

## ***Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art Out of Desperate Times***

**Walker & Company**

Susan Quinn, in her most recent book, "Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times," gives us the lowdown on the Federal Theatre Project (later referred to as the FTP). We get the skinny on young Orson Wells' bombastic "Voodoo Macbeth," a 1936 reinterpretation of Shakespeare's classic, now set in 19th century Haiti. We learn of the political controversy sparked by the FTP production of "The Cradle Will Rock." Moreover, Quinn describes in detail the concept of "Living Newspapers," an idea developed by Flanagan and her cohorts that dramatized current events in a manner that was exploratory and experimental, and as informative as it was entertaining. Nevertheless, certain racist and rightwing factions in congress, lead by House on Un-American Activities Committee Chairman Martin Dies, accused the FTP of communist sympathies, making the FTP one of the initial targets and early victims of the so-called Red Scare.

Vassar drama professor, Hallie Flanagan was given an enormous task during the Great Depression of the 20th century. Flanagan's assignment--under the supervision of her old college chum, Harry Hopkins--was to direct this unwieldy Federal Theatre Project. Hopkins was in 1935 President Franklin D. Roosevelt's confidant and first choice to head the Works Projects Administration (WPA)--the largest of the New Deal agencies. The WPA's aim was to provide employment relief, as well as infrastructure development across the country. It was part of FDR's economic stimulus package, you could accurately say.

Included in this package was a provision for what was called Federal One; it was comprised of the FTP, the music project, the writer's project, the visual artist project, and the historical records survey. Each of these Federal One divisions employed artists, scribes, auteurs, and archivists. All of the projects contributed to the cultural quilt that is America.

The Federal Theater Project, for example, hired 12,500 artists and craftspeople while producing 1,200 plays in its 4 year lifespan (1935-1939). What's more, 25,000,000 theatergoers experienced the joy, insight, and exhilaration of what Flanagan called, "free, adult, and uncensored" live stage productions.

In 336 pages, Susan Quinn has constructed a readable tome that is steeped in history, focused on theater, and relevant to today's simmering economic crisis. As Quinn herself has stated, "The Federal Theatre Project dealt with everything going on, so I told the story of the Great Depression through the lens of the Theatre Project." After all, it is through the arts that we are able to see ourselves. As President Roosevelt surely knew, that's stimulating not only to our economy but to our humanity.

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