

**The Rise and Fall of The Federal Theatre:
The Question of Control, Sponsorship and Innovation.**
(and the influence of Europe)

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In the words of painter Stuart Davis, secretary of the American Artists; Congress, in the 1930s, "The artists of America do not look upon the art projects as a temporary stopgap measure, but see in them the beginning of a new and better day for art in this country."

Let's, for a few moments, look at the relevancy of these words, today, through the question of control, sponsorship and innovation through the rise and fall of The Federal Theater during the time of President Roosevelt.

" *Young Americans in the 20s and 30s got an education in the theatre, for almost every subject of importance was discussed in the best plays of these years, from social and political philosophy to sexual morality. The censors, official and unofficial had not yet moved in.*" Willard Thorp pg 63 "American Writing in the Twentieth Century" Harvard University Press. 1960

Theater, the art of making drama, is an art form different from any other. It is effervescent, yet interactive with the audience. There are memorable, life changing, tangible experiences, like all Art. However, with Theatre, none of these can be repeated after the run. Much more 'dramatic' in the literal sense, than music, art and writing; Theater, reflecting and enacting life, has a range of influences beyond the other genres.

Just under a 100 years ago, in the 30s, when Americans were recovering from the effects of the depression and examining themselves with resolutions to avoid such a mishap ever, ever again, promises being made, laws begin passed, Federal Reserve security being installed and put in place, changes being demanded and set in motion, and the war cries from overseas, Europe in this instance, were sounding loud and clear, theatre responded to the needs of the American people with a resurgence. This resurgence was comparable to the era before the critics: namely the time of the 1900s and the early 1920s.

Americans then, as they are today, were seriously concerned about their beloved Republic. What would happen to America? Could she stand? What would happen to her fortunes? Theater was a vital component then to satisfy the needs of the people. Will it be a vital component now?

1934

The Federal Theater began with this phone call to Hallie Flanagan:

Harry Hopkins, head of the WPA program, telephoned her in February 1934 and said: " We've got a lot of actors on our hands. Suppose you come to New York and talk it over," her work as the Director of the Federal Theater a project of the Works Progress Administration had begun.

To understand the importance of this phone call, a little background is necessary.

Let us shine a light on Art Theater and Commercial Theaters in this background, and on the thread of Control woven within.

The earliest American plays in the 1800s were written by mostly untrained playwrights: Those who had been reporters and journalists, and took to drama, Or those who had come to play-writing from vaudeville.

However, early as the late 1800s the control of theater had begun:

1895 CONTROL:

" The Theatre Syndicate, founded in 1895, by a group of theatre owners, controlled most of the houses across the country and soon had all the better actors in its keep. So tight was the Syndicate's monopoly, that when George Tyler took Sarah Bernhardt on tour he frequently had to play her in a circus tent. The rivalry soon offered by the Shubert's chain of theaters worsened the situation. The individuality of the local houses was destroyed and the quality of plays and productions was lowered even further" Thorp

Under the conditions which prevailed between 1895 and 1905 there was little chance that plays of any literary merit could emerge.

Also, at this time America had little interaction with Europe.

These early plays were not well constructed. Whatever reality is in them is " *only a device; it is not organic, it is not in the theme.*" as Alan Downer pointed out in *Fifty Years of American Drama 1900 - 1950*

According to Thorp:

There are three written in that period that can be revived today: " *the New York Idea* " by Langdon Mitchell in 1906, a genuinely witty satire on "advanced" ideas about marriage and divorce; " *The Great Divide* " by Vaughn Moody in 1909 a problem play which in the persons of the hero and heroine brings into conflict the puritanical east and the lawless Arizona frontier; and " *The Scarecrow* ", by Percy Mackaye 1910, a fantasy which anticipated the plays on folk themes, an important feature of the experimental drama of the 1920s.

At that time, there were many plays which dealt with contemporary themes: Augustus Thomas " *The Witching Hour* " about mental telepathy, Eugene Walter's " *The Easiest Way* " about a woman who succumbs, but is abandoned in the end, and Edward Sheldon's " *The Nigger* " about a rising politician who has to face the fact of his Negro "blood" .

