

## The Living Newspaper in Philadelphia, 1938-1939

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By the mid-1930s American live theatre was crippled by the combined effects of a faltering economy and motion picture innovations. More than 14,000 theatres were wired for movie sound by 1932 simply to cut expenses. Weekly film audiences in the tens of millions encouraged other theatres to convert to motion picture screens from vaudeville. One reason audiences were attracted to sound films was because admission cost a fraction of attending live theatre. As the Depression continued, road companies of stage shows were stranded across the country and vaudeville acts had difficulty finding adequate bookings.

Under Works Progress Administration Federal Project Number One, the Federal Theatre Project was created in 1935 to put unemployed theatre people back to work, including actors, directors, playwrights, set designers, vaudeville acts, and even stage workers.<sup>1</sup> Hallie Flanagan Davis, Professor of Theatre at Vassar College and director of her school's experimental theatre, was appointed national director of the project. She divided the country into thirteen regions, each with its own director, to implement the Federal Theatre Project. The largest region was New York City because it was also the capital of the American theatrical world, but major units also existed in Chicago and Los Angeles. Flanagan's experience at Vassar's experimental theatre led her to encourage innovative plays and productions, but 95 percent of the FTP productions were standard stage plays: dramas, comedies, vaudeville, musicals and even puppet shows for children, the future audience. The fame of the Federal Theatre rested not on ordinary shows, however, but on the experimental presentations or innovative stagings that Flanagan encouraged, including Orson Welles's direction of an all-black "Macbeth" and the Chicago FTP "Swing Mikado." The most experimental presentations were the Living Newspapers that discussed current problems, the way some muckrakers of the Progressive era had shown the flaws in American society at the end of the nineteenth century. Were Living Newspapers successful in encouraging change, however? Of the two Living Newspapers presented in Philadelphia at least one, "One-Third of a Nation," had enough influence on city officials to change some of the slum conditions dramatized by the performance.

For the first two years of its existence the Philadelphia FTP was not in the same league as the Theatre Projects of other cities. Leadership was lacking and presentations lurched between marionette shows for children and tired vaudeville routines that audiences had seen before. After several false starts in the administration of the Pennsylvania Federal Theatre Project, which was almost exclusively confined to Philadelphia, Herbert Humphreys was appointed state director. He and James Light, a noted director in New York theatre, were imported to improve the local efforts. From the moment of their arrival the quality of Philadelphia's FTP improved, reaching its apogee in October, 1938 with the opening of "One-Third of a Nation."

Humphreys came to Philadelphia from the FTP San Bernardino Project in California, where he had been a district supervisor. When that project merged with the one in Los Angeles to meet quota reductions he was brought to the east coast by Flanagan for the specific purpose of upgrading the work of the Philadelphia FTP.<sup>2</sup> Light was a renowned director of drama on Broadway. He was most noted for his staging of original Eugene O'Neill plays at the Provincetown Playhouse in Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup>

Hallie Flanagan came up with the idea of the Living Newspaper during one of the first organizational meetings of Works Progress Administration Federal Project Number One, of which the theatre project was a part. During the discussions Flanagan suggested using unemployed actors to dramatize contemporary events in a series of short scenes. Emphasis would be on many people performing small roles, instead of on stars.<sup>4</sup> This idea turned into the Living Newspaper. The Living Newspaper was first implemented in New York City to cut down the unemployment among theatre people. As such it solved several problems: first, it gave people jobs; second, by emphasizing production, directors minimized the acting deficiencies of some participants; third, it created a whole new form by dramatizing current events; and, finally, it provided a social commentary that spoke articulately about contemporary problems.<sup>5</sup> Instead of drama where actors played fictional characters, the Living Newspaper dramatized a current issue with the story evolving from a series of related events. A loudspeaker became the commentator and the story was presented in a series of vignettes. Dialogue came from newspaper stories, trial transcripts, public hearings, and the publicized comments of politicians, especially senators and congressmen quoted from the *Congressional Record*, although Living Newspaper characters were unnamed except for historical figures. By diminishing

audience identification with particular characters the Federal Theatre heightened the "Everyman" experience. Stage activity was augmented by the projection of photographs and drawings as background material that saved money for the perennially threadbare Theatre Project. Occasionally full sets were created when the story required it, but by reducing scenery to a minimum and using suggestion, lighting, and the audience's imagination to enhance the dramatic intensity, an entire act would build to a climax that left the audience wanting more.<sup>6</sup> Pierre de Rohan was in charge of the unit in New York City and during the life of the FTP produced five shows with large casts. Each ran from two to nine months.<sup>7</sup> Three, "One-Third of a Nation," "Power," and "Spirochete," were reproduced by FTP units across the country.<sup>8</sup>

