

A User's Guide to the Federal Theater Project

As part of our graduate work in English, we thought it would be exciting to pursue a redefinition of the traditional high school canon and curriculum. A chance meeting with Professor Lorraine Brown led us to the Federal Theater Project Archives at George Mason University and gave us the opportunity to explore the wealth of materials housed there. The result of our work is *A User's Guide to the Federal Theater Project*, a guidebook for teaching a selection of the plays. Our text provides information on the FTP as well as curriculum materials and activities for use with several of the plays produced by the Project. At the core of our work is the desire for the FTP materials to operate on many different levels, similar to the way a traditional high school curriculum does. However, we felt that the inherent interdisciplinary nature of the materials gave us even greater freedom in encouraging a network of activities incorporating discussion, reading, thinking, performance, and research.

Since the selection of approaches is dependent on the curriculum, climate, and maturity level of the students (and their parents and administrators), our text presents methods ranging from the traditional to the experimental. Some of the materials are politically charged. We feel that the best classrooms are too.

Though our investment in the materials grows out of our work as English teachers, the material is uncontrollably multidisciplinary, incorporating sociology, history, geography, medicine, economics, cultural studies, and race, class, and gender issues. This cultural weave is an essential part of our methodology. The materials have strong authorial intentions, yet provide for open-ended responses and challenge many beliefs.

The FTP was, by definition, a collaborative effort. These activities are designed primarily for small and large group encounters. There are few right answers; these materials are intended to be a site of some contention and disagreement, reflecting, as they do, a turbulent era and a government program about which there was much disagreement.

The Federal Theater Project

The crisis wrought by the Great Depression was unprecedented. Franklin D. Roosevelt's program of government-sponsored relief, called the New Deal, featured such agencies as the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Its function was to put the unemployed back to work, ideally in the jobs they were trained to do. The Depression had destroyed a great deal of the entertainment industry, throwing an assortment of skilled workers—musicians, dancers, writers, stage hands, prop designers and builders, lighting specialists, costumers,

as well as front office people: ticket takers, marketing specialists, and accountants—out of work.

Hallie Flanagan, a drama professor at Vassar College, was chosen to head the FTP. Flanagan had studied how European governments founded and funded national theater, and was excited to try it in the United States. The FTP was officially created in August 1935. People would go over bridges put up by relief workers—would they watch them at a theater?

Skepticism ran high. Until the FTP, art in general, and the theater particularly, were commodities that were run, attended by, and oriented toward the upper class. The theater community was skeptical too. Since the FTP was not supposed to compete with the existing theaters, it was to be oriented toward the poor and the working and middle classes and would be ethnically diverse. It would offer different kinds of entertainment. Where the popular movies and plays of the time were escapist (like Disney's cartoons) or formulaic (like light romances, or gangster movies), the FTP productions were intended to reflect real lives—the lives of the audiences in attendance. The unions, which represented working theater professionals, were afraid the federally-funded theaters would drive down wages, especially since wages were tight; the most a person could make in New York City working for the FTP was \$23.86 per week. Theater professionals were leery of the “down and outs” being on stage. The powers of the New York theater scene, especially the owners and critics, initially resisted the FTP's efforts. And, there was no star system to guarantee that people would come. Questions abounded: What form should a federally-funded theater take? Who should be represented and how? What's at stake in a federally-funded theater program? And, the big question: Would people come? They would, and they did, in record numbers. In just four years, the FTP put on 1,200 productions. Thirty million people were to see a Federal Theater Production—then, one out of every five people in the U.S. Of those people, sixty-five percent had never seen a live play before. The FTP, which operated in thirty states, brought live theater to places which had never had a stage production before. Theater workers retrained, and 1,500 returned to the commercial theater industry.

The FTP did not just create a system for producing the theater with federal money, it remade the context of the theater in the U.S. The FTP functioned as a great decentralizer of theater—it no longer just occurred in New York City, and no longer with just big-name actors. The FTP provided a structure across the country and was, therefore, able to involve a wide array of people. Productions emphasized large casts, living newspapers, and inexpensive perfor-

mances. The jobs were for unemployed theater professionals, and they were to be regarded as theater professionals, not as relief workers. For instance, two of the FTP productions went to Broadway. Some of America's most respected dramatists—like Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill—provided their works for the FTP productions. Some of America's greatest theater artists—like Orson Welles, John Houseman, and John Huston—got their start and some excellent training in the FTP. Other stars, such as Burt Lancaster, also appeared. It birthed new artists, too; thirty-five percent of the royalties went to new playwrights.