Then Europe and the war happened . Influencing America.

Art Theatre began to take a solid form: " *inspired by the achievements of Brahm and Reinhardt in Germany, Antoine and Copeau in France, Years and Lady Gregory in Dublin what could young enthusiasts bent on reforming American drama do in the face of the theatrical monopoly? They could do. Of course, what their European predecessors had done. - free theaters and art theaters in defiance of the "system" " Thorpe*

In a short time little theaters broke out all over the county that were to have a long and prosperous life. The most prominent was the Washington Square Players. Their quality and high standards were an inspiration to the other little theaters.

Some of the Washington Square veterans organized the Theatre Guild, the most influential organization America has ever known. Its intention was to take Broadway by storm. Here is the healthy competition between Art and Commercial theatre.

1936: CONSOLIDATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

The Introduction to The Theatre Guild Anthology, written in 1936, said it was : "**without a theatre, without a play, without an actor and without a scrap of scenery. Its sole artistic asset was an idea.**" It seems this was not much, but they had intelligence and experience. And the shrewdest theatrical management! It was the first organization to set up a subscription plan. And the only professional theater to have an entire play reading department. (4 of Shaw's world premiers were at the guild) In the early seasons it was rightly accused of producing only foreign plays. But as soon as the young American playwrights came along it was quick to take them. Provincetown Players, born because of the Theatre Guild, took theatre through the first war and had a list of impressive artists who became widely known as poets, novelists and critics. Significantly fostering O'Neill's talent.

These were the trends that were already in existence before the sponsorship of The Federal Theatre:

INNOVATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

This was the rise of Art Theaters and their transformational effects. 1920s was the production of the lavish Ziegfeld "Follies" and O'Neill's phenomenal success of "Anna Christie" and Elmer Rice's "Street Scene", which got a Pulitzer in 1929. The terms for the Pulitzer are : "**the play receiving the award must raise the " standards of good morals, good taste and good manners"** in the theatre.

Not all the plays were written by insurgent theatre. It's important to remember this fact. "Icebound" (1923) by Owen Davis and "The Show Off" (1924) by George Kelly are two examples. They still had traces of theatricalism. What made the difference was a development with the work of Sidney Howard, a graduate from the U of California, who had lived abroad, served in the war as an ambulance driver, studied under Baker, at Harvard, (more on Baker on below under Consolidation and Development) and was an able reporter. His plays were more sophisticated. "They Knew What They Wanted" won the Pulitzer in 1924.

These Art theaters did something more than show plays with realism as a style and theme. They kept in touch with the new movements in art, much like the European theater they had styled themselves after. Naturalism, Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism penetrated deep into human consciousness. Freud and Marx needed new drama.

Additionally they sought out the innovations in stage presentations that would increase the rapport between the spectator and actor which existed in the theatre of Shakespeare and Aeschylus. It was the including of the spectator in the action. The little theater were the leaders in showing the plays of expressionism, already a movement in Europe by the early 1920s. Commercial theater took note, specially after Eugene O'Neill's success with "The Emperor Jones" (1920) and "The Hairy Ape" (1922) both of which have expressionistic techniques. When the Theatre Guild produced "The Adding Machine" Broadway audiences had no difficulty in understanding what Elmer Rice was trying to say by expressionistic methods. Although plays had expressionistic techniques, they did not produce an American school, as such. Only one play "Machinal" (1928) by Sophie Treadwell which uses these expressionist techniques to convey a woman's sense of bewilderment, sexual frustration, fear, sense of guilt and final hopelessness.

Another innovation of Art Theatre was the invention of the dream sequence in plays such as "A

Beggar on Horseback" (1934) by George Kaufman is an example.