Living Newspapers were highly effective for large projects employing thousands as in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Not only did they involve speaking roles for actors, but frequently incorporated music, which necessitated an orchestra, chorus, and even dancers. Work was provided for as many as possible. Among the Living Newspaper productions in New York City, "Triple-A Plowed Under" had 76 speaking parts and "Power" had 157. Chicago's "Spirochete" had 91 speaking parts.<sup>9</sup> Unlike private theatre in which one character actor sometimes played several roles, each of the Living Newspaper speaking parts employed a different actor or actress.

Smaller FTP units such as Philadelphia found that if they wanted to repeat a Living Newspaper that had originated with one of the large programs, they were sometimes forced to merge several separate units to recreate the production. The Negro unit, drama unit, dance unit and even the vaudeville unit would all be merged to construct the Living Newspaper. That was a problem. While the collected group rehearsed, the local project virtually dropped out of the public eye because all units were busy in the one effort.

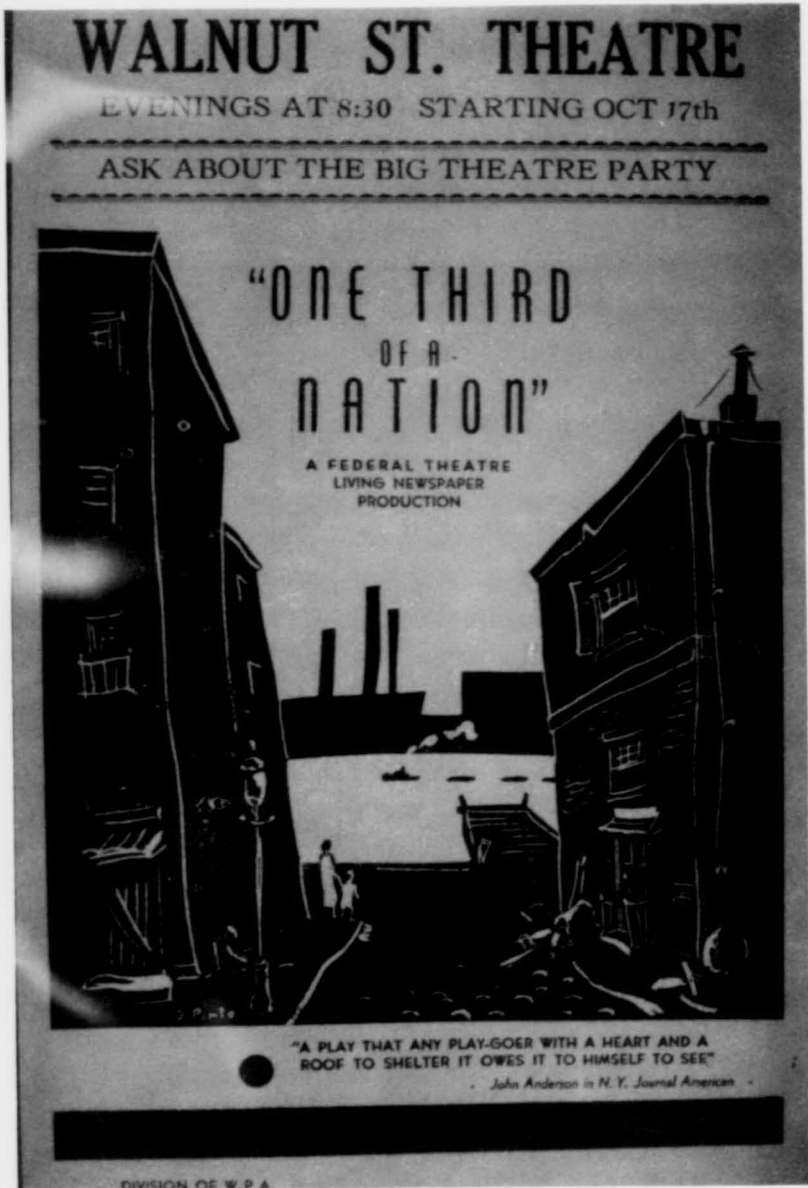
Plans for a Philadelphia production of the Living Newspaper "One-Third Of A Nation" were announced in late March, 1938. "One-Third of a Nation" told how slums became overcrowded and dramatically explained why a solution was so difficult to achieve. It involved the greatest number of speaking parts for any Living Newspaper, 164. The Philadelphia FTP indicated it intended to localize the production so the show would have a distinctly Philadelphia flavor.<sup>10</sup> Rewriting, casting, and rehearsals for Philadelphia's version lasted for almost six months, partly

