaders such as the Brahmins and Churches had established censorship in Boston, the government’s obscenity laws gave city officials the authority to directly moralize theatre.

One of the first prominent censorship cases in Boston surrounded Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude* in 1929. After a successful run in New York City and a Pulitzer Prize win, the play was scheduled to open at Boston’s Hollis Theatre on September 30. However,

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Boyer, *Purity in Print*, 190.

<sup>12</sup> Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, 112.

Mayor Malcom Nichols, advised by John Casey, deemed it a “disgusting spectacle of immorality” and threatened to shut the Hollis Theatre down if the production played there.<sup>13</sup> He had also rejected a production of O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* three years earlier.<sup>14</sup> Nichols claimed *Strange Interlude* advocated atheism and infidelity, and when the producing company offered to eliminate the most offensive details, he simply objected to the play’s entire theme. The company protested that they had been advertising for months in advance and already sold 7,000 tickets. The script had encountered no trouble from city authorities or the notorious Watch and Ward Society when it was sold in Boston bookstores.<sup>15</sup> Even the press complained that Nichols and Casey would make Boston the laughingstock of the nation; the phrase “Banned in Boston” soon became an infamous reference to the city’s strict standards. Still, the ban remained and the production was forced to move to nearby Quincy.

Nearly six years later, in 1935, three cases brought Boston’s theatrical censorship issues to a head, rallying the city against productions that defied the traditional status quo. In January of 1935, Sean O’Casey’s *Within the Gates* was set to premiere at the Schubert Theatre. The Irish playwright’s grim drama examines religion, centering on a bishop and his illegitimate daughter as she turns to prostitution and eventually dies. Though O’Casey leaves the bishop’s religious affiliation unspecified, most assumed him to be Roman Catholic.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Catholics—as well as many other Christians—found the play offensive and immoral. The Catholic and religious leaders of Boston railed against the play,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 111–112.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Miller, *Banned in Boston: The Watch and Ward Society’s Crusade Against Books, Burlesque, and the Social Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 122.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 140.

and in a city so loyal to the Church, they had the power to stop it. Many Boston clerics complained to the mayor. Father Russell M. Sullivan, head of the Boston College Council of Catholic Organizations and active participant in the Legion of Decency, publicly attacked the “sympathetic portrayal of the immoralities described” (prostitution), and “the clear setting forth of the futility of religion as an effective force in meeting the problems of life.”<sup>17</sup> Mayor Mansfield had at first approved the play with a few minor changes, but under such pressure, sent new City Censor Herbert L. McNary to review the play in New York. When McNary returned, he convinced Mansfield to ban not only the production, but also the printed text.<sup>18</sup> As theatre scholar John Houchin notes, “in the opinion of Boston’s clerical establishment, *Within the Gates* challenged the hegemony of orthodox religion and had to be completely suppressed. And they called upon civic officials to enforce their religious agenda.”<sup>19</sup> When theatre contested religion, Boston’s conservative officials had the authority to shut it down.

At the end of the year, the same theatre—the Schubert—announced its intention to produce Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* in January 1936. The tragic drama follows the effects of a schoolgirl’s lie about her teachers’ “unnatural” lesbian relationship, and was critically acclaimed in New York. Yet when the Schubert scheduled it for Boston, Mayor Mansfield again sent his censor to see the Broadway production and judge whether it was decent enough for the city. McNary objected to the theme of homosexuality, and decided that *The Children’s Hour* “was not a proper presentation for a Boston theatre,” leading the

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<sup>17</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>19</sup> Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, 122.

mayor to announce a ban on December 14 without ever having seen the play.<sup>20</sup> The show's New York producers decided to fight their decision in federal District Court by filing suit against Mayor Mansfield and Commissioner McNary for \$250,000 in damages and petitioning to enjoin the City of Boston from further interference with the production.<sup>21</sup> They accused the Mayor and Commissioner of slander and libel against the play. During the proceedings, the Mayor was able to both cite the Moral Code against portrayal of any "moral pervert or sex degenerate," and point out fact that he had not technically banned the play, but forced it to face the censorship board (which would have certainly banned it and revoked the theatre's license).<sup>22</sup> The producers consequently lost the case, and *The Children's Hour* did not play in Boston.<sup>23</sup>

The third scandalous play of 1935 was censored for reasons beyond the usual claims of "sexual perversion" or anti-religiousness. Clifford Odets's *Waiting For Lefty* follows a taxi strike, stirring themes of social protest and revolution. Sure his play would be banned for its radicalism, Odets released a statement before the opening that read: "Waiting for Lefty' has been closed by the Boston Police. 'Expressive of un American [sic] activity' is the charge. Americanism depends upon your point of view. If you are afraid of the deepest truths of the class conflicts of our times, all liberal or radical activity may be so labeled."<sup>24</sup> The mayor's office did allow it to play at the Dudley Street Opera House, but at the opening on April 5, Censor McNary, a police captain, and a police sergeant sat in the

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>22</sup> "Refuses to Compel Lifting of Play Ban: Judge Won't Make Self Licensing Board," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, January 14, 1936.

<sup>23</sup> Miller, *Banned in Boston: The Watch and Ward Society's Crusade Against Books, Burlesque, and the Social Evil*, 145.

<sup>24</sup> "Boston Police Halt Play For Profanity: Arrest Four Members of Cast of 'Waiting for Lefty' in Premiere There.," *New York Times*, April 7, 1935.

audience. Policemen from the city's "Red Squad" also surrounded the theatre. At the close of the curtain, McNary signaled the policemen to arrest four of the nine cast members, and the play was forced to close.<sup>25</sup> Officially, the charge was "using profanity in a public assemblage," but many believed officials had shut down the play because of its radical politics. The play was allowed to open with several deletions of profanity, but for many, Bostonian censorship now not only regulated the lewd and irreverent, but also the radical.<sup>26</sup>

These three scandals—as well as book banning cases and theatre suppression in surrounding cities—set the standard for censorship in Boston by the time the Federal Theatre Project produced *Valley Forge* as its first major play in that city. Cultural institutions and societal leaders wielded powerful influence on government officials who had the authority to shut down plays as they saw fit, whether they were judged too lewd, irreverent, immoral, or dangerously radical. The FTP production of Maxwell Anderson's *Valley Forge* began rehearsing in January of 1936, just weeks after the uproar over *The Children's Hour*.<sup>27</sup> When leaders in the area found the play distasteful, they had a well-established censorship apparatus at their disposal to suppress it. *Valley Forge* depicts George Washington and his soldiers at the low point of the American Revolution, giving a gritty picture of Washington's army. Soldiers are shown deserting camp, swearing, and living in squalor; members of Congress appear petty and even plot against the troops; the usually glorified George Washington nearly loses hope. Other revered leaders of the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, *Banned in Boston: The Watch and Ward Society's Crusade Against Books, Burlesque, and the Social Evil*, 143.

<sup>27</sup> "Boston Civic Theatre Now Rehearsing 'Valley Forge,'" *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, January 12, 1936.

American Revolution are often portrayed as spiteful or cruel. For the elite Bostonians who revered the past, such a grim view of history amounted to blasphemy.

Many Bostonians may have also seen *Valley Forge* in terms of Roosevelt's fledgling relief programs and the devastation of the Depression. The play opens on a soldiers' bunkhouse, where men finish their meager dinners, though "the food this evening is inedible."<sup>28</sup> The army's plight has many parallels to that of the desperate workers laboring in the Works Progress Administration: poor living conditions, meager supplies, tough work, disputes with Congress and local governments over program implementation. Their clothes "are dirty, torn, patched, threadbare, and in many cases almost nonexistent."<sup>29</sup> One man complains, "Nobody could eat this carrion tonight. I wouldn't set it down to a good dog," to which another responds, "that's Congress food, that is."<sup>30</sup> Washington constantly demands more supplies and rations for his men from Congress. His anger at an uncooperative government may have been too suggestive for Boston audiences; the Boston government was especially hostile to the New Deal and its projects. Prominent politicians such as Michael Curley, Joseph Ely, and Frederick Mansfield, though previously Roosevelt supporters, promoted economic retrenchment instead of cooperating with large-scale New Deal relief projects.<sup>31</sup> For Bostonians hostile to Roosevelt's new policies, the pro-relief themes in *Valley Forge* were particularly offensive.

The Boston FTP had planned to present *Valley Forge* to several cities on a local tour. Troubles began after an early stop in Plymouth, where local Selectman Charles Moning

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<sup>28</sup> Maxwell Anderson, *Valley Forge: A Play in Three Acts* (Anderson House, 1934), 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>31</sup> Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 143–146.

issued a statement calling the play “a combination of obscenity and ‘ham’ acting.”<sup>32</sup>

Objections poured in, and the Selectmen of Lexington, the tour’s next stop, soon banned the play because of “improper passages.”<sup>33</sup> Patrons of the sold-out performance arrived at the theatre to find a sign announcing the cancellation, and stage equipment was shipped back to Boston for the evening.<sup>34</sup> Other cities set to host the production—including Leominster and Fitchburg—now required the Federal Theatre Project to cut or alter the offending passages in order to proceed with performances. These passages included “bunkhouse scenes [that] depict the actions and conversations of Washington’s soldiers while off duty” and a scene “depicting a woman camp follower and remarks addressed to her,” during which “much of the conversation is blunt and characteristic more of the barracks than of polite society.”<sup>35</sup> The play’s great success in New York was not enough to keep it intact. Though *Valley Forge* played in several cities after Lexington, many Bostonians would continue to associate the Federal Theatre with scandal, and the project lost much of its potential audience for the next year and a half. Much like the cases of 1935, *Valley Forge* lay victim to Boston’s strict moral standards.

The scandal around *Valley Forge* caused further tension within the Federal Theatre Project and Works Progress Administration. After receiving complaints about the play, head of the Massachusetts WPA Paul Edwards nearly instated a censorship board to specifically monitor the Boston FTP and guard the citizens’ moral sensibilities, stating, “if there is any scandal on the federal drama project, I intend to get to the bottom of it and

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<sup>32</sup> “Banned Play to Be Presented: W. P. A. Cast Going to Leominster and Fitchburg--Lines Deleted Before Protest,” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, February 21, 1936.

<sup>33</sup> Special Dispatch to the Globe, “W.P.A. Play Given Rousing Applause: Fitchburg Audience Likes ‘Valley Forge,’” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, March 4, 1936.

<sup>34</sup> “Banned Play to Be Presented.”

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

clean it up.”<sup>36</sup> Fortunately, he reviewed the situation and withdrew his objections. Still, officials in the state and national Federal Theatre Project distrusted the Boston chapter. In the uproar over the episode, regional director Hiram Motherwell dismissed the Massachusetts FTP State Director Lawrence Hansen as well as two of his assistants.<sup>37</sup> Motherwell himself soon resigned due to the controversy.<sup>38</sup> Audience numbers in Boston were so low that National Director Hallie Flanagan tried to dissolve the entire FTP chapter there, but authorities in Washington continued the project.

As it struggled to produce successful works, Federal Theatre Project officials consistently reminded Boston artists to avoid another *Valley Forge*. Hallie Flanagan told the *Boston Globe*, “the Federal theatre has not progressed far in Massachusetts because of administration tangles and poor selection of plays,” and noted that she would continue to be more involved in the selection process.<sup>39</sup> Leading up to the project’s next major production—*Created Equal*—Eastern Region Director Blanding Sloan asked, “please bear in mind the VALLEY FORGE [sic] production, and the sad effects it had on the Boston public’s attitude toward Federal Theatre Productions. The reaction in the public mind is bitter and very antagonistic.”<sup>40</sup> Boston’s first major Federal Theatre production had experienced the city’s infamous censorship right out of the gate, and it left some scars.