Even more in the American vein is "*Processional*" (1925) by John Howard Lawson set in the West Virginia Coalfields during a strike where the playwright maintains that life under the Coolidge era was a vast vaudeville, and only the vulgar slapstick of vaudeville can mirror its madness. The Klan meeting, for instance, is burlesque with chants sung and danced to jazz rhythms. The Playwright's intention being to show "the color and movement of the American processional as it streams about us" the sarcasm and satire is underneath on prohibition, the Klan, tabloid journalism, mother love, professional veterans among other things.

All this time, there was a balance between commercial theatre and the Art theatres. This, again was before the sponsorship of the government. A consideration to examine is the healthy competition between commercial and Art Theaters.

The Art Theater continued their search for more innovative drama in technique and representation during this continued time of innovation, thereby polishing and refining their Art form. There was an exciting and invigorating range available to audiences, and it was far more than just sensational.

1927 INNOVATION:

One of these was Vassar Experimental Theater, run by Hallie Flanagan who is the one who received the phone call. In 1927-1928 it's audiences saw Chekhov's "*Marriage Proposal*" produced in one evening in three different styles : realism, expressionism and constructivism .

1930 INNOVATION:

In 1930-1931 "*Anthony and Cleopatra*" , "*the Knight of the Burning Pestle*", "*the Barber of Seville*" were overhauled and presented in various modern modes. ANY form and technique that required a new form of writing and directing was given a try: Japanese No Play, the Hawaiian Ritual, the Greek Mime, Ballet in the Mayan mode.

INNOVATION: AMERICAN FOLK DRAMA:

One of the other innovations of this new theatre was American folk drama. People were excited about it. The Abby Theatre Players had made a deep impression during their tours in this country. They were looking at those area in America not yet affected by the blight of "standardization". Several directors working in provincial theater believed that a genuine national drama could only come to life in the grassroots: University of Wisconsin, and University of South California, for example. Cornell College professor Drummond established a country theater showing rural life plays in the New York state fair, and a further number of excellent plays on folk themes did well on Broadway. A Pulitzer was won in 1924 for "*Hell-Bent for Heaven*" which dramatized the machinations of a half crazy evangelist in the Carolina mountains. Another Pulitzer for "*Abraham's Bosom*" about a young Negro in the turpentine woods of eastern North Carolina. In 1927 the Theater Guild presented the Pulitzer winning DuBose Heyward's "*Porgy*". This was the forerunner for Gershwin's "*Porgy and Bess*". When the Theater Guild showed "*Green Grow the Lilacs*" in 1931 it had a modest run of 8 weeks, but the musical based on it "*Oklahoma*" (1943) had a phenomenal record with 2,248 performances in addition to enormous success on the road and in England.

CONTROL:

But, by this time, criticism had begun to show its head : a comedy of a latter day Davy Crockett "Roadside" was withdrawn after two weeks. In this he wrecks a courtroom in Indian territory and 'lights' out of town to Texas with Hannir and her Pap !

INNOVATION:

Not all forms born of insurgent or commercial art forms including theater gather traction. This is to be expected. Not all forms of art are long lived although they have their purpose. Folk plays reached Broadway, but did not last. Fading enthusiasm did not support this genre. Their biggest contribution, which remained, was for the Negro actors giving them a venue better than vaudeville. The Federal Theatre , later, was a significant venue for this genre. "*The Swing Mikado*" and "*Haiti*" were huge successes.

CONSOLIDATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

Keep in mind at that time there was no university degree in the art of writing plays, there were few classes in drama from as early as 1914. As in the earlier days of the late 1800s and early 1900s, Some writers were vaudeville, and some reporters or column writers who turned to writing dramas, encouraged by this Art Theatre groups.

George Price Baker was the most famous at Harvard, although not very well supported by his peers at Harvard. His workshop was called 47 named after the catalogue number of his course of play acting, Eugene O'Neill is the most famous alumnus. He, with his other classmates were called the Baker's dozen.

Then, suddenly, the crash of 1929 happened. A few years later, Harry Hopkins called Hallie Flanagan.