because major revisions were needed to make it a uniquely Philadelphia production, partly because the much smaller Philadelphia unit had to cast individuals in multiple parts. Arthur Arent's New York-based script was completely re-written by Edward Malle and Harold Berman of the Philadelphia unit. Research about Philadelphia housing was done by the Philadelphia Federal Writers' Project. All references to New York streets were changed to Philadelphia locations; references to housing code regulations were changed to Philadelphia's Housing Code. Information about crowded housing conditions and inadequate slum homes were adapted from reports published by the Philadelphia Housing Association in 1935 and 1936, which concluded that a housing shortage had forced residents into substandard dwellings. Unsafe structures had no plumbing and open privies. Owners permitted them to deteriorate because they could always find people willing to pay despite the run-down condition. Vandals compounded the problems by entering abandoned structures to steal pipes, boards, and furniture abandoned by previous tenants.<sup>11</sup>

By 1938 Philadelphia had a serious housing shortage, partly caused by the economic problems of the Depression, and partly by the conservative political leadership that refused to use city money for housing and feared that federal funds would undermine Republican control of the city. Between 1930 and 1934, only 4,432 units for family dwelling had been constructed when in normal times construction would have provided 26,000 units. In the same five-year period, 5,875 family units were withdrawn from use and another 1,540 had been demolished for unsafe conditions or new construction. Philadelphia had actually lost units during the Depression, and several factors restricted replacing housing, including a decrease in rents collected, large numbers on relief, unemployment, and delinquent tax collection. Adding to the problems was the city's inability to force landlords to upgrade their property for safety purposes or to condemn unsafe dwellings.<sup>12</sup> Tenants constantly complained that landlords collected their rent, but did nothing to make repairs, improve the apartments, or upgrade safety features. In April, June, and November, 1937, dissatisfaction was so widespread that tenants across the city conducted demonstrations and held rent in escrow until landlords answered their complaints. Picketing took place on both Lambert Street and Stanley Street in the Northeast section, and in the 44th Ward.<sup>13</sup>

One troubling housing problem experienced by Philadelphia slum dwellers was that houses tended to collapse, burying the occupants. On July 25, 1935, two

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*Philadelphia poster for "One Third of a Nation".*

buildings collapsed behind Johnson's Art Gallery on Broad Street. Children playing in an adjacent lot narrowly missed being trapped by the rubble. On December 19, 1936, seven people were killed and another fifteen injured when a similar building collapse took place of 15th Street.<sup>14</sup> These were "band-box" dwellings, condemned by the Housing Authority, but still used because people had no other place to go.

When "One-Third of a Nation" opened at the Adelphi Theatre in New York City on January 17, 1938, the recreation of a slum fire in the first scene drew immediate attention. This was a dramatic method of locating the story, demonstrating a problem, and stimulating audience interest. The Living Newspaper then froze the scene, went into a blackout, and changed the set to develop the story of how New York housing had reached such terrible conditions. Malle and Berman realized this opening was highly successful, but it had little to do with Philadelphia slums. To make the first scene more Philadelphia-specific, Malle and Berman had part of the set for the Walnut Street Theatre production collapse in full view of the audience, dramatically recreating recent, real-life Philadelphia tragedies.<sup>15</sup> Additional Philadelphia problems that were dramatized included land speculation, greedy owners, and frequent cholera epidemics in the city's crowded, unsanitary neighborhoods. Cholera and yellow fever epidemics had plagued the city throughout the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Slum congestion was illustrated by crowding a great number of performers onto a small rug that represented city land. Other scenes demonstrated the emergence of juvenile delinquency and the ineffectiveness of investigations into housing. The co-writers pointed out that Philadelphia housing was so bad that it resulted in a tenants' rent strike in 1937 to protest rent increases during a housing shortage. One of the play's lessons was that urban slums developed over long periods and were a main source for social problems that plagued American society.

