

BANNED IN BOSTON: Censorship and Self-Censorship in Boston's Federal Theatre Project

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How did the FTP choose plays?

Play Service reports show preference for uncontroversial material:

Converse Tyler on *American Wing*:

"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."

Elizabeth Hull on *The Princess Runs Away*:

"A harmless and amusing operetta. There is a faint satirical thrust at war and its nonsense, but done so mildly that it would fail to impress the average audience as an anti-war play."



Timeline

1904: A city law passes giving Boston mayors the ability to revoke a theatre's license for any reason.

1929: Mayor Nichols bans Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*.

1935, Jan: Mayor Mansfield bans John O'Casey's *Within the Gates*. He then bans Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*. That play's producer brings an unsuccessful lawsuit to court.

1935, Feb: Mayor Mansfield revises censorship rules to create a Board of Censors.

1935, Apr 7: Police arrest members of the radical play *Waiting For Lefty* for "profanity."

1935, Apr 8: Congress creates the Works Progress Administration. Director Harry Hopkins then contacts Hallie Flanagan to head the Federal Theatre Project.

1936, Feb: Early Boston FTP production *Valley Forge* suffers from controversy and is banned or censored in several towns.

1938, Jun: *Created Equal* opens in Boston as a long-awaited success for the FTP, but with careful revisions.

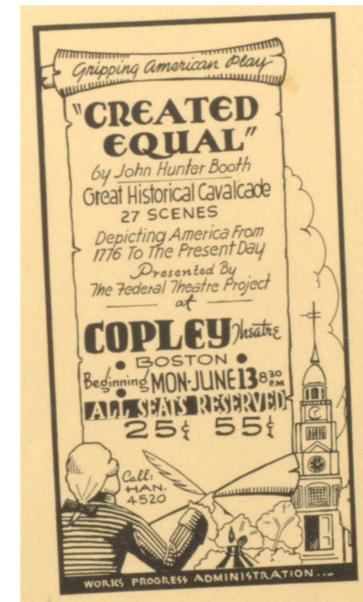
Hallie Flanagan



Photo from *Created Equal*



Posters from Boston productions (also at left of poster)



How did the FTP promote productions?

The FTP disregarded radical material:

Letter to Springfield Mayor Roger L. Putnam asking sponsorship for *Created Equal*:

"It is really a historical cavalcade of the high-lights of the History of America, from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the present time . . . The Plot is based entirely on the Constitution, laying special emphasis on the fact that "All men are Created Equal" . . . There is no political propaganda, no Communistic or Socialistic tendencies or trends involved, and is historical only."

Special thanks to Drs. Heather Nathans and Anne Moore, and my sponsors Drs. Karen Schwartz and John Paddock

How did the FTP use scripts?

The FTP often changed the script to rid it of controversy.

Changes include:

- Cutting scenes
- Cutting profanity
- Reversing the ending
- Adding romance
- Making the leading woman "feminine"
- Changing character views on gender

Resources include archival material from the Federal Theatre Collection at the Library of Congress