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<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Ann Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 52.; Quoted in Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 225, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106017214971>.

<sup>37</sup> “Ousts Federal Theatre Trio: Motherwell Dismisses Hansen, Assistants State Director Fights Edict, Blames ‘Valley Forge,’” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, March 6, 1936.

<sup>38</sup> George Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays* (New York: Xlibris Corp., 2011).

<sup>39</sup> “Actor Projects’ Head Looks For Theatre Here: Mrs. Flanagan Declares Work Will Be ‘American, First of All,’” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, August 5, 1936.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Osborne, *Staging the People*, 52.

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## Chapter 2

### *No Experiments for Boston!*<sup>1</sup> Play Choice in the Boston FTP

In the months after the *Valley Forge* debacle, Boston's Federal Theatre had to tread carefully in order to overcome the poor reputation that censorship had caused. Head of the Massachusetts W.P.A. Paul Edwards had already threatened to institute a censorship board, and the Boston FTP had to present him with arguments justifying the play's production to change his mind. In May of 1936, a group of Boston-area community cultural leaders met to discuss "the future of the W.P.A. community theatre program and work to date," presumably referring to its declining reputation.<sup>2</sup> After such an unsuccessful first season, Hallie Flanagan tried to end the project; "considering the history of the Boston project up to that time, I requested that we should 'discontinue federal funds as this project draws to a close in June, transferring the people to recreation projects.'"<sup>3</sup> Officials in the Massachusetts and Washington W.P.A. refused to close the unit. Though the Boston project continued, Flanagan wittily remarks, "the company felt shaken in any desire to experiment with such dangerous authors as Shakespeare or Maxwell Anderson."<sup>4</sup> All eyes were on this still-new theatre company. The Boston FTP's next productions would have to be tame enough to not only avoid censorship from officials, but also to find success amongst audiences that distrusted it so much.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote comes from Hiram Motherwell, who reported early on to Hallie Flanagan that there would be "no experiments for New England!"; Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 224, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106017214971>.

<sup>2</sup> "Future of W. P. A. Theatre Discussed," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, May 27, 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 226.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

The season following *Valley Forge*—1936-1937—proved cautious in its play choices, uncontroversial, and consequently safe from censorship. Eastern Regional Director William Stahl, Massachusetts State Director Leonard Gallagher, and Hallie Flanagan decided to open the season with two plays that had already found success within the national Federal Theatre Project.<sup>5</sup> Both *Chalk Dust* and *Class of '29* had opened in New York City with the FTP within the past year: *Chalk Dust* in March of 1936, and *Class of '29* in May.<sup>6</sup> *Chalk Dust*, a drama by Harold A. Clark and Maxwell Nurnberg that criticized the inadequacies of public school, had a popular run at New York's Daly Theatre, eventually grabbing the attention of Hollywood producers.<sup>7</sup> It had played in six different cities before a Massachusetts production went up. Even then, the show ran in Holyoke, MA for two weeks before coming to Boston; Boston's first major Federal Theatre production since *Valley Forge* had to be a guaranteed success, and *Chalk Dust* was as close to a sure bet as officials could get.<sup>8</sup> *Class of '29*, depicting life during the Depression for a group of college graduates, had a similarly strong history. With a popular run in New York, the show was produced in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and Cambridge, Massachusetts before opening in Boston in September.<sup>9</sup> The first two shows of the season were bound for success.

Advertisements for *Chalk Dust* and *Class of '29* pushed their previous success and uncontroversial nature. The Boston poster for *Chalk Dust* included quotes from several different critics praising the production, including a *Boston Globe* review claiming “the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>6</sup> Fenwick Library Staff George Mason University, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions, Compiled by the Staff of the Fenwick Library, George Mason University* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986), 31, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Jane De Hart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1967), 74.

<sup>8</sup> George Mason University, *Catalog-Calendar of Productions*, 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 35.

boldest line in the play has to do with the need of organization among the teachers, but that too has been past history for nearly a decade. The humor in the play, on the other hand, was up to the minute and brought roars of laughter.”<sup>10</sup> Though the play deals with social issues, the advertisement assured audiences that these are not controversial issues. No one in this audience will be offended by a “historical” problem. Similarly, a Worcester poster for *Class of '29* included quotes from reviews “to certify that the critics have acclaimed the Federal Theatre’s production.” The *Worcester Evening Post* assured audiences that “contrary to reports that [*Class of '29*] was propoganda for the Democratic party, (it) seemed not in favor of any major party, but a vital plea for a change in the system which refuses men self respect and real jobs.”<sup>11</sup> Here again, the ad promises no divisive themes or “propaganda;” the vague idea that men need “self respect and real jobs” seems quite natural in the Depression era. By promising audiences uncontroversial, established works, the Boston Project hoped to regain audiences.

Like *Chalk Dust* and *Class of '29*, most of the major plays produced by the Boston Federal Theatre Project in the 1936-1937 season were plays that had already been produced successfully by the FTP in other cities, usually New York City. Over the course of the season, the Project put up seven productions in major Boston theatres; *Chalk Dust*, *Class of '29*, and *It Can't Happen Here* at the Repertory Theatre; *Help Yourself* and *Bloodstream* (the latter with the Ralf Coleman Group of Negro Players) at the Copley Theatre; *The Deluge* and *Johnny Johnson* at the Majestic Theatre.<sup>12</sup> Of these, only *Bloodstream* and *Johnny*

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<sup>10</sup> *Chalk Dust Poster*. Poster. Boston: Federal Theatre, 1936. From Harvard Theatre Collection, HTC Clippings 5, WPA Federal Theatre Advertisements.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> In addition to these, the Boston FTP also put on an *All-Star Vaudeville* show and *Swanee Minstrels*, a traditional minstrel show.

*Johnson* were premieres unique to Boston.<sup>13</sup> More than half of the plays produced in Boston that season had already been run by the FTP, a testament to their likeability and resistance to controversy. The Boston FTP avoided risk by stocking their season with these plays, but although the season passed without scandal, their audience numbers remained low.

The Boston FTP had so few audience members, that in the 1937-1938 season they produced no major plays at all in Boston.<sup>14</sup> Hallie Flanagan recalls the fight to stimulate the Boston project;

We had tried a series of New York productions, stock and touring; we had tried three Boston theatres, several state and regional directors. We had had constant struggles with the state administration which did not want a theatre project but merely wanted relief people employed inconspicuously; we had not won a hostile press and we had not won a public.<sup>15</sup>

Instead of a season in Boston, Flanagan and new Regional Director George Gerwing focused on a string of plays at the Empire Theatre in Salem. The year included three Eugene O'Neill plays (*The First Man, Ah, Wilderness!*, and *The Emperor Jones*), Lynn Riggs' *Green Grow the Lilacs*, Talbot Jennings' *American Wing*, and H. L. Fishel's *Jericho* by the Negro company. Like the Boston productions, many of these plays had already been produced by the Federal Theatre in other locations.<sup>16</sup> The Boston unit could take no risks to compromise its fragile state.

When comparing the Boston Federal Theatre Project to its counterparts in cities like New York and Chicago, it becomes clear how cautiously Boston chose its seasons. The large

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<sup>13</sup> *It Can't Happen Here*, as a special case, premiered simultaneously in Boston as well as twenty-six other cities. Hallie Flanagan, along with playwright Sinclair Lewis and several other federal FTP officials conceived the project as a national event.

<sup>14</sup> "Seven Boston Theatres Open in 1937-38 Season," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, June 19, 1938.

<sup>15</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 227.

<sup>16</sup> George Mason University, *Catalog-Calendar of Productions*.

New York City project had early success with premieres of new and socially conscious plays like *Triple-A Plowed Under*, *Battle Hymn*, *Altars of Steel*, and others.<sup>17</sup> Yet their 1935-1936 season had also seen controversy when the White House shut down their first Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia* led by Elmer Rice, for its treatment of an international political subject.<sup>18</sup> In New York like Boston, Rice and others began to fear for the freedom of a project that had promised “free, adult, and uncensored theatre.”<sup>19</sup> Still, New York ran multiple new and daring productions in the season that followed. Hallie Flanagan recalls that “the critics were united in disliking” Virgil Geddes’ *Native Ground*. Barrie and Leona Stavis’s *The Sun and I* had success even though it included “a beautiful woman tearing her clothes off” and potentially controversial references to “economic tyranny.” An adaptation of *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* by John Houseman and Orson Welles was a strange new imagining of the story, but New York’s risk paid off when critics universally praised the show.<sup>20</sup> New York’s Federal Theatre continued to produce many cutting-edge and potentially controversial plays through the 1936-37 season.<sup>21</sup>

New York’s 1938-1939 season introduced even more new plays. They premiered Bernard Shaw’s *On the Rocks* as part of a Shaw cycle.<sup>22</sup> In early 1938, three premieres brought great success to the FTP, despite their political themes. In *One-Third of A Nation*, the Project provided a moving exposé on city slums. E.P. Conkle’s *Prologue to Glory* depicted Abraham Lincoln’s life as part of United States history. *Haiti*, put on by the Negro

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<sup>17</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 184.

<sup>18</sup> Mathews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, 63–64.

<sup>19</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–187.

<sup>21</sup> Flanagan’s chapter “New York City: November, 1936-July, 1937” in *Arena* gives a thorough overview of the plays produced in this period, as well as the administrative struggles the New York chapter saw.

<sup>22</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 318.

troupe in Harlem, also had contemporary political themes.<sup>23</sup> The Senate Dies Committee would later cite all three plays as having “communist leanings.”<sup>24</sup> Unlike Boston, the New York unit was able to give its audience bold new plays—both politically themed and not—and not rely on classics and previously staged successes.

Multiple Federal Theatre centers had also been producing daring new work through Living Newspaper units—groups of playwrights and researchers that created issue-driven plays about current events. Typically, the Living Newspapers concerned current, locally relevant, and controversial issues. Though the units claimed to present information objectively and to only inform audiences about the chosen issue, the plays usually included a specific call to action.<sup>25</sup> As theatre historian John Houchin describes it, “the Living Newspaper attempted to educate and empower the audience by explaining a social problem and exhorting them to solve it.”<sup>26</sup> New York’s first attempt, a production depicting the Italian invasion of Ethiopia—also called *Ethiopia*—was abruptly shut down for its political content.<sup>27</sup> The city still continued with the program, premiering its first full Living Newspaper, *Triple A-Plowed Under*, on March 14, 1936. The play depicted the unfortunate state of farmers over the previous decade, and attacked politicians against Roosevelt’s Agricultural Adjustment Act.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>24</sup> Mathews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, 199.

<sup>25</sup> Ira Levine, Ira. *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985, 156.

<sup>26</sup> John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 135.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. See above. As Hallie Flanagan describes it, the federal government feared that portrayal of an international figure would damage relations, and further forbid depiction of a state head.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 136.

Despite opposition, *Triple-A* and New York's Living Newspaper group found success, and the unit produced several more activist plays; *1935* opened in May of 1936 and provided an overview of the year within the Depression; in July, *Injunction Granted* argued that unions are necessary to the life and safety of American workers by presenting an American labor history; in February of 1937, *Power* argued that electricity belonged to the people instead of to companies, and urged them to campaign for public control.<sup>29</sup> Several other cities also had thriving Living Newspaper units, producing current, activist theatre—Chicago's *Spirochete* informed audiences about the danger of syphilis, and Portland, Oregon created *Bonneville Dam* in response to a local dam project.<sup>30</sup> Boston, unlike other active Federal Theatre cities, never had a Living Newspaper unit. While these chapters effectively produced new, current, socially-minded plays, the Boston Federal Theatre relied heavily on established successes, particularly in the two seasons after *Valley Forge*.