One scene, unchanged in Philadelphia from the New York production, recreated a Senatorial debate about the Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill that proposed to use one billion dollars to build low-income housing. Among the figures whose dialogue was taken directly from the *Congressional Record* were Senators William E. Borah of Idaho, Robert F. Wagner of New York, G. O. Andrew of Florida, Harry F. Byrd of Virginia, and Millard Tydings of Maryland, as well as Vice President John Nance Garner:

LOUDSPEAKER

Senator William E. Borah of Idaho.

BORAH

Mr. President. . . .

GARNER

Does the Senator from New York yield to the Senator from Idaho?

WAGNER

Certainly.

BORAH

Is the Senator going to discuss the question of causes of slums? Why do we have these awful degraded conditions?

LOUDSPEAKER

Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York.

WAGNER

I think it is a very simple matter. It is because of the low income received by the individuals who live in the slums. This is the fundamental difficulty. If overnight we could increase their incomes by a more fair distribution of the wealth of the country, we would not have any slums!

LOUDSPEAKER

Senator C. O. Andrews of Florida.

ANDREWS

Mr. President, I should like to ask the Senator from New York where the people who live in the slums come from.

WAGER

A great many of them have been here a long time. What does the Senator mean by "where do they come from?" Whether they have come from some other country?

ANDREWS

I think we ought not to offer any inducement to people to come in from our country or foreign countries or anywhere else and take advantage of our government in supplying them with homes. For instance, if we examine the birth records in New York, we will find that most of the people there is the slums were not born in New York, but the bright lights have attracted them from everywhere, and that is one reason why there are so many millions in New York without homes!

LOUDSPEAKER

Despite his position during the debate, Senator Andrews voted for and supported the Bill in its final form.

BORAH

Mr. President. . . .

(Enter CLERK left. He hands GARNER a slip of paper. Three raps of a gavel are heard. CLERK exits.)

GARNER

(reads) The appropriation for the Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill has been reduced from one billion to seven hundred million dollars!

LOUDSPEAKER

Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia.

BYRD

Mr. President, I offer an amendment, the purpose of which is to prevent the extravagance which has occurred in other homestead projects built throughout the country. . . . This amendment is presented for the purpose of preventing the expenditure of more than four thousand dollars per family unit.

WAGNER

Those who are not in sympathy with our efforts to do something for the one-third of the people of the United States who are ill-housed—something to give these unfortunate people who have insufficient income to enable them to live in decent quarters a chance for life—will find that the amendment of the Senator from Virginia ought to be adopted and the bill defeated. I say very candidly to the Senate that if the amendment of the Senator from Virginia is adopted it will kill the bill.

(Enter the CLERK down left. HE hands GARDNER another slip of paper. Three raps of the gavel are heard.)

GARNER

(reads) The appropriation for the Wagner-Steagall Housing Bill has been reduced from seven hundred million to five hundred twenty-six million dollars! (His voice fades and lights dim down as a large screen rises up. [The stage] blacks out. The voices of the Senators fade but are heard debating in a vague sort of mumbo jumbo pattern under the LOUDSPEAKER. Music.)

BYRD

Does the Senator think this low income group about which he is talking—and I am thoroughly in accord with *that*—

WAGNER

If the Senator is in accord with that, he should not suggest this amendment because he may be able to do in Virginia what he suggests, but there will be few areas in the United States where a room can be built for a thousand dollars, and under the Senator's amendment this benefit would be limited to a few localities!<sup>17</sup>