1935

The Federal Theatre came about in 1935. It was the most far reaching of all the theatre groups. It employed 10,000 artists and stagehands and allied workers at its peak. It operated theaters in 40 states. It presented all kinds of entertainment: classical plays, modern drama, musicals, plays for children, dance drams, religious dramas, any drama or play that would fall in the category of theatre. These were performed wherever there was space available: in theaters closed down by the depression, in public parks, in state run community houses, in churches , in school auditoriums, in open playgrounds. Many of the plays were original works. No theatre group had such a fine repertory or has reached so many people. At the time of despair, people flocked to these plays. Some of the original plays which evolved to be the best productions were : '*Triple A Plowed Under*' , '*One third of a Nation*' , '*Chalk Dust*' , '*Haiti*' and the dramatization of Sinclair Lewis '*It Can't Happen Here*'

All these plays were very topical and relevant to the times American were struggling through.

INNOVATION:

A Federal Theatre Magazine was formed to keep abreast of all the activity generated by it, as well as to reach out further. This paragraph, from the magazine, was written by them to describe their work and vision and scope:

" We're the Caravan theatre in the parks, Shakespeare on a hillside, Gilbert and Sullivan on a lagoon, the circus under canvas, Toller on a truck. we're the theatre for the children of the steel mills in Gary; we're the theatre for the blind in Oklahoma. We're dramatic companies and vaudeville companies and marionette companies touring the C.C.C. camps, touring the flood areas, playing in schools, playgrounds, prisons, reformatories, hospitals. "

Harry Hopkins, chief of WPA addressed the question of censorship when asked if a government funded project can ever be free of censorship:

" I am asked whether a theater subsidized by the government can be kept free of censorship, and I say, yes, it is going to be kept free from censorship. What we want is a free, adult, uncensored theatre."

It was then when painter Stuart Davis, then secretary of the American Artists' Congress, said:
" The artists of America do not look upon the art projects as a temporary stopgap measure, but see in them the beginning of a new and better day for art in this country."

INNOVATION:

One of the two contributions from America to World Theatre happened at this time: The Living Newspaper . The other contribution was the Musical.

The Living Newspaper was a theatre form that Hallie Flanagan used at Vassar. These were montage documentaries, carefully researched, written by teams of researchers-turned-playwrights, with clear points of view, using the Epic theatre techniques. Most Living Newspapers used a common man as their unifying character, whose curiosity about the current problem has been aroused. The character is then led through a background of the problem, which clarifies the issue for the audience.

One of the Living Newspapers was called "*Power*". When Harry Hopkins saw "*Power*" he went backstage and congratulated the cast. These were his words:

" I want to tell you that this is a great shoe. It's fast and funny, it makes you laugh and it makes you cry and it makes you think - I don't know what more anyone can ask from a show. I want this play and plays like it done from one end of the country to the other....now let's get one thing clear: you will take a lot of criticism on this play. People will say it's propaganda. Well, I say what of it? If its propaganda to educate a consumer who's paying for power, it's about time someone had some propaganda for him. The big power companies have spent millions on propaganda for the utilities. It's about time that the consumer had a mouthpiece. I say more plays like " Power" and more power to you. "

CONTROL:

But the rumbling storms of criticism and control were gathering.

One of the Living Newspapers, planned for production in January 1936, but never produced, was "*Ethiopia*". The show depicted Haile Salassie, leader of Ethiopia. Washington immediately ordered that closed. No current minister or heads of state could be represented in the Federal

Theatre Project plays.

Regardless, the innovative methods and the very American quality of these Living Newspaper, keeping the common man as the central figure, became strong enough to give rise to the genre at a world level.

The Federal Theatre Project had brought theatre to millions who had never seen theatre before, it employed thousands of people, it introduced Epic theater and the Living Newspaper theater techniques to the United States. All this, as a consequence of the sponsorship of the government and its programs.

Did the government cross the line? Should control become an issue? Where does artistic license begin and end? Would any of these plays and all that theater and drama been made and produced without the sponsorship / funding of the government?