Though Boston's FTP unit failed to follow the example of cities like New York, it faced obstacles that made achieving such goals impractical; Boston had the strongest censorship system of any city in the country. The Watch and Ward Society, active since the first World War, banned dozens of books from the city's shelves, sparking a city-wide crusade against immoral art.<sup>31</sup> The government now had multiple ways of shutting down theatre, and used each regularly. Massachusetts' obscenity statute forbade "obscene" publications, and Boston's own "Code of Morals" from John Casey listed specific immoralities not to be portrayed on stage. The city mayor had the legal right to shut down

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Ann Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 38, 139.

<sup>31</sup> Neil Miller, *Banned in Boston: The Watch and Ward Society's Crusade Against Books, Burlesque, and the Social Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

a theatre for any reason. Throughout the '20s and '30s, the mayor also had a city censor on staff to approve plays.<sup>32</sup> The Boston government often threatened theatres with legal penalties in order to purge the theatre of immorality and radicalism. Plays that included overt sexuality like O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, anti-religious themes like *Within the Gates*, or radical politics like *Waiting For Lefty* would certainly be censored. With these systems in place, the Boston FTP had to be cautious where other units could be bold.

When Boston's Federal Theatre re-started in the fall of 1938—after its hiatus the previous season—it began its largest season yet, with eight major productions at the Copley Theatre. Along with crowd-pleasers like *Dr. Faustus*, *Macbeth*, and *Pinocchio*, Federal Theatre national successes *Haiti*, *A Moral Entertainment*, and *Dus Groise Gevins* (by their Yiddish troupe), the 1937-1938 Boston season included premieres of new works *Lucy Stone* and *Created Equal*.<sup>33</sup> After over two seasons, the chapter finally had its own, locally premiered plays. Yet as reader reports from the National Play Service (NPS) reveal, the Boston Federal Theatre still deliberately chose uncontroversial plays through these months. The National Play Service aided the Federal Theatre by collecting and recommending plays via readers' reports, which include an analysis of each play, its themes, and its usability for the FTP. The Boston Project and officials such as George Gerwing almost certainly read these reports, and chose those plays that had received more benign remarks.

Talbot Jennings' *American Wing*, though it played in Salem instead of Boston, opened in March of 1938 as one of the company's last productions before re-opening in the

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<sup>32</sup> Please see my previous chapter for a more thorough examination of censorship in Boston.

<sup>33</sup> "Record of the Boston Theatre Season of 1938-39," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, June 4, 1939.

city.<sup>34</sup> Following two seasons of low audience numbers for the FTP, the pressure was on to have success. Officials chose Jennings' piece—about the downfall of a well-established family—not for its social themes but for its lack thereof. Converse Tyler, one of the NPS' most active report writers, wrote that the play “has social importance. The author clearly shows a liberal point of view but keeps obvious propaganda at arm's length with the result that the play makes good entertainment.”<sup>35</sup> By choosing a play without “propaganda” or strong social views, the Boston project could avoid controversy and provide entertainment with wide appeal. Tyler continues; “this play combines a theme of vital importance with high entertainment value . . . it is developed with delicacy and restraint,” suggesting again the unit's preference for “entertainment” over serious dramatic issues.<sup>36</sup>

Tyler claimed that *American Wing's* social themes were restrained, but other reports suggest they were lacking altogether. One report called it “a quiet, thoughtful, readable play,” giving it a completely benign reading. Another report simply deemed it “smooth but sappy,” never mentioning any social themes.<sup>37</sup> Judson O'Donnell further criticized *American Wing* for not pushing far enough in its social critique, noting, “the theme of ‘American Wing’ is worthwhile, and deserves a more capable and proficient handling than this author has been able to give it.”<sup>38</sup> In her similar report, Ann Grosvenor Ayres questioned the believability of *American Wing's* story and the significance of its social themes, which is “what keeps “American Wing” from being an important play—it has not the real breath or

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<sup>34</sup> George Mason University, *Catalog-Calendar of Productions*, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Converse Tyler, *American Wing*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service, 28 July 1936. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 139, Folder F561.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Louis Vitter, *American Wing*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service, 13 August 1936: From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 139, Folder F561.

<sup>38</sup> Judson O'Donnell, *American Wing*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 139, Folder F561.

sweep of American life . . . seeming more important than it really is, and making much of little.” She adds that “with good acting and a superior production this might pass for an important play—which in this reader’s opinion it definitely is not.”<sup>39</sup> “Importance” here is equated to urgent social relevance. *American Wing*, when chosen by the Boston Federal Theatre Project, was not such an “important” play. It was similar enough to the activist dramas popular in cities like New York to seem interesting, but uncontroversial enough to play in Boston without scandal or censorship issues.

The first play chosen for the Boston FTP’s 1938-1939 season was John Hunter Booth’s *Created Equal*, a play about the history and struggles of American democracy that many said was in the style of the Living Newspaper. Yet much like *American Wing*, initial reports from the National Play Service suggested it lacked the clear message and political themes that the Living Newspaper style depended on. For reader Henry Bennett, *Created Equal* had no clear purpose. As he observed:

(It was) completely devoid of the incisiveness and the various attention-compelling devices that made the Living Newspaper so memorable and successful and experiment. One of the chief merits of the Living Newspaper productions was that each of their scenes went towards building up some special argument or point of view, driving home point after point with great assurance and dramatic ingenuity. But here the succession of scenes leaves one in doubt concerning the play’s real theme.<sup>40</sup>

Converse Tyler similarly thought that Booth’s themes—government corruption, inequality, and the failures of democracy—were too ambiguous, naming in particular the critical Wall

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<sup>39</sup> Ann Grosvenor Ayres, *American Wing*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service, April 6, 1937. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 139, Folder F561.

<sup>40</sup> Henry Bennett, *Created Equal*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service, 31 October 1937. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 171, Folder PRR.

Street crash scene and group ending as “not made clear” and “lamentably weak.”<sup>41</sup> Even those readers who recommended the play and discerned its political themes did not define it as activist or extreme; Jos. Tugendhaft describes it as “*potentially* effective stage material” if done with various revisions, and an unnamed reader defines Booth’s message as a critique of “the *potentially* undemocratic nature” of the Constitution (emphasis mine).<sup>42</sup> Clearly, the *Created Equal* described within the NPS reader reports was not a boldly activist play, and according to several reports it was not a political play at all. The Boston Project ran little risk of controversy by choosing *Created Equal*.

Boston’s next original play, *Lucy Stone*, was seen by readers as little other than a historical piece, suitable for “little theatre groups interested in doing plays about the achievements of women.”<sup>43</sup> Numerous reports suggested its use for “Schools, Colleges, and Women’s Organizations,” though not necessarily for a major stage.<sup>44</sup> They repeatedly describe *Lucy Stone* as an “episodic drama” that reviews Ms. Stone’s history with the suffragette movement, and dismiss any dramatic tension or overarching themes; one calls it “more history than dramaturgy,” and another suggests, “it might be useful to schools or colleges but its general value is rather limited.”<sup>45</sup> For his part, reader William Dorsey Blake

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<sup>41</sup> Converse Tyler, *Created Equal*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service, 14 January 1938: From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 171, Folder PRR.

<sup>42</sup> Jos. Tugendhaft, *Created Equal*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 171, Folder PRR.; Unnamed Reader, *Created Equal*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 171, Folder PRR.: *Federal Theatre Collection*, Library of Congress

<sup>43</sup> Unnamed Reader, *Created Equal*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 171, Folder PRR.

<sup>44</sup> Unnamed Reader, *Lucy Stone*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 247, Folder PRR.

<sup>45</sup> Unnamed Reader, *Lucy Stone*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 247, Folder PRR.

did find a dramatic theme in *Lucy Stone*—that of the struggle for gender equality—but felt that it was too dated to produce theatrically:

The subject of the play (the fight to obtain women's rights) is somewhat of a dead issue in these modern times. Nowadays we take the women's franchise very much for granted. It seems inconceivable to us that there could have been a time in our near past when women did not live on terms of comparative equality with men . . . This being the case, it is both bad theatre and an imposition on the Public to offer it a two and a half hour play in which a dead subject is the main theme.<sup>46</sup>

His ignorance of feminist issues aside, Blake's impression that *Lucy Stone* had no current or contentious issue was shared by the Boston officials who would later completely revise it (with a new focus on Ms. Stone's personal life),<sup>47</sup> making the play another safe choice.

Writing about the production, Hallie Flanagan also dismisses any substance; "we regarded the play as of local and historic rather than theatre interest."<sup>48</sup> A play that focused on a historical story and "dead issues," was surely less liable to cause scandal among critical Boston theatregoers.

For Boston, the combination of theatre classics (*Doctor Faustus*, *Macbeth*), national successes (*Haiti*, *A Moral Entertainment*, *Dus Groise Gevins*), and original material carefully selected to be non-contentious (*Created Equal*, *Lucy Stone*), created a season devoid of the bold activism seen in other FTP projects, but also safe from Boston's infamous censorship. Furthermore, the conservative season washed away any lingering speculations of the project's respectability from *Valley Forge*; the 1938-1939 season was the Boston FTP

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<sup>46</sup> William Dorsey Blake, *William Dorsey Blake to Ben Russak, October 10, 1938*. Letter. From Library of Congress, *Federal Theatre Collection*, Box 247, Folder PRR.

<sup>47</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*. In her chapter on Boston's FTP chapter, Osborne analyzes the revisions made to the original *Lucy Stone* script, and the ways in which they feminize and weaken the Lucy character, as well as the feminist themes of the play.

<sup>48</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 230.

chapter's most successful, bringing back large audiences who had stayed away the previous years. By deliberately choosing plays that either had an established popular history without controversy, or new plays that had little controversial content, the Boston project could have success—if not innovation. As Flanagan writes in *Arena*, “nothing controversial would go in Boston, nothing political, nothing connected with the economic scene. Boston liked the classics, if richly mounted and well acted.”<sup>49</sup> The little political theatre Boston could do would have to be restrained and obscured.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

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### Chapter 3

#### *“Restore Your Faith In America:” Promoting *Created Equal**

On June 13, 1938 at the Copley Theatre, John Hunter Booth’s *Created Equal* heralded the Federal Theatre Project’s return to the Boston stage, after the unit produced no major shows there during the 1937-38 season. The play came fresh from short Salem and Springfield try-outs, and had been advertised in Boston several weeks before its premiere. For Hallie Flanagan, George Gerwing, and Project officials, this was a last effort to build an effective Federal Theatre unit in a city that distrusted the Project. *Created Equal* needed to succeed if the Boston Federal Theatre Project was to survive. In their promotion of the play, the FTP argued that *Created Equal*—and the project as a whole—was a moral, patriotic, educational, and communal experience. Their promotion successfully built a respectable reputation for the Boston FTP, but did so at the expense of representing the play’s politically charged message.

The play *Created Equal* contained themes about government corruption, social stratification, and the need for political revolution to achieve true democracy. In his “Notes for Directors,” playwright John Hunter Booth states the play’s proposition:

The Declaration of Independence promised equality.

The Constitution established a propertied class.

Amendments to the Constitution are slowly fulfilling the promise of the Declaration.<sup>1</sup>

Though the more radical elements of the production would be subdued (as I will discuss in the next chapter), it clearly contained socially relevant and contentious themes. Yet the

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<sup>1</sup> John Hunter Booth, *Created Equal* (Final Version), 17 June 1938: Box 622, Folder S323 (1). Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

Boston Federal Theatre Project promoted the play as innocuous, stripping it of any political content in the public eye. In ads, interviews, endorsements, and community engagements, *Created Equal* appeared to be a simple and wholesome play, devoid of social messages, that appealed to Boston's conservative audiences.