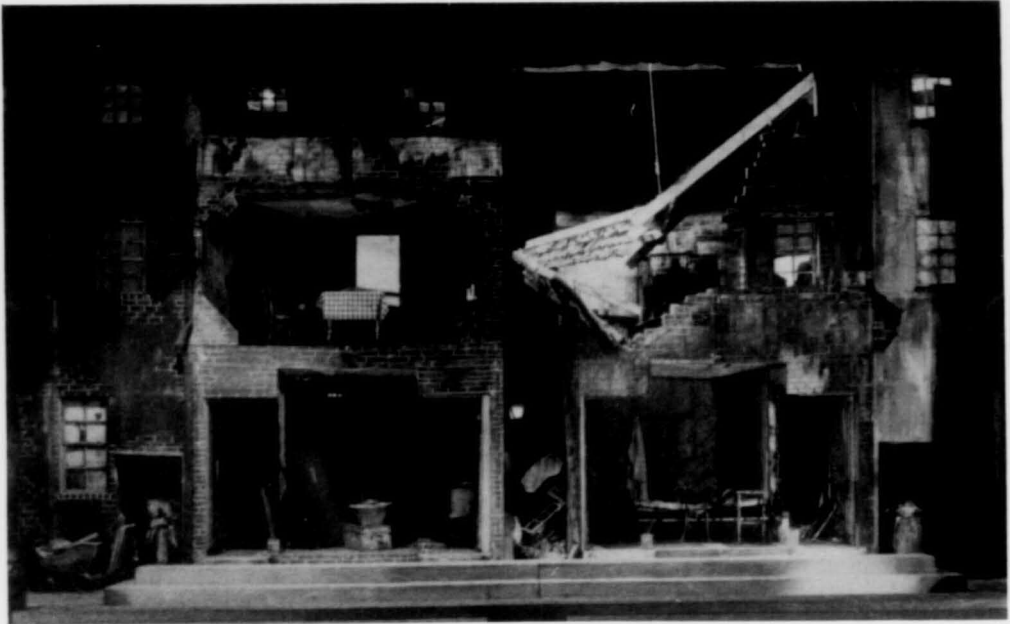
While stage "Senators" debated, a screen opened for a slide show of actual Philadelphia locations. Audiences viewed the trash-filled air shaft of a dumbbell apartment, a man emerging from the cellar in which he lived, filthy vacant lots on which children played, windows with bars, a pushcart, outdoor privies next to water pumps, overflowing garbage cans, a dead rat, and a fire.<sup>18</sup> The message was one of squalor, deprivation, and unspeakable housing conditions.



"One-Third of a Nation" was an enormous production for the small Philadelphia Project. It used three of the city's four federal adult units; the White Dramatic Company, the Colored Dramatic Company, and the Dance Group. A total of 67 people were needed for the 164 speaking parts and a total of 195 appearances.<sup>19</sup> It was also a show that was almost overwhelmed by problems.

Philadelphia's FTP leased the Walnut Street Theatre for the 1937-1938 season, but had to let it go because the FTP could not use it during the summer. A new lease was negotiated for 1938-1939, but the cast and crew could not get into the theatre until five days before the opening. Nobody in the cast had ever been in a show as large as "One-Third of a Nation." Confusion reigned over the countless entrances and exits until Director Light posted a coordinated chart that also indicated when costume changes were needed.<sup>20</sup>

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*The set of the collapsing home for "One Third of a Nation". The home is on the right with a building support diagonally falling.*

Unfortunately the dramatic highlight of the show, the collapsing home, also threatened to collapse the elderly stage of the Walnut Street Theatre, the oldest continually operating theatre in the United States, dating back to 1809.<sup>21</sup> Hours before the opening curtain, technicians found that the stage was insufficiently supported, for the sudden movement of heavy scenery required by the opening scene building collapse. For opening night this problem was solved by rumbles, screams, and alarms heard from the darkened stage. Then, as the curtain rose, the tragedy was revealed as already having happened.<sup>22</sup> After opening night, the stage support beams were reinforced and the "collapsible home" worked on cue for the remaining performances.

"One-Third of a Nation" was the clearest demonstration of cultural localism in the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Project. A script written to dramatize slum problems in New York City was completely rewritten to fit the housing problems of Pennsylvania's largest city. In New York the problem was greedy land owners who squeezed every possible penny from renters, but in Philadelphia avaricious landlords preyed upon destitute workers who wanted to find housing close to their work. Where New York had its infamous "lung block" of tuberculosis victims, Philadelphia was plagued by epidemics of cholera and yellow fever caused by unsanitary water supplies in the mid-nineteenth century. In New York ramshackle buildings caught fire and incinerated occupants, but in Philadelphia bandbox dwellings collapsed, burying the residents. Each script graphically presented the problems of its specific urban area. By locating the stories in familiar settings Federal Theatre heightened local interest, increasing the chances for success. One unexpected bonus for Philadelphia was that some cast members lived in the very conditions condemned by the drama and could bring their personal experiences to each performance.