And what about the healthy competition between commercial and art theater? How much of innovative theater did that create? How much innovative theater did *resistance* to control create?

Consider the following:

Clifford Odets, a playwright writing with the middle class as a focus, whose plays become closely associated with the Group Theater, one of the theaters that came up as a consequence of the Theatre Guild; while Eugene O'Neill was closely associated with the Provincetown Players and the Theatre Guild. Odets' play " *Waiting for Lefty*" (1935) gave him sudden fame. American Leftist of all shades and opinions could point to the 8 Odets plays written between 1935 and 1941 with pride, seeing him as a dramatist produced by the leftist movement. His liberal use of Marxist rhetoric was instrumental in bringing the curtain down in his plays, and it is the belief of this author, of the Federal Theater. He was the last dramatist to make a name for himself before the second world war.

REFINING THE ART & DEVELOPMENT:

Of the new developments along Broadway, in the 1930s, none gave greater promise than the Group theater : a close knit organization of actors, directors and dramatists who, adopting the methods of Moscow Art Theater, rehearsing until every nuance of speech, gesture and movement had been internalized.

CONTROL:

All this work was arrested, stunted in its growth by the rumbling storms which were now surrounding the Federal Theater. Some suspicious people persuaded a few Senators and a few political leaders that these plays were not morally appropriate. And of course, Communist and Red propaganda, moralistically deprived: all at taxpayers expense.

1938 CONTROL:

By 1938 Roosevelt's New Deal was faltering. The President had attempted but failed to purge conservative Democrats from the party. The WPA opponents were attacking it for its alleged waste and ' subversive' activities.

A new committee was formed: The House of Un-American Activities Committee. Martin Deiz, Republican member of Congress, became the head. Deiz accused the Federal Theater of inefficient, extravagance, political satire, lewdness, waste and leftism, finally calling it a propaganda machine. A few political leader claimed that these plays were not morally

appropriate. Indecent was the term used by some and the branding given: "Love 'em and Leave 'em" was far too risqué a title and content. "Up in Mabel's Room" was far too suspicious. The extremism and ridiculousness shows up when Haillie Flanagan mentioned, during the testimony, the name of Christopher Marlowe, and one member of Congress asked if Marlowe was a communist. Congress removed all funding.

1939: CONTROL

The end came on July 1, 1939.

The other three Arts projects: Music, Art and Writing continued to be funded until 1941

The Federal Theater was full of the vigor, the energy, the controversy and the fearlessness that characterized this project and its leaders. Nothing remains of the production except for some faded photographs and some yellowing scripts. That is the nature of theater. It is effervescent and ephemeral.

But just as other Federal arts projects produced such giants as John Cheever, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright in the Writers program; Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Philip Guston and Jack Levine in the Arts project; the Theater program provided a home for some of the most brilliant actors, directors, designers and dancers of the period: Orson Welles, John Houseman, Norman Lloyd, Arthur Kennedy, Katherine Dunham, Helen Tamiris, Jack Carter, Canada Lee, Ian Keith, Joseph Cotton, Burt Lancaster....the list is endless. And all this in the face of the fact that the Federal Theater was mandated to hire not reigning stars but primarily the unemployed.

These are the closing words written by Haillie Flanagan :

" The President of the United States, in writing, to me of his regret at the closing of the Federal Theatre referred to it as a pioneering job. That it was gutsy, lusty, bad and good, sad and funny, superbly worth more wit, wisdom and imagination than we could give it. Its significance lies in pointing to the future, the ten thousand anonymous men and women-- the et ceteras and the and-so-forths who did the work, the nobodies who were everybody, the somebodies who believed it-- their dreams and deeds were not the end. They were the beginning of a people's theatre in a country whose greatest plays are still to come."

But have they? We are almost 80 years out. Its not so long ago, yet a whole era has changed.

What is the reason why creativity has been curtailed. Has it been curtailed? Has serious American Theater built itself on the back of this enterprise?