With all its promotion materials, the Boston FTP marketed *Created Equal* as a "history play" rather than a "social play." Officials such as Hallie Flanagan used the term "social play" to discuss plays that questioned or criticized social issues; she called *Power*, *Class of '29*, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, *Battle Hymn*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *Chalk Dust*, and *Altars of Steel* all "social plays."<sup>2</sup> *Created Equal*, however, she named "a chronicle of history."<sup>3</sup> The distinction between the two descriptions had important repercussions for the play's perception. The "social plays" were seen as contributions to dialogues about important issues, each with relevant messages or even calls to action. A "history play's" main function was to review issues and events that had already come and gone, not to contribute to ongoing debates. The "history play" was less a vital message to the community at the moment, and more a helpful or pleasing reminder of the past. Though *Created Equal* addressed many contemporary issues and had a strong call to action, its characterization as a "history play" lasted throughout its promotion.

Newspaper ads and articles about *Created Equal* always presented it as an "American Chronicle" of historical events, a "panoramic," or "historical cavalcade." A *Boston Globe* announcement of the production describes it in purely historical terms: "the play is a dramatic chronicle of outstanding events in United States history from 1776 to the present,

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<sup>2</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 184, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106017214971>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

and introduces many prominent figures, including Washington, Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton.”<sup>4</sup> Another *Globe* announcement called *Created Equal* “a panoramic play of American history,” that

... brings to life upon the stage the outstanding events in United States history from 1776 to the present. The Continental Congress, the Revolution, the Civil and the World Wars figure importantly, together with such epochal happenings as the Dred Scott decision and the stock-market crash of 1929. Historical characters, of course, are introduced, including Washington, Jefferson, Grant, Lincoln, and others.<sup>5</sup>

Most articles and ads promoting *Created Equal* also focused on the history and described its plot in terms of the “outstanding” events and figures depicted. A *Boston Herald* article titled “Historical Drama at Copley Monday” read: “‘Created Equal’ is described by the author as ‘an American chronicle in 27 scenes, dramatizing the birth and growth of the American spirit.’ The play presents the outstanding incidents in American history from 1776 to 1938.”<sup>6</sup> In actuality, these “historical characters” barely feature in *Created Equal*, and the “outstanding” events mostly represent government corruption and inequality. Yet FTP

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<sup>4</sup> “‘Created Equal’ Coming to the Copley June 13,” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, May 29, 1938.

<sup>5</sup> “‘Created Equal’ at the Copley Theatre June 13,” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, June 5, 1938.; It is also interesting to note that this article mentions the Dred Scott scene, a scene that discusses race issues and slavery as an example of inequality. Booth certainly had these issues in mind, though other issues, such as his treatment of Native Americans, complicate this view. Elizabeth Osborne gives a good discussion of this in her book, *Staging the People*.

<sup>6</sup> “Historical Drama at Copley Monday.” *Boston Herald*. Article. June 10, 1938: HTC Clippings 13, Houghton Library, Harvard Library.

publicity articles neglected Booth's darker themes in order to present the play as a patriotic overview of the country's past.<sup>7</sup>

Print ads run by the Boston FTP also portrayed *Created Equal* as a simple history play. Focusing on the play's historical subject, they revealed none of Booth's social themes. The *Boston Globe* ran several of the FTP's ads in the weeks before their premiere. Their June 5 ad was labeled, "from the Cavalcade of '76 to the Motorcade of 1938," indicating the play's span of years.<sup>8</sup> On June 12, their ad read: "160 Years of Gripping U. S. Drama in 160 Minutes . . . 27 Scenes of Chief Events From '76 to Now."<sup>9</sup> The opening night *Globe* ad read "Dramatic Review of United States from '76 to NOW [sic] in 27 Scenes."<sup>10</sup> The display ads condensed the message of the promotion articles, emphasizing the "1776 to 1938" historical overview message over any other theme. Though the ads described the play as "gripping" or "dramatic," readers could never get the sense that *Created Equal* dealt with issues as serious as those in *Chalk Dust* or *It Can't Happen Here*.

The FTP's poster for *Created Equal* further supported this message. The calm scene painted by the poster gives no suggestion of the corrupt democracy that Booth's play portrays. A founding father figure in wig and tailcoat signs a scroll, as if signing the very Declaration that Booth found so inadequate. In the background stands Boston's famous Old South Meeting House, a symbol of Boston pride and of the American Revolution. For a play that questions the efficacy of that "Revolution" and the need for further change, the

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<sup>7</sup> It must be noted that these articles and ads were almost certainly created or initiated by the Federal Theatre Project. Newspaper advertisement was the FTP's main source of promotion.

<sup>8</sup> "Created Equal Ad: June 5," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, June 5, 1938.

<sup>9</sup> "Created Equal, American Chronicle Play at Copley," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, June 12, 1938.

<sup>10</sup> "Created Equal Ad: June 13," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, June 13, 1938.

glorified image of this building is not a fitting choice for the poster. A true symbol of uprising, such as the Boston Tea Party ships, or of contemporary inequality, such as Wall Street, would have given a more accurate representation of the production's message. As the poster stands, idyllic clouds and trees surround Old South Meeting House, suggesting a pleasant tone that *Created Equal* would not give. The poster's text contains the same history-themed messages as other articles and ads, describing the production as a "Gripping American Play," and a "Great Historical Cavalcade," "Depicting America From 1776 to the Present Day."<sup>11</sup> Like other visual material for the production, the poster emphasized history, as well as patriotism. Instead of risking controversy by publicizing the play's politics, the Boston FTP promoted its "American history." By presenting *Created Equal* as a patriotic "history play" rather than a "social play," the Boston FTP diffused audience anxieties about the unit being irreverent or radical.

For *Created Equal*, the Federal Theatre Project also made a special effort to acquire endorsements from major cultural leaders as a way to reassure the community about the production's quality. The FTP sought and received endorsement from prominent figures who could lend their moral authority to the play, including ministers, government officials, principals, and professors, as well as civic organizations. While the FTP obtained endorsements for both the Springfield and Boston productions, I focus here on the Springfield letters; a larger collection of promotion material survives from the Springfield production thanks to the efforts of the Springfield production team, and provides insight into Boston's promotion process. In Springfield, the FTP publicity team chose wholesome

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 1. Created Equal Poster, from the Created Equal Production Bulletin. Poster. Boston: Box 997, Folder Created Equal (Boston) (1). Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

and respected cultural figures to offer endorsements. The FTP first partnered with The American Youth Council (AYC), a civic organization for the rehabilitation of unemployed city youths, which made the production a part of the Springfield community. Part of the proceeds went to the AYC, giving the FTP and its play a good public image. Through the President of the Springfield Ministers Association, the FTP was then able to send a letter to fifty-eight ministers in Springfield and its surrounding towns, asking them to announce the play at their churches. With this type of support, the FTP assured audiences that their new play was family-friendly and uncontroversial. Endorsements from the local Mayor, House Representative, and school principal had a similar effect.<sup>12</sup> Springfield's *Created Equal* drew audiences and built an upstanding reputation for their FTP chapter. When the FTP repeated these strategies in Boston, they found similar success.

The letters sent by the FTP to obtain endorsements characterized *Created Equal* as a patriotic historical review, much like the newspaper articles. Nearly identical letters addressed to Springfield Mayor Roger L. Putnam and House Representative Charles R. Clason claim "it is really a historical cavalcade of the highlights of the History of America, from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the present time . . . in fact every important event in the History of America is plainly visualized."<sup>13</sup> Another letter to William C. Hill, Principal of Springfield's Classical High School also labels the play "a historical

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<sup>12</sup> "Promotion Work for the Production of *Created Equal*." Springfield, MA. Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>13</sup> "Letter to Hon. Charles R. Clason From Willard Dashiell." In Promotion Work for the Production of *Created Equal*. 8 May 1938. Springfield, MA: Box 997, Folder *Created Equal* (Springfield). Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress; "Letter to Hon. Roger L. Putnam from Willard Dashiell." In Promotion Work for the Production of *Created Equal*. 2 May 1938. Springfield, MA.: Box 997, Folder *Created Equal* (Springfield). Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

cavalcade” and promises “educational value.”<sup>14</sup> In Boston, similar letters were sent, such as one to prominent Harvard Professor H.W.L. Dana, reading “this dynamic cavalcade of the birth, growth, the America of today, is being presented in twenty-seven scenes . . . assuring the audience of witnessing the major events which have colored our entire history.”<sup>15</sup> Again, the promotional material over-emphasizes the play’s subject matter while neglecting Booth’s darker themes.

More than simply de-emphasizing themes of social inequality and corruption, however, the letters wholly deny any radical themes. The letters to Putnam and Clason deftly re-work Booth’s message about the failures of the Declaration of Independence:

The Plot is based entirely on the Constitution, laying special emphasis on the fact that “All men are Created Equal” and that all men have the right to “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness” as enunciated in this Document, but particular stress being laid on that portion which declares for “Equality of Man.”<sup>16</sup>

This vague summary gives the impression that *Created Equal* champions the Constitution’s great successes. The letter also assures its readers that through this “reenactment of the deeds accomplished by our forefathers, and the trying times thru [sic] which they lived,” which *Created Equal* provides, “our faith in America may be reborn, and the love of our Country remain unshaken.”<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the letter to Principal Hill claimed that the production presented an opportunity to show students “what our forefathers went through

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<sup>14</sup> “Letter to Mr. William C. Hill From Willard Dashiell.” In Promotion Work for the Production of *Created Equal*. 2 May 1938. Springfield, MA.: Box 997, Folder Created Equal (Springfield). Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>15</sup> “Letter to Professor HWL Dana from Jon B. Mack.” 9 June 1938. Boston: Box Ms Thr 402, Folder Works Progress Administration-Federal Theatre, 1934-1939. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana Collection, Harvard Theatre Collection.

<sup>16</sup> “Letter to Hon. Charles R. Clason From Willard Dashiell.”

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

and to restore their faith in America and the belief that all men are created equal.”<sup>18</sup> A large sign erected in front of the Springfield Auditorium even read “RE-STORE YOUR FAITH IN AMERICA. SEE ‘CREATED EQUAL.’”<sup>19</sup> Though Booth clearly expressed discontent with the state of the country and its class systems, the FTP had to reverse these themes to earn valuable endorsements.

Letters from the FTP seeking an endorsement of the show also contain variations on the following statement: “There is no political propaganda, no Communistic or Socialistic tendencies or trends involved, and [it] is historical only.”<sup>20</sup> This direct assertion not only subverts Booth’s social and political themes, but also points to a moment of upheaval in Massachusetts. As the Federal Theatre Project at state and city levels began promoting *Created Equal* with the goal of bringing it to Boston, they had reason to avoid Communist and Socialist “trends.” Workers’ movements and unions had been growing across the country during the first half of the century, and plenty of powerful groups in Boston wanted to shut them and their sympathizers down. Unions such as the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Women’s Trade Union League, International Longshoremen’s Association, and International Ladies’ Garment Workers Union had been actively recruiting and striking in Boston throughout the 1910s and 1920s;<sup>21</sup> the period saw major strikes from the Lawrence mill workers and the Irish Boston Police.<sup>22</sup> Because union members

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<sup>18</sup> “Letter to Mr. William C. Hill From Willard Dashiell.”