The theatre was filled on "One-Third of a Nation's" opening night, October 17, 1938.<sup>23</sup> Special guests included Governor and Mrs. George H. Earle, the state's first Democratic governor since the Civil War, and Mrs. A. Mitchell Palmer, chairman of the Pennsylvania Board of Censors and wife of the former Attorney General of the United States. Local papers approved of the changes as did *Variety*, the show business newspaper, which called the play "... an intensely interesting, historical, and propagandistic drama all the way through."<sup>24</sup> Henry T. Murdock of the *Evening Public Ledger* called the Living Newspaper format

The only new dramatic form to be developed . . . in the last decade. . . . The Living Newspaper might be likened to a stage attempt to emulate the movie newsreels, or perhaps it would be more accurate to state an attempt to institute an editorialized newsreel in the manner of "The March of Time" on screen and radio.<sup>25</sup>

Murdock also contended that people who saw the original New York show said the Philadelphia production was superior.<sup>26</sup> Even the *Inquirer*, a paper that viewed almost all New Deal programs with hostility, viewed the production favorably.

Through spotlights, through black-outs, through the dance, through an explanatory voice, through films, through by-play between actors and audience—in short, through all the tricks of the theatre, stepped up to a modern pace—the story of slums, of the disease and crime they produce, is graphically and effectively told.<sup>27</sup>

Proof the play had fulfilled its purpose appeared when a teacher at Philadelphia's Dobbins Vocational School wrote to the WPA in New York:

To make a long story short. I am going to teach "Housing" to a group of girls and I can think of no better way than to start by reading your play to them, with the statistics on housing in Philadelphia. I hope a few of them have seen your play but I doubt it very much because they belong to "One Third of the Nation."

May I please have a copy for this very worthwhile purpose? Thank you very much for your kindness in this matter.<sup>28</sup>

"One-Third of a Nation" claimed that government low-cost housing was a possible solution to the problem, but undermined this point by demonstrating the complexity of construction in urban locations. Land condemnation, bids to put up buildings, gas and water supplies, and taxation were all impediments that had to be overcome. The drama did not indicate how these problems were to be solved. Furthermore, the Wagner-Steagall Act, discussed in the Senate debate scene, was passed to support low-cost housing, but it was underfinanced. Although \$526 million sounded very impressive, the play presented that figure in more practical dimensions by stating that it was unlikely for any state to receive more than ten percent of the total. Philadelphia's share would probably only amount to \$26 million, while two billion dollars were needed to solve the city's housing problem.<sup>29</sup> "One-

*Third of a Nation*” did not provide definite answers for social problems but used authenticity to demand action from state and national government.

Philadelphia Federal Theatre’s first *Living Newspaper* ran for nine weeks and gave 63 performances, second only to New York’s run of 247. It was supposed to end on December 10, 1938, but public interest and ticket demand encouraged the production to continue for another week. It finally closed on December 17, 1938. At ticket prices of 26¢ to \$1.14, the nine-week Philadelphia run made a profit of \$4696 on total receipts of \$11,006.19.<sup>30</sup> With seven performances a week the total attendance of 24,851 averaged 395 per show, one-third of the seats at the 1054 seat Walnut Street Theatre. That may not sound impressive until it is realized that most Philadelphia theatres were closed during the Depression and theatre at any price was not within the reach of most of the Depression audience. “*One-Third of a Nation*” closed only because a traveling production of “*Prologue to Glory*”, a New York WPA presentation about the early life of Abraham Lincoln that preceded Robert Sherwood’s “*Abe Lincoln in Illinois*” by seven months, was scheduled to come into the theatre.<sup>31</sup>

One success, however, did not mean the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Project could compete with New York. It was still too small to launch more than one major effort at a time. Furthermore, work rules limited the number of hours each FTP person could work. This prohibited the Philadelphians from presenting one major effort while rehearsing a second. Several dramas were being written, but for rehearsals to be initiated “*One-Third of a Nation*” had to close while traveling units visited the city. Only then would cast members be available for rehearsals.