Only two playwrights of distinction emerged after the second World War and continued, from play to play, to hold their audiences: Tennessee Williams (b. 1914) , and Arthur Miller (b. 1915) Williams, one of the most expert dramatists of the century, was known for his skillful construction and the liberal amounts of sex, bawdy, and violence his plays contained. Miller's aim was more general.

In 1949, "The Death of a Salesman" made such a strong impression in the theatre because it fulfilled Arthur Miller's intention of picturing a man "who was not even especially 'good' but whose situation made clear that at bottom we are alone, valueless, without even the elements of a human person, when once we fail to fit into the patterns of efficiency."

The resultant deep moral uneasiness in all among us later on, after this time span, was clearly spelled out by Arthur Miller in his attempt to address this uneasiness through his plays. He says in his "On Social Plays" in 1955: "There is a world to make, a civilization to create, that will

move toward the only goal the humanistic, democratic mind can ever accept with honor".

The dramatist role, for Arthur Miller, was to show people that there are different kinds of peace. It is possible that the peace we may get " may leave us without the fruits of civilized life"

Did this loss have a far reaching effect on American Theatre?

It is my belief that it did, although the period of The Federal Theatre was very short lived, the circumstances and suddenness of its forced closing left an gap. The theatre that followed did not supply the needs of the public. The fact that only two playwrights gained any sort of prominence after the war is revealing.

There is one thing that is very insidious about control, either as a open policy, or as an unconscious phenomenon : the people who are being controlled strike out against it, both against the action of control as well as the person who is responsible for the control. That is probably the reason why "*Cradle That Rocks*" became a key factor in bringing the Federal Theatre into a close.

For those who are unfamiliar with the story, the Federal Government gave an order that the play, which was not acceptable to them, was not to be played on the stage. So the cast, including Orsen Welles, performed it from the seated audience, in sheer defiance.

Control phenomenon has a character all its own. The line between assistance and control is a strong, yet delicate line.

I do not underestimate the impact of Hitler's Theaterism National Society and the allied salons. More research needs to be done on this to see if it is a factor in the closing of the Federal theatre.

Defiance, although puerile, is not restricted to pre-teens.

Now, in the world Internet and cyberspace where does this control and sponsorship occur? What is the role of Independent artists and self-sponsorship ? What effect, far-reaching or temporary, will it have on Art in America.

We know we have grown away from traditional societies. This is the age when " The mass of men" came into political power, as Harold Laski, political scientist said. When we look at who ruled the previous era, we see the strong role of religion, and kings, controlling social and economic life in the western and eastern world.

Gideon Rose is the Editor of Foreign Affairs, his article 'Making Modernity Work. The Reconciliation of Capitalism and Democracy.' in the Jan-Feb 2012 special report said: " The major battles about how to structure modern politics and economics were fought in the first half of the last century, and they ended with the emergence of the most successful system the world has ever seen."

Control and Protectionism, the sleeping dogs that destroy growth of all kinds, will destroy again, as they did in the years after the crash in 1929 and in the years of the Great Depression: " Beggar Thy Neighbor" is a philosophy that didn't work then and will never work again. We cannot afford to push art into one venue, at the cost of innovative exuberance, and for the purpose of control.

The control today is economic, not so much political. Control in Art does exist, albeit insidiously and quietly: For example, at this point out state gives funds to only one organization, and then the

Organization gives 'grants' to those they wish to encourage. This breeds control phenomenon, not innovation. Sensationalism: the quicksand of American Art, is a byproduct of the control phenomenon. Grand funding needs to be given to the best, not to the one "designated" organization. This 'selection' is not the breeding ground for Art in any of its forms. However, in today's days of Self Sponsorship, all Artists are capable of refusing to accept these grants.

Keeping in mind: abundant talent is like underground water, it will gush forth in many ways, I believe it is impossible to hold Art and its creative process back.

Were the truth in the words of painter Stuart Davis, then secretary of the American Artists' Congress "The artists of America do not look upon the art projects as a temporary stopgap measure, but see in them the beginning of a new and better day in this country," correct ?