<sup>19</sup> Promotion Work for the Production of *Created Equal*. Springfield, MA: Box 997, Folder *Created Equal* (Springfield). Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>20</sup> “Letter to Hon. Charles R. Clason From Willard Dashiell.” The statement also can be found in the letters to Mayor Putnam, Principal Hill.

<sup>21</sup> Sari Roboff, *Boston’s Labor Movement: An Oral History of Work and Union Organizing* (Boston: Boston 200 Corporation, 1977).

<sup>22</sup> Richard D. Brown and Jack Tager, *Massachusetts: A Concise History*, Rev. and expanded ed (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).

often also identified as socialists, unions acquired a reputation for socialism and an association with both the International Workers of the World and the Socialist Party.<sup>23</sup> Tensions erupted with the 1921 trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, two young Italian anarchists tried for murder in Braintree. When an appeals committee sentenced both to death, many working-class and liberal Bostonians believed that it had condemned the duo's radical politics more than it had investigated any evidence of murder.<sup>24</sup>

As the Soviet Union grew throughout the '20s and '30s, fear of communism spread across the U.S. In his book *Anti-Communism in Twentieth-Century America: A Critical History*, Larry Ceplair argues, "anti-communism in the United States grew out of and became the institutionalized version of the anti-radicalism, nativism, and Americanization movements."<sup>25</sup> Anti-communist forces in Boston certainly capitalized on both the anti-radicalism of staunch conservatives and the Americanization of recent immigrant communities such as the Irish and Italians. For traditionalists like the many of the Boston Brahmins, communism presented a threat to their way of life. It espoused an economic system antithetical to capitalism; it created a social structure that subverted the hierarchical idea of the "American Dream;" and it came from a completely foreign (not truly European) culture.<sup>26</sup> Boston's Brahmins, upper-class Yankees, and other conservative groups promoted what Ceplair calls "conservative anti-communism;" anti-communist sentiment perpetuated by those who also adhere to moral, moderate, and classical values. Their anti-communist ideas "focused on what they perceived as the decline of culture in the

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<sup>23</sup> Roboff, *Boston's Labor Movement*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Brown and Tager, *Massachusetts*, 258.

<sup>25</sup> Larry Ceplair, *Anti-Communism in Twentieth-Century America: A Critical History* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

United States,” as opposed to the corrupting power of communism and the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup>

A 1930 op-ed in the *Boston Globe* explains the Brahmins’ conservatism and anti-communism:

They tend to be completely conservative, resisting any deep change in their own lives or in that of their community. They offer the most inhospitable soil conceivable for the planting of new economic, social or moral ideas. The Sacco-Vanzetti case still lingers in their minds, though it may not be present in their conversations. They saw in it not only a question of two men’s guilt but a challenge to their whole system of law and order.<sup>28</sup>

Such resistance to radical ideas from powerful upper classes meant that politicians, institutions, and artists had to tread carefully in their politics.

Boston’s influential religious institutions denounced communism in a more public manner than the Brahmins, though they shared a fear of declining moral values. The Catholic Church was most active in regularly condemning communist activity. Its newspaper, the *Pilot*, frequently criticized communist activities around the world, including those in the Soviet Union and Spain. An article discussing communism in relation to fascism read, “the Communist is the more dangerous agent. Besides our money and our moral support, he wants ourselves. He hopes for a Sovietized America.”<sup>29</sup> Cardinal William O’Connell, hugely influential among his flock at this time, spoke out against the “communist” Loyalist government in Spain, Roosevelt’s policies with revolutionary

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>28</sup> R. L. Duffus, “Things That Make Boston What She Is: Censorship, Prohibition, Brahmins, and a New Political Order Afford Strange Contrasts,” *New York Times*, February 16, 1930, sec. The New York Times Magazine.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in John F. Stack, *International Conflict in an American City: Boston’s Irish, Italians, and Jews, 1935-1944*, Contributions in Political Science, no. 26 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1979), 61.

communists in Mexico, and the “socialist” federal works projects.<sup>30</sup> He fervently supported the Massachusetts Teacher’s Loyalty Oath requiring teachers and professors at both private and public schools to pledge loyalty to the U.S. Constitution.<sup>31</sup> O’Connell also sent Father James I. Corrigan as his personal representative to testify against the Child Labor Amendment at the General Court for what he perceived as its socialist agenda.<sup>32</sup> O’Connell believed that communism would ruin the country, and many priests as well as other faith leaders followed his example in condemning it.

Irish and Italian immigrant communities joined the anti-communist fray to validate their ethnic identities in the U.S. Historian John F. Stack writes that international communist issues “served as catalysts for the articulation of ethnic grievances and the search for a meaningful Italian American ethnic identity,”<sup>33</sup> and Italian-run newspapers frequently printed hostile writings toward communists. For Boston’s Irish, strong anti-communist sentiments represented a commitment to American freedom and democracy. The Irish-dominated political scene would eventually launch Boston’s Red Scare in the mid-thirties. Controlled by Irish politicians, the state committee interrogated communist suspects, asking if they knew the meaning of “Boogwazzies” (bourgeoisie) or if they planned “to liquefy the Church.”<sup>34</sup> The Irish-led Boston School Committee was so passionate about the anti-communist campaign that it asked the federal government to

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<sup>30</sup> Charles H. Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal* (Boston: Oxford University Press, 1977), 261.

<sup>31</sup> Edgar Driscoll, “Thomas Dorgan, for 35 Years Clerk of Suffolk Court,” *Boston Globe* (1960-1984), August 28, 1977.

<sup>32</sup> Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 262.

<sup>33</sup> Stack, *International Conflict in an American City*, 85.

<sup>34</sup> Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 259.

investigate the Boston WPA and National Youth Administration.<sup>35</sup> As Stack explains, for the Irish as well as other ethnic groups, participating in anti-communist movements “was a way of proving the Americanism of their ethnic inheritance.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, anti-communist sentiment burned strongly for many social groups in Boston.

Like censorship, anti-communism became part of the government’s role as moral authority. With the Irish political machine leading the charge, the Massachusetts state and Boston city governments rooted out political radicals throughout the decade. In fact, Stack writes, “red-baiting evolved into one of the [city] council’s favorite pastimes.”<sup>37</sup> The Irish-led council passed multiple orders supporting the federal government’s Dies Committee.<sup>38</sup> In 1935, state Senator Thomas Dorgan led Boston’s own Red Scare by writing the Teachers’ Loyalty Oath Act of 1935, a bill lambasted for being unconstitutional, “Fascist,” and a threat to education.<sup>39</sup> He then helped establish the state committee that would investigate radical activists and organizations; originally Dorgan and his fellow legislators had organized the committee specifically to target communists, but outcry from the Jewish community forced them to expand their search to also seek fascists.<sup>40</sup> With strong hostility towards communism and socialism amongst Bostonians, and real danger of political action against radical expressions, the Massachusetts FTP had to clearly distance themselves from any such ideas.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Stack, *International Conflict in an American City*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 215.; Driscoll, “Thomas Dorgan, for 35 Years Clerk of Suffolk Court.”

<sup>40</sup> Stack, *International Conflict in an American City*, 65.

Boston's intense anti-communism, when put in context with the city's strong traditional values, explains why the Federal Theatre Project promotion teams went above and beyond to ensure that audiences saw *Created Equal* as an innocently patriotic play. Its publicity blitz was one of the larger within the Federal Theatre; Hallie Flanagan remembered it opening "with considerable fanfare."<sup>41</sup> Articles, ads, endorsements, community engagements, and even parades strengthened *Created Equal's* image and the Federal Theatre unit's reputation. The production's Dedicatory, printed in both the Springfield and Boston programs, made clear their intentions to promote the play as a grand review of "American history":

To those keen students of American History, who re-live in their thoughts the trials and vicissitudes of their forefathers—to the boys and girls on whose minds are now impressed the deeds of our most illustrious great—to the patriotic American whose most glorious inheritance is the noble thought and daily prayer that America will always be supreme—to that solid great majority of our citizenry from which emanates the continual flow of ideals that still allows for a spirit of fair play—and lastly, in respectful reverence to those most worthy souls and spirits, whose very deeds and acts we are dramatizing tonight.<sup>42</sup>

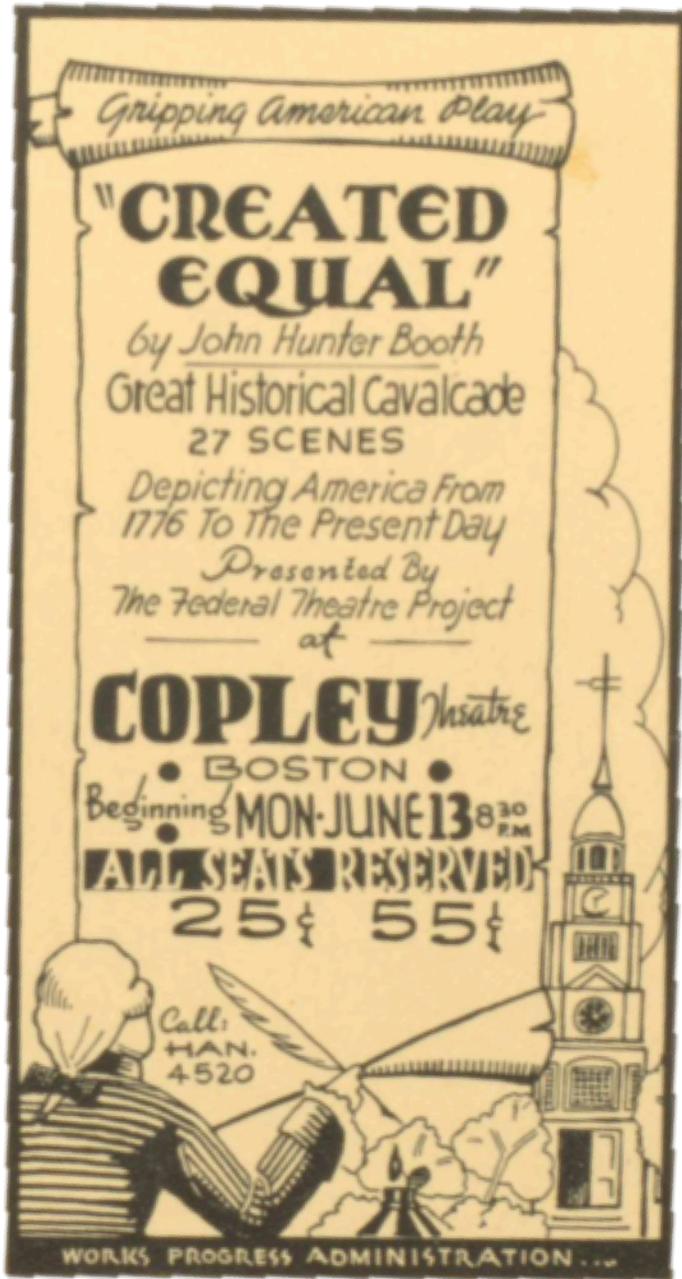
While tensions over radical ideas ran high in Boston, the Massachusetts Federal Theatre Project promoted wholesomeness and American-ness. The idea of a "history play," reverent of the country, without dangerous social commentary, and removed from the communist political debate, appealed to conservative audiences and authorities. Though completely disconnected from Booth's original thesis, a more subdued version of *Created Equal* was the one that Boston audiences would accept. With this image for their new production and a more respectable reputation in place, the Federal Theatre could move forward in Boston.

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<sup>41</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 228.

<sup>42</sup> "Created Equal Program." Boston. Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

Appendix 1



The Boston Poster for *Created Equal*, also used for the Springfield production.