The focus of the theater was on people, not profits. In addition to large productions, the FTP sought to entertain people in work camps, orphanages, prisons, and hospitals, and in small town venues like churches, town centers, and outdoor parks. The poor received free admission, and most of the tickets ranged from ten to fifty cents in most places, cheaper than a ticket to the movies. Ninety percent of the workers had been on relief, and ninety percent of the money spent went to salaries. Functionally, it helped to put people back to work in their areas of expertise, doing what they knew how to do. The effect on morale—both for the players and the audience—was immeasurable.

The FTP had five major foci: Living Newspaper groups; a Popular Price Theater; an Experimental Theater; a so-called Negro Theater; and a Tryout Theater.

In addition, the range of smaller projects they funded was staggering: musicals, high school troupes, vaudeville, marionette(puppets), classical theater, children's theater, Negro youth, Italian, Hispanic, German, Anglo-Jewish, Native American, Radio, a portable "Suitcase Theater," and agitprop.

The end of the FTP is a disturbing chapter in our history. Despite enormous popular and critical support, many viewed the FTP as an intensely political, not just a cultural, phenomenon. The FTP was a site of contention for politicians, and its opponents claimed it harbored and encouraged radicalism and communism. The House Un-American Activities Committee, also called the Dies Committee, effectively organized enough rumor and invective to make the FTP budget—all of one half of one percent of the WPA budget—politically untenable. Despite no evidence to suggest it was engaging in subversive or dangerous activity, the FTP ceased to exist on 30 June 1939.

Sample Material from the Guide

Presented below is the history of "Steel," followed by the subsequent *Questions for Discussion* and *Activities* sections from the Guide.

"Steel"

Very little besides the script survives from Steel. No production records exist, no set designs, or photographs of productions. The play is set in the fictional town of Ironton, Ohio, and focuses its attention upon the employees of "Pan-American Steel." The drama traces the conflicts of two brothers-in-law whose convictions fall on opposite sides of the labor issue. Joe Raldny studies law and is a committed

organizer for the national industrial union. Steve, his brother-in-law, is being courted by the management of Pan-American. Although he dreams of escaping the industry one day, he believes he will succeed by working with management and climbing the ladder internally.

The play's exposition focuses upon the ideological conflict between the brothers, ultimately revealing the exploitative nature of Pan-American and, by extension, the steel industry in general.

The play makes reference to the Great Steel Strike of 1919, and ends optimistically with the escape of Joe and his wife and the optimistic, if slightly implausible, conversion of Steve to labor's cause.

For Discussion

1. What does Skinny mean when he tells Dan that he is sending Joe to school with "blood money?"
2. Compare and contrast Dan Raldny and Skinny. What motivations do they share? How are they different? Include in your discussion ideas about why Dan and other characters in the play seem to dominate Skinny. Explore how each is fulfilling the American Dream.
3. The dramatic scene of Dan's death during shift-change must be very powerful on stage. Why do you think the playwright chose to place Dan's death immediately after his confrontation with Joe?
4. What motivated Dan to work so hard, particularly after his experiences in 1919?
5. How is Melania characterized? What dialogue and/or stage directions serve to create her in your imagination? Is it significant that Steve deceives her? Is the audience expected to side with Steve or Melania in this conflict?
6. What motivates Joe's behavior and commitment to study? Are his actions worth it?
7. What initiates Steve's conversion to Joe's cause? Is this a predictable outcome? Which of his beliefs has to change for him to move in Joe's defense?
8. A great deal of the characterization is done through ethnic stereotypes—not negative necessarily, but through stereotyping nonetheless. Why so?
9. What role does technology play in this play? For whose benefit does it exist?

Activities

1. In two or three paragraphs, explain Steve's understanding of his relationship with the mill. What philosophy guides his behavior?
2. It is popularly believed that everyone "has a right to make a living." Whose living is more important in this play? How does the playwright elicit the audience's sympathy?
3. Research the changes effected by technological development. Choose one aspect of technological development and prepare a short presentation to the class. Try to explore the benefits and costs of the change you are presenting. Consider the issue of "progress." How far does it get us, with your particular choice, and what do we lose because of it? It's probably best if you choose something in which you are not personally invested.

Ideas: these are just broad categories, think about all the technology which goes into each item: medicine, high speed transportation, drugs, instant entertainment, housing, educational system computers, television, exploration, the fashion industry, music, tapes, CDs, telephones, etc.

Collect information on your topic and prepare a brief (five minute) presentation to the class. You may collect information from any sources you see fit, but also include one interview. For it, you will have to determine which person would be most appropriate for your research, prepare a list of questions and conduct the interview.