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## Chapter 4

### *Eliminating the Red Element: Revisions of *Created Equal**

As the first major Boston Federal Theatre production in over a year, *Created Equal*, written and directed by John Hunter Booth, needed to be a success in order for the national FTP to continue supporting the local chapter. The Boston group set the premiere for June 13, 1938. As I noted in Chapter 3, they pulled out all the stops to draw in audiences—try-outs in Salem and Springfield, dozens of newspaper announcements and ads, attractive posters, multiple local endorsements, cross-promotion with community groups, and even a parade in Springfield. Yet for many FTP officials at both the local and national level, the most important part of the production process for *Created Equal* was script revision. Multiple officials, including Hallie Flanagan, required Booth to revise his script several times before the play opened. These revisions sharpened Booth's focus on inequality, but made crucial changes to the "rebellion" and "mob" scenes, as well as the ending, which subdued protests and condemned any communist rebellion. In a decade of unemployment riots and labor strikes around Boston and Red Scares across the nation, the Boston Federal Theatre Project's revisions of *Created Equal* reflect a fear among upper classes of worker uprisings. To keep their chapter running, the FTP had to tone down radical themes that might have incited further violence or caught the attention of those hunting controversial works.

In her article, "John Hunter Booth's *Created Equal*: A Federal Theatre Model for Patriotism," Angela Sweigart-Gallagher gives a thorough overview of the Boston FTP's revision process for *Created Equal*, from proposal to production. John B. Mack, the Massachusetts Director for the Federal Theatre, first proposed the play for Boston. After

George Gerwig, Assistant Director for the Eastern Region, and John McGee, Associate National Director, approved the choice, John Hunter Booth had to submit the play to the National Play Service for review. It was these NPS play reports, which I discuss in Chapter 2, that compare *Created Equal* to the Living Newspapers of other Federal Theatre Projects, question its focus, criticize its ending, and call for revisions.<sup>1</sup> As the Boston chapter mounted the production, officials including John Mack, Director of the Service Bureau for the East Robert Russell, and Hallie Flanagan continued to suggest changes to focus the play's theme, but also to avoid contention.<sup>2</sup>

In Boston, elevated class tensions gave the FTP reason to worry when producing a play focused on equality. Workers had begun protesting unfair labor conditions by joining unions and holding strikes. Membership in the first half of the decade increased rapidly, with Boston unions adding 16,000 members and representing 23 percent of the work force by the end of 1933.<sup>3</sup> Several New Deal policies—further enforced locally—gave unions legal support, including the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act which stipulated that employees “shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively,” and the instatement in 1934 of the National Labor Relations Board to investigate employer practices.<sup>4</sup> Although the Supreme Court struck down the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1935, Roosevelt signed the pro-union Wagner Act later that year.<sup>5</sup> After Roosevelt's victory in the 1936 presidential campaign, Boston unions expanded their numbers at impressive rates. While

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<sup>1</sup> Please see Chapter 2 for my analysis of the Reader's reports of *Created Equal*, including those by Converse Tyler and other readers.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Sweigart-Gallagher, “John Hunter Booth's *Created Equal*: A Federal Theatre Model for Patriotism,” *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 24, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 83–85.

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal* (Boston: Oxford University Press, 1977), 201.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 200–202.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 209–210.

the size of Boston's labor force decreased in the later 30's, unions added 45,000 workers to their ranks. As historian Charles Trout writes, "the city had entered the Depression as one of the nation's major centers of unionism, and it emerged from hard times as an even greater stronghold of labor organization."<sup>6</sup> Boston had a strong base of workers ready to fight for better conditions, whether through legal actions or more aggressive means. Provoking tensions between workers and the upper classes could prove disastrous for the Boston FTP.

The Federal Theatre Project archives at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. contain several versions of the *Created Equal* script, reflecting changes made during the Boston production. They include five different scripts of the play (as well as copies of those scripts); one marked "Final Version" and dated June 17, 1938; one marked "Revised"; one marked "Old Version"; one marked "New Jersey"; and a "Short Cast" version. Due to its labeling and late date—*Created Equal* opened in Boston on June 27<sup>th</sup>—the "Final Version" script can be considered as a performance text.<sup>7</sup> Both the "New Jersey" and "Short Cast" scripts were most likely made after the Boston production; Boston's successful run of the *Created Equal* led to a run in Newark on November 26, 1938, and its success motivated the FTP to create a scaled-down script for smaller companies.<sup>8</sup> The "Revised" version has many of the elements included in the "Final," but with key differences in structure, indicating its place as a later, but not final, text. The script labeled "Old Version" has many differences to all other texts, and appears to be the earliest script available. However, National Play

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>7</sup> Sweigart-Gallagher agrees with this interpretation.

<sup>8</sup> Fenwick Library Staff George Mason University, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions, Compiled by the Staff of the Fenwick Library, George Mason University* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1986), 40.

Service reader Converse Tyler's report on the play mentions a final scene that reconnects with "the descendants of the Schuyler family in a rather cut-and-dried and childish radio interview."<sup>9</sup> Missing from all extant versions of the script, this scene points to an even earlier version now lost.<sup>10</sup> For my analysis of the FTP's changes to *Created Equal*, I will use only the "Old Version," "Revised" version, and "Final Version," focusing on the "Old Version" as the most original text and the "Final Version" as the performance text.

Having received multiple National Play Service reports calling his play weak and poorly structured, Booth added elements to clarify his overall theme of inequality. Reports from Henry Bennet and Converse Tyler claimed the play was "completely devoid of the incisiveness and the various attention-getting devices that made the Living Newspaper so memorable," or included scenes "so sketchily presented that its overwhelming importance is not made clear."<sup>11</sup> Though Booth's early texts certainly contain strong critiques of the upper classes and corrupt officials, his first changes more directly depict the U.S.'s social stratification in an "attention-getting" way. Throughout his director's notes and correspondence with the FTP, Booth returns to inequality as his main theme, and so his revisions clarify this message. Remembering that his "Notes for Directors" portrays the play as "a living, glowing ideal of freedom to make man his brother's equal," it seems fitting that many of Booth's more obvious revisions highlight the inequality between the working

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<sup>9</sup> Converse, Tyler. *Created Equal*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service, January 14, 1938: From Library of Congress, Federal Theatre Collection, Box 171, Folder PRR.5/18/16 10:06 PM

<sup>10</sup> Sweigart-Gallagher also notes this discrepancy, adding that the scene has not been found in either the LOC or NARA archives at George Mason University.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Bennett. *Created Equal*. Reader Report. New York: National Play Service, October 31, 1937. From Library of Congress, Federal Theatre Collection, Box 171, Folder PRR. ; Converse, Tyler. *Created Equal*. Play Report.

and upper classes.<sup>12</sup> The first “Revised” version already shows many of the added stage directions, lines, and scenic elements that Booth would use to convey his message in the final script.

The first scene, constant throughout all three texts, focuses most explicitly on inequality, and Booth’s additions to the “Revised” version make its meaning unmistakable. Originally labeled only as a “Prologue,” in the “Revised” script the passage becomes a full scene called “The Seat of Power.” Booth sets up a tableau in which a majestic throne, covered in various symbols of power including “stars, crescent moons, bees, fleur-de-lis, swastikas, etc.,” rests on a raised platform above a group of cowering subjects. The swastikas especially, since Hitler’s appointment as German Chancellor in 1933 and growing power, would have signified great and disturbing power. In the “Original Version,” only an Executioner and armored soldier stand by the throne, while a somewhat vague “group of tattered, underfed, medieval subjects” worship below. However, the revision adds “a group of Beaux and Belles and Substantial Citizens” next to the throne, and specifies, “Lesser Citizens and their women folk fill the steps” while “Villagers, male and female, herd together on the stage or lowest level.” Instead of an enigmatic and abstract source of power lording over all citizens, the revised scene depicts a clear hierarchy of power in which “Substantial” citizens rule over the poor. New lines for the crowd emphasize the large power held by few:

Monarch—majesty—mightiness!

All hail! All hail!

Sovereign, emperor, king!

Glorious be thy name.

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<sup>12</sup> John Hunter Booth, Created Equal “Final Version,” June 17, 1938

Czar and Sultan,  
Lord and Master,  
To you all honor  
And all praise!<sup>13</sup>

While the “Substantial Citizens” may speak these lines with reverence for the system that endows them with dominance, those below them may speak it in fear or desperation.

Booth repeats this hierarchical staging in several scenes as part of his first revision. A second scene depicting Thomas Jefferson drafting the Declaration of Independence originally shows the founding father alone at his desk. The revised version includes “Villagers kneeling about him, while the Citizens and Beaux and Belles stand on (the) steps and platform behind him,” reminding audiences of the different significance Jefferson’s statement had for working and upper classes.<sup>14</sup> When the townspeople in a New England village read the Declaration, Booth again separates them by class to emphasize their different reactions. Whereas before the townspeople had been just “a group of villagers,” Booth’s new stage directions divide them into “Villagers and Citizens, moving in separated, definite units” from whom “definite cliques form—the Beaux and the Belles remain together, as do the Substantial Citizens.”<sup>15</sup> The Declaration affects each group differently; though the lower classes will now have rights, but the upper classes will “lose” status. These “cliques” last throughout the show. Next, in a scene depicting the start of the American Revolution, Booth adds a moving tableau to address the inequality of military involvement amongst the classes. Though the earlier version opens on the image of “a

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<sup>13</sup> John Hunter Booth, “Created Equal Revised Version” (Script, n.d.), 1–1–1, Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1–2–1.

<sup>15</sup> John Hunter Booth, “Created Equal Old Version” n.d., 1–2–1, Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.; Booth, “Created Equal Revised Version,” 1–3–1.

company of ‘substantial’ citizens” contemplating lack of discipline amongst lower-class army men while lounging in a tavern, the new tableau more sharply contrasts the classes’ military involvement.<sup>16</sup> After the previous village scene, “the men Villagers, inspired by the [fife and drum] music, fall into step behind the soldiers, suggesting that they have joined the army. Their women folk flock along beside them with excited ad. lib. chatter. The Beaux and Belles stroll unobtrusively off L., as do many of the Citizens and their wives.”<sup>17</sup> The scene reflects the large numbers of working class men often drawn into war instead of upper class men, speaking to both the American Revolution and the World War (more recent to the FTP audience). Like many of Booth’s added stage elements, the tableau brings into sharp contrast the experiences of the wealthy versus the poor.<sup>18</sup>

Many of the script changes strongly critique the upper classes, and point to Booth’s underlying political agenda, but he had to concede to other changes that subdue any violent or revolutionary elements. Knowing that multiple Federal Theatre officials requested revisions from Booth, and that the Boston chapter consistently promoted *Created Equal* as a play with “no propagandistic or communistic tendencies,” it seems likely that the officials, not Booth, initiated the cuts. The underlying themes of his play, inequality and corruption, indicate a political agenda for Booth, as do the revisions he made to make some of these messages clearer. Though it is also possible that Booth himself either initiated or supported changes to focus on other themes, the results produced a less overtly political script;

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<sup>16</sup> Booth, “Created Equal Old Version,” 1–3–1.

<sup>17</sup> Booth, “Created Equal Revised Version,” 1–4–1.