For your presentation, you may create/bring in any visual aids you see fit. These will be particularly useful if the information you present is new or complex. When you turn your project in, please include with it a transcript (tape or interview notes) of the interview.

4. Divide the students into two random groups. This activity should prove flexible enough to be molded to fit your students needs.

Option A Divide the students into teams and have them role play the employee/management meeting scene from the play. After they have done this, very little preparation time should be necessary. Ask them to work in their groups to rewrite the scene. They may add to or alter the scene as they see fit. This activity can be as detailed or as free-form as you wish. Students may simply be asked to revise their team's approach, and reenact the scene, or they may be required to write out their alterations with explanations for the changes. Planning or writing should culminate in an in-class enactment.

Option B Devise a scenario, with cooperative class input, in which present-day conditions mirror the conflict between labor and management. Assign roles to students randomly, and reenact this confrontation. Conditions governing employee/management behavior may be adjusted to yield vastly different responses. Each enactment should serve as the basis for discussion about risk-taking,

group behavior, motivations for individual action, what each individual and group has at stake, etc.

For example: Worker-students receive cards listing the conditions of their employment. Include items such as salary, personal responses (families, sick children, etc.), and work history (fired before, commended, in conflict with a supervisor).

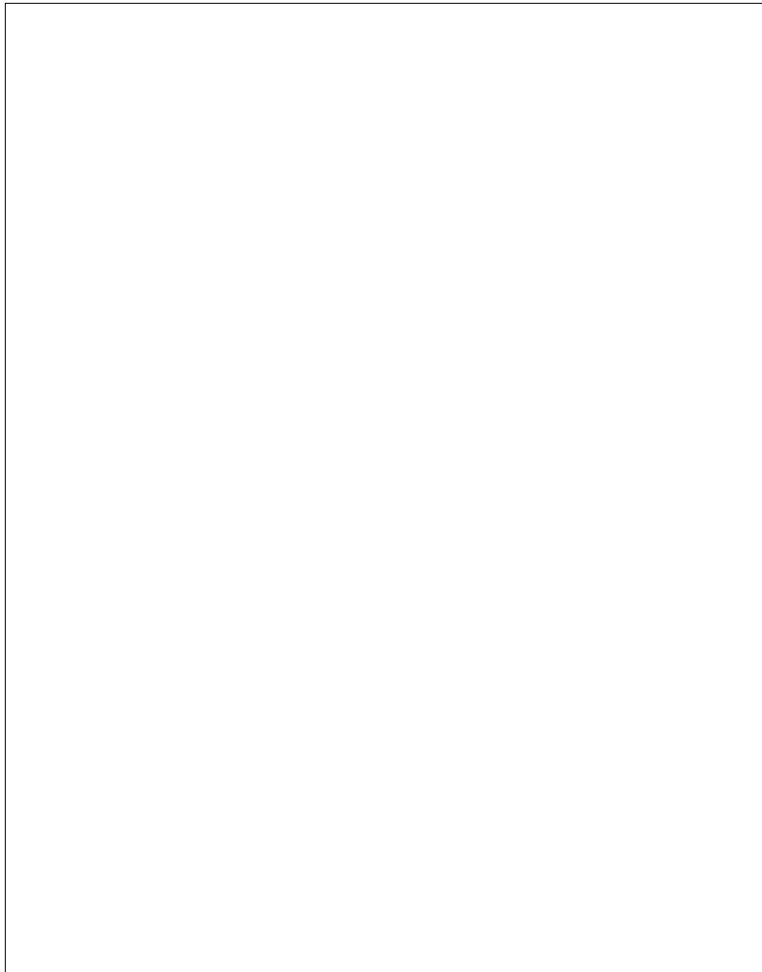
Management-Students also receive cards. These should include information about profit margin, management infrastructure, pressure from above, availability

of cheaper labor, etc. Include personal or behavioral characteristics as well. For example, a low-level manager may dominate workers with threats, or with belligerence.

Students should be encouraged to respond as their cards indicate their characters might. This exercise should stimulate some serious discussion about communication, about negotiation, and the power structures which govern our behavior.

For accomplished interactive students, the instructor can simply facilitate and guide discussion. In more hesitant classrooms, these cards can be made together, on the spot, and large enough that everyone can read them when hung around the neck, or taped to the chest. This seems to be just silly enough to get young people involved. □

William Z. Foster, *The Great Steel Strike and its Lessons* (1920)



An anti-strike advertisement placed in the *Pittsburgh Chronicle Telegraph* during the Great Steel Strike of 1919. The plethora of languages reflected the ethnic make-up of the labor force.

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