<sup>18</sup> In her book, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, and its chapter on the Boston chapter, Elizabeth Osborne explores *Created Equal* and the ways in which it gives voice to the powerless, the lower classes, and those cheated by authority. She gives a further analysis of the “Seat of Power” scene, as well as other stage devices and dramatic techniques Booth used in both the older and revised versions of the script.

altered scenes, removed lines, and even added stage notes warn against presenting material—especially mob activity—that might be seen as Communist or radical. Booth’s “Notes for Directors,” only present in the “Final” version, gave stylistic advice: “A dogmatic blue-printing of the proposition is not desired. Such a method is sure to make radical what was never so intended. Care must be taken in this respect, as such a charge is certainly not to be courted.”<sup>19</sup> As for the group scenes, he added,

The careful handling of the mobs cannot be stressed too emphatically. Never let them become a noisy rabble. They are the Principals of your play. Keep their cries low and subdued—let them have sincerity and feeling. They are the spirit of America, protesting at abuses, striving towards the promised freedom.<sup>20</sup>

It was crucial for Booth and the FTP that the mobs not protest too loudly or violently, for this might seem too inhuman, but also too dangerously “radical” in light of Boston worker activity. For three large “mob” scenes—the Shays’ Rebellion, the Whiskey Rebellion, and the finale—Booth made revisions that subdue the power of the “mobs” and assure the audience that a rebellion’s end goal should only be “the promised freedom” of American democracy.

Booth’s ninth scene portrays Shays’ Rebellion, an uprising of Revolutionary veterans, farmers, and tradesmen who marched on a government arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts to address financial burdens.<sup>21</sup> It represents the first depiction of rebellion in the play, as *Created Equal* refers to the American Revolution only in passing. Though little of the dialogue in this scene changes between scripts, Booth added stage notes and

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<sup>19</sup> John Hunter Booth, “Created Equal Final Version” June 17, 1938, 1, Federal Theatre Collection, Library of Congress.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>21</sup> Richard D. Brown and Jack Tager, *Massachusetts: A Concise History*, Rev. and expanded ed (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 100–106.

directions to ensure that the rebellion is not a threatening one. In both the older and final versions of the play, the leader of the rebellion criticizes the leaders of the newly formed United States for “betraying” their citizens:

What else were we promised? The right to “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Well, let us look into that. Speakin’ for myself, what with havin’ no home, no job, no food, I’m not findin’ Life easy . . . As for “Liberty”, I’ve just escaped from a Boston debtor’s jail . . . Now what have we left? “The pursuit of happiness.”<sup>22</sup>

This First Soldier’s speech remains nearly the same between revisions, and at its end he leads his troops to meet with General Shays and take over the Armory. Yet Booth warned the director in a new stage note not to make this a revolutionary act:

Care must be taken in this scene to keep the mob in hand, to eliminate any “Red” element. Their responses to the speaker are not shouted or howled, but are full of a restrained anger, a leashed bitterness more menacing than noisy yells. Definite exclamatory phrases are given to some of the extras so that the general responses have a ring of naturalness and are not just the usual mob cries.<sup>23</sup>

The new note urges directors and actors to keep “the mob” quiet, organized, and non-radical. Here Booth argues that this “leashed bitterness” is “more menacing” than a louder group, but a “restrained” mob that does not shout seems much less powerful than an uproarious one.

Consequently, it is the character of the rebellion that changes in the revisions. The “Old” version’s mob has an unrestrained quality, seen through their reactions to the First Soldier’s speech. Here, they give loud group responses—“cheers,” “cries,” and “outbursts.” They become exceptionally vocal when the First Soldier criticizes the unequal division of property among the rich and poor:

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<sup>22</sup> Booth, “Created Equal Final Version,” 1–9–2,3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1–9–1.

The land, it seems, was already divided. It was the property of “The wise, the rich, and the good.”

**(There is an outburst of jeers, hisses and catcalls).**

There wasn’t an acre for us—“the simple, the poor, and bad.”

**(a roar of boo-es and howls) . . .**

Now what have we left? “The Pursuit of Happiness”.

**(there is a sardonic laughter, howls and jeers).<sup>24</sup>**

For the same passage in the final script, Booth significantly restrained the mob’s reactions:

The land, it seems, was already divided. It was the property of “the wise, the rich, and the good.”

**(he glances pointedly at the three [upperclass] characters L.C. and the mob turns toward them in a low menacing murmur. The Wife instinctively draws close to her husband, her face showing her fear. The mob again turns to 1<sup>st</sup> Solder as he resumes).**

There wasn’t an acre for us,--the “simple, the poor and the bad.”

**(This causes a gust of bitter merriment) . . .**

Now, what have we left? “The pursuit of happiness”

**(low bitter sardonic laughter from the mob).<sup>25</sup>**

Here the mob does not speak, but only “murmurs” and “laughs” at a “low” volume. Booth cut any “jeers” or “howls,” or any direction that might have given them a more chaotic character. The mob’s revised exit further emphasizes their non-threatening nature; while the original scene ends with “a tumultuous cheer and a surge of the crowd,” the new version provides a more organized, even sunny ending. Following the First Soldier off stage, the mob breaks into “Yankee Doodle” and continues singing backstage throughout the following scene. The song completely changes the tone of the scene from tension and threat of violence to hope and cheer.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1-8-2.

<sup>25</sup> Booth, “Created Equal Old Version,” 1-9-2, 3.

The mob's actions also become far less dangerous, and Booth took special care in his revisions to assure his audience that their goal is fair treatment, not violence. The "Old" version shows the rebel troops leaving for the Armory, and in a separate scene depicts a wealthy man sheltering from the uproar in his home with his wife and a friend. In the background they hear "shouts, cheers, marching and running feet, an occasional shot." Five times the stage directions indicate a shot from outside, most instances calling for an accompanying shout ("another shot from outside—a piercing scream"). The wife too screams, crying out, "they're murdering people!"<sup>26</sup> This rebellion scene has a grim tone, keeping death and destruction as primary themes. As they take over the town and strike fear into the upper classes, these rebels have the power of a true uprising. Yet in the "Final" version, Booth minimized the mob's action. He created a new structure in which the Husband, Wife, and Friend appear next to the mob during the First Soldier's speech. The two groups glare at each other in distaste. However, before the tension erupts, the mob simply looks away; it is clear that the mob will not harm the wealthy citizens. In fact, all signs of the skirmish—including shots, screams, and the Wife's line claiming the rebels to be "murderers"—have been cut. Instead of causing violence, the Friend assures the wealthy trio that the rebels' only wish "to close the courts so they may prevent their arrest for debt."<sup>27</sup> By ignoring the violence that took place in the Shays' Rebellion—when Shays' two thousand troops marched on the government's encampment, cannon fire flew and three rebels died—the revisions not only subvert Booth's original political themes, but also

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 1-9-2.

<sup>27</sup> Booth, "Created Equal Final Version," 1-9-4.

rewrite history.<sup>28</sup> The “Final” version of Shays’ Rebellion portrays a non-violent protest with moderate goals that presented little threat to the status quo.

The second rebellion discussed in *Created Equal* is the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, in which settlers from western Pennsylvania refused to pay what they considered unfair taxes on their whiskey exports. Though neither the “Old” version nor the revisions depict any fighting, they each examine the federal government’s intervention of the protests. Like the Shays’ Rebellion revisions, changes to this sequence emphasize the rebels’ non-violent nature and their desire to work within the law. Booth’s largest revision replaces a scene in which a federal military General decides to apprehend the “rascals.” That scene questions the government’s right to do so, but does not give voice to the “Whiskey Boys” themselves. In the new scene, the play’s hero Phillip Schuyler comes to New York to speak with Alexander Hamilton as a representative of the Western settlers. The military men of the earlier scene stated that the men “have offered us no resistance,” but as a “Whiskey Boy” himself Phillip specifically assures Hamilton that his protest will not become a full-scale rebellion:

GENERAL: The situation in Pennsylvania will develop into another Shay’s Rebellion.

PHILLIP: Nay, General, an’ you permit me. We Western farmers are simply protesting against a tax which seems to us unjust . . .

HAMILTON: You farmers are delinquent—you’ve assaulted our tax collectors, you’ve held public gatherings, you’ve—

PHILLIP: The right of assembly is a Constitutional right, sir. As for the disorders, I am here to express the regret of those I represent, and the hope that such will not occur again.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Brown and Tager, *Massachusetts*, 104–105.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–14–1.

A protester who promises not to disobey, create violence, or rebel, makes a strong statement against rebellion. By having Phillip directly speak for the obedience of the rebellion, this scene characterizes the Whiskey Rebellion as tame even more obviously than the scene without Phillip.

Moreover, Booth made clear the protesters' desire to work within the laws, with democratic rule as their end goal. During the older scene, the General and Colonel debate the legality of federal military involvement; they mention the farmers' delinquency and demands to "be tried in local court," but do not discuss any more specific actions, legal or insurrectionary.<sup>30</sup> In the "Final" scene however, Phillip explains the farmers' efforts as purely legal protests. To Hamilton, he asks, "may I present our case? We've petitioned the Congress without result," and states, "we farmers have an honest grievance." After apologizing for any disorderly behavior, Phillip never threatens further misconduct, and only asks for more time to pay the tax.<sup>31</sup> He and the Whiskey Boys aim to act within the laws, and never threaten any uprising other than civil protests against an unfair law. In fact, a new scene first seen in the "Revised" version connects the Whiskey Rebellion not to more rebellion, but to Jeffersonian Democrats. Established politicians blame the people's politics on the Whiskey Rebellion, admitting, "these democratic societies were born of the Whiskey Boy business."<sup>32</sup> By making this connection clear, Booth implies that rebellion is only new politicians: not new politics and certainly not new government or communism. These ideal rebels work within the existing democratic structure to bring about "change," and do not work against it.

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<sup>30</sup> Booth, "Created Equal Old Version," 1-14-2.

<sup>31</sup> Booth, "Created Equal Final Version," 1-14-1, 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 2-1-1, 2.

In 1930s Boston, Booth and the Federal Theatre Project had good reason to avoid characterizing the rebellions in *Created Equal* as threatening; working-class uprisings struck the area throughout the decade, alarming upper classes and officials who then sought to shut down any trace of radicalism. The year 1930 ushered in the decade with several unemployment riots. On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, a group of Worker's Party members held an impromptu protest meeting on the State House steps. When a police sergeant asked the group to disperse, they refused, prompting an exchange during which an officer and civilian were injured, and three Party members were charged with assault.<sup>33</sup> A much larger riot hit the city on March 6<sup>th</sup>. Organized by the Communist Party, over 3000 unemployed men and women gathered on the Boston Common to air their grievances. Though the *Boston Globe* article on the event stated the meeting "failed to win any recruits," it admitted "a crowd of 5000" soon began marching to the State House.<sup>34</sup> There, disorder broke out, requiring reserve police with "riot guns and tear gas bombs."<sup>35</sup> The uproar ended in the arrest of five people, all on charges of disturbing the peace.<sup>36</sup> Again on October 14<sup>th</sup>, the police broke up a Communist demonstration on fair work—they chanted "work or wages"—which began in front of the American Federation of Labor's convention hall. The police, calling the protest "probably the worst riot that this city has seen since the I.W.W. riot of 1917," claimed to be "bitten, scratched, and pummeled by the Communists." A *New York Times* article specifically points out women protestors who would "pounce on [the officers] and bite and

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<sup>33</sup> "Fight Communists At State House," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, February 4, 1930.

<sup>34</sup> "Police of Every City Quell Red Day Crowds' Outbursts," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, March 7, 1930.

<sup>35</sup> Special to The New York Times, "Many Hurt in Riots in Nation's Cities," *New York Times*, March 7, 1930.

<sup>36</sup> "Police of Every City Quell Red Day."

kick,” making the protest seem even more frightening for including violent women.<sup>37</sup> The unemployment movement had risen in Boston with a defiant and even violent character.

As labor movements and unions continued to grow, union strikes also began occurring regularly in the Boston area. Workers in numerous trades staged strikes or walk-outs, including firefighters, garment workers, shoemakers, longshoremen. The longshoremen struck in 1931 against low wages and terrible working conditions. A 1932 strike against wage cuts by the International Ladies Garment Union involved 2,500 workers.<sup>38</sup> The Furniture Workers Industrial Union struck in 1935 against nine different upholstery companies, with support of the new National Labor Relations Board.<sup>39</sup> Strikes continued through the end of the decade as the Wagner Act took effect. John Mitchell, member of a local chapter of Amalgamated Meatcutters and Butcher Workers, recalls his own union’s heavy activism: “The Packinghouse Workers were part of the turbulent ‘30s. They struck every year from 1937 until 1941.”<sup>40</sup> One of the most militant and most successful strikes came in February and March 1936 from the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and International Ladies Garment Union. A group of 4,000 workers marched and chanted on the Boston streets, calling for higher wages and better conditions, and often coming to blows with police and strikebreakers. Still, the strike was successful and

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<sup>37</sup> Louis Stark, “Reds Riot in Boston While Labor Meets,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1930.; Interestingly, in all versions, Booth leaves out women in both of his rebellion scenes, and they play only a small part in his final “mob” ending. Though women clearly had a role in workers’ movements in Boston and the nation, it was perhaps too scandalous or dangerous for them to be included in such protests on stage.

<sup>38</sup> Sari Roboff, *Boston’s Labor Movement : An Oral History of Work and Union Organizing* (Boston : Boston 200 Corporation ;, 1977), 44, <http://archive.org/details/bostonlabormove00robo>.

<sup>39</sup> Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 203.

<sup>40</sup> Roboff, *Boston’s Labor Movement*, 48.

employers granted the workers nearly all of their original demands.<sup>41</sup> The year leading up to *Created Equal's* premiere also saw multiple strikes or threats of strikes. A *Boston Globe* article called the Wool Handlers' Union and Wool Trade Association strike in July of 1937 "the greatest threat in (the) history" of New England shipping industries.<sup>42</sup> In April of 1938, just two months before *Created Equal* opened, 1200 fuel truck drivers in the greater Boston area struck for higher wages and shorter hours.<sup>43</sup> Threat of worker uprising was alive and well as the Federal Theatre put together its new production.

The Boston FTP remained acutely aware of class tensions and the authorities that sought to monitor them. Their anxiety presents itself clearly in the revisions of *Created Equal's* final scene. Both the "Old" and "Final" finale recognize the inequality and poor conditions of the Depression era, but where the "Old" version criticizes its government to the point of rebellion, the "Final" version praises Roosevelt's administration with zeal. Groups of government workers stands on stage in both versions, "engaged in various tasks" such as carpentry, and playing music, and they introduce themselves by trade or social status. In the earlier script, they have a melancholy attitude, unhappy with their work, saying they only "add to the sad confusion" of the time. A First Workman makes a long speech decrying the United State's unequal society and characterizing the WPA as charity:

Depression's victims—we. Scorn us not. Take warning rather from our plight. Smug security was ours not so long since . . . We, too accepted and upheld a scheme of things which gave us luxury and ease at others' cost—sparing no thought for those of poorer fortune. But now—now that we have

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<sup>41</sup> Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal*, 213.

<sup>42</sup> "Fear Port Tieup By Wool Strike," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, July 2, 1937.

<sup>43</sup> "Fuel Truck Strike Due to End Today," *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, April 1, 1937.

known the bitterness of poverty's despair, tasted mendicancy's break, so grudgingly bestowed, endured the charity that robs a man of self respect—the matter's different.<sup>44</sup>

He even calls the works project “sop to idle millions,” a “compromise” in the fight for true democracy. The workman, maintaining that in the United States “greedy selfishness prevailed,” calls his fellow workers to “lift high our banner of democracy. Rally—one and all—to its defense.”<sup>45</sup> His rallying cry not only asserts the corruption of American democracy, but also urges the people to reject it for a better system.

Workers in the revised ending show a much less radical view of the country and the New Deal programs. Busily engaged in building a roadway, erecting a structure, or sewing clothing, the workers defend their government labor:

FIRST LABORER: Now, with millions more, we are depression's rank and file.

FIRST CARPENTER: Well, we're not standing in breadlines, are we?

FIFTH LABORER: We're clearing away foul slums.

FOURTH CARPENTER: We're building healthful homes.

FIRST MAN GROUP: And not for private profit.

SECOND MAN GROUP: We labor for the nation.

FIRST LABORER: Yes, and the nation labors for us.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast with the “greedy” nation that the “Old” finale's First Laborer describes, the new scene's First Carpenter calls the New Deal era a “new economy” and “new order of things that places human welfare before cash dividends.”<sup>47</sup> Here, change has already come, not thanks to protests of the people, but to a sympathetic government putting new policies in place. Consequently, Booth's final image for the play reaffirms trust in the Roosevelt

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<sup>44</sup> Booth, “Created Equal Old Version,” 2–11–3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 2–11–4, 5.

<sup>46</sup> Booth, “Created Equal Final Version,” 2–10–2, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 2–10–3, 4.

administration; the cast thrusts up their hands, “picks, shovels, hammers, saws, etc. being raised aloft.” The tools reflect the power of the working people, but also the strength of the works projects, indicating that the peoples’ victory only comes through the government. Moreover, Booth’s stage directions explain the image as “a picture of a united America re-dedicating itself to those principles of freedom which are our country’s proudest heritage.”<sup>48</sup> With this final image, Booth emphasized the workers’ role as a part of American democracy, not a rebellion working to transform it.

Given the tensions rising in Boston and the nation at the time of *Created Equal’s* opening, it seems sensible that the Federal Theatre would want or need the production to incite as little conflict as possible. The relevant themes of inequality and corruption in *Created Equal* speak directly to the working class, and for the many Bostonians experiencing regular strikes, the rebellion portrayed in the Shays’ Rebellion and Whiskey Rebellion scenes was a real possibility. Of course, the conservative class in Boston was already taking action against radical and “communist” inspired ideas to combat any such uprisings, with “Red Scare” searches and communist hearings.<sup>49</sup> Revisions that subdued protests, assured audiences that the rebels would work within the political system, and praised the government instead of calling for change, made *Created Equal* a less radical play. Yet the revisions protected it from sure opposition and censorship from city officials hoping to control an increasingly restless working class.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2–10–7.

<sup>49</sup> My previous chapter discusses anti-communism in Boston during the 1930’s.

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### Conclusion

The 1938-1939 season was the last for Boston's Federal Theatre chapter, as it was for the entire project. In May 1938, Congress established the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) to investigate political subversion within the nation, but as John Houchin notes, it soon "became clear that the committee cared less about unearthing subversion than with using its investigative powers to wound the Roosevelt administration by linking it with radicals."<sup>1</sup> They focused on the Works Progress Administration and its arts projects, with Committee member J. Parnell Thomas claiming the FTP "has become part and parcel of the Communist Party, spreading its radical theories through its stage productions."<sup>2</sup> On July 26, 1938, just a month after Boston's run of *Created Equal*, Thomas announced that he would soon have the Committee investigate the Federal Theatre and Writers' Projects.<sup>3</sup>

Hearings that began in August continued for months. The Committee called multiple former, disgruntled employees of the FTP as witnesses, who claimed the organization was run by Communists, that Hallie Flanagan was a Soviet sympathizer, and that the plays were socialist propaganda. Hazel Huffman, the investigation's first witness, among many things claimed that Communists controlled the Federal Theatre because Hallie Flanagan and other officials had given power to the Communist-allied Workers' Alliance.<sup>4</sup> Though Miss Huffman and the other witnesses usually had few credentials or little experience with the

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<sup>1</sup> John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 145.

<sup>2</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 146.

<sup>3</sup> JANE DEHART MATHEWS, ed., "Politics Versus Theatre:: The Dies Committee Investigation," in *Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1967), 199, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13x1bqq.9>.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

FTP, the Committee did not verify their statements, but relied on their testimony to develop a position on the Project. They even denied Hallie Flanagan and other FTP officials the ability to testify until several months into the investigation; in December, Flanagan came before the Committee with statistics, plot synopses, and statements from FTP officials ready to de-bunk accusations of Communism or corruption.<sup>5</sup> After a fruitless questioning period during which the Committee members focused on Flanagan's personal history instead of the FTP's record, the Committee filed an incriminating report of the FTP on January 3, 1939:

We are convinced that a rather large number of the employees on the Federal Theatre Project are either members of the Communist Party or are sympathetic with the Communist Party.<sup>6</sup>

The House Subcommittee on Appropriations soon cut the Federal Theatre Project out of its next relief budget, which Congress passed in the following months.<sup>7</sup> On June 30, 1939, Roosevelt signed in the new relief bill, and shut down the nation's first and only Federal Theatre Project.<sup>8</sup>

The Dies Committee and its witnesses found "un-American" radicalism in plays such as *The Cradle Will Rock*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *Professor Mamlock*, the Living Newspapers, and even a children's play titled *The Revolt of the Beavers*. Many of the plays lauded for calling attention to social themes became subjects of high scrutiny during the trial. Boston,

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<sup>5</sup> Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, 148.

<sup>6</sup> Qtd. in *ibid.*, 150.

<sup>7</sup> Though Hallie Flanagan and FTP supporters fought for the Project for another several months while the HSA and Congress debated the new budget, they ultimately lost the battle. The reputation which the Dies Committee had given them, as a Communist-infiltrated, needless organization, set Congress against the Project.

<sup>8</sup> MATHEWS, *Politics Versus Theatre*, 293.: Though Roosevelt called the termination of the FTP "discrimination of the worst kind," he noted that he could not withhold his signature from the new budget for one organization, and therefore risk the stability of the entire relief program.

on the other hand, was hardly mentioned during testimony, and had maintained a unit without scandal since the *Valley Forge* incident. The chapter's ability to produce socially-conscious plays of any kind, while avoiding a shut down, raises the question: did the Boston Federal Theatre Project walk the right line between free expression and censorship? Is it more important to make bold artistic statements as intended, or create art with a more subdued message that may be accepted and seen by more people? Though the Boston FTP did not put on numerous overtly political plays such as *One-Third of a Nation*, *Power*, or *Triple-A Plowed Under*, such plays most likely would never have had success in a culturally conservative and censorship-inclined city like Boston. By producing social plays with less direct or less radical messages—such as the revised *Created Equal* that subdues rebel activity, or *Lucy Stone*, whose gender politics many readers found to be out of date—the Boston FTP could create social messages without facing backlash or outward censorship, and while maintaining an audience.

At the same time, censorship of any kind erases messages that those in power find distasteful or dangerous; censorship is a product of power, and ignores the ideas of those who do not have the power or authority to participate in it. When censorship occurs, we must ask, which and whose stories are not being told? The kind of self-censorship the Boston Federal Theatre Project engaged in kept the chapter going, but led officials to consistently avoid social and working class issues, choose non-political plays, subdue leftist scripts, and advertise plays with controversial messages as benign. With thousands of workers joining unions, striking, and even rioting in the city, FTP decisions such as those made to tame *Created Equal's* rebellion scenes misrepresent not only John Hunter Booth's original intent, but also great numbers of working Bostonians. A system of censorship

existed in which Boston society leaders were determined to pursue offensive theatre, government authorities had the authority to condemn it, and the Federal Theatre chapter felt pressured to self-censor their own work. This pressure had substantial impact on the stories the Boston Federal Theatre Project was able to tell, and unfortunately, many active working classes could not see their story on the Federal Theatre stage.

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