While several productions from New York’s Federal Theatre visited Philadelphia, it was announced that “*Spirochete*” would be the local unit’s next *Living Newspaper* effort. James Light was again scheduled to direct. Originally produced by the Chicago Federal Theatre Project, “*Spirochete*” was the story of syphilis. A series of loosely connected historic vignettes, “*Spirochete*” told how the disease spread through Europe after sailors with Columbus picked it up in the New World. Several scenes showed how it ruined lives, while others dramatized how legislators were too embarrassed by the social stigma of syphilis to discuss the problems it created. Additional scenes traced the search for the causes and strongly supported Dr. Paul Ehrlich’s early cure. Dr. Ehrlich conducted 605 experiments to find a treatment for syphilis before his 606 arsenic formula, found in 1909, killed

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Philadelphia poster for "Spirochete".

the culpable spirochete virus without also killing the patient.

The announcement that "Spirochete" would be Philadelphia's next Living Newspaper resulted in an immediate protest from Cornelius C. O'Brien, a leader of the Catholic Knights of Columbus. He had two objections. First, references in the play to Christopher Columbus and his crew being the means by which syphilis was carried from the New World to the Old seemed to slander the explorer's reputation. Second, O'Brien feared the drama would make the United States a laughingstock for Europeans. Emerging dictators like Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco were only too eager to find fault with Americans. The Living Newspaper would provide additional material for their propaganda by suggesting that syphilis had started in America.<sup>32</sup>

Catholic objections to "Spirochete" led to an FTP administrative invitation to O'Brien to attend a meeting with the playwrights and production staff. O'Brien's objections would be discussed and the drama's research would be defended. Because Philadelphia had already experienced one show business boycott led by John Cardinal Dougherty against supposedly immoral motion pictures from May to July 1934—just before the Hays Commission was installed by the film industry to police itself—local Federal Theatre administrators sought to diminish O'Brien's objections before they exploded into a damaging public demonstration. At the same time they did not want to create the impression that they had "caved in" to censorship pressure. Participants at the meeting included O'Brien, Herbert Humphreys, Pennsylvania State FTP director, Edward Kienle, Public Information Assistant from the American Social Hygiene Association, and Henry Thornton Craven, who represented his wife, a member of the Mayor's Theatre Censorship Board. During the meeting O'Brien clarified his objections to the play stating that it defamed the character of Columbus, that it was un-American to show that the disease started from the New World, that international complications would result if the play presented the scene in which the disease spread from Genoa, Italy, and that American tax money should not be spent publicly ridiculing the country.<sup>33</sup> O'Brien's complaints were attacked by Kienle who quoted authorities and reference works that supported the play's research. Craven defended the Federal Theatre Project's use of the Columbian Theory of the spread of syphilis, and agreed with the play as written. Craven also objected to censorship from a special-interest group. Although the meeting was amicable, O'Brien's opinion was unchanged. He remained determined to stop this Living

Newspaper from appearing in Philadelphia.<sup>34</sup>

In an effort to outflank O'Brien, representatives from the Philadelphia Catholic Archdiocese, physicians, and civic and labor leaders were invited to a special preview performance to advise Federal Theatre officials how to avoid sensationalism.<sup>35</sup> This preview, at which members of the Knights of Columbus also judged the play, was a standing-room-only presentation because letters invited 3500 people to the special preview. Apparently O'Brien's objections were not completely satisfied. After the preview, changes were made in the Philadelphia production deleting all material that suggested Columbus or his sailors carried syphilis back to Europe. Additional cuts removed any hint that Italian sailors from Genoa spread the disease during their travels in the Mediterranean.<sup>36</sup> Although the cuts may have partially satisfied

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*Federal Theatre personnel in the lobby of the Walnut Street Theatre, October 31, 1938. Seated; Gertrude Sharkey, Hallie Flanagan Davis, Blandings Sloan. Standing; Jack Rose, Mr. Davis (Flanagan's husband), and William J. Hagerty. Photo credited to Krasney.*

the objections, they compromised the play's continuity, for the revised Philadelphia production seemed to say that syphilis started nowhere and spread for no reason.

Another problem for Philadelphia's "Spirochete" was the inept publicity of the promotion department. M. Manisoff, acting head of the Pennsylvania project while Herbert Humphreys recovered from illness, discovered that nothing had been done to secure the sponsorship of "Spirochete" by local health organizations. Also, when reviews were published, one of the promotional assistants distorted the play's message by deleting all references to the Living Newspaper as a WPA effort, emphasizing instead the presentation as propaganda. Finally, local promotions manager William J. Hagerty did not send project speakers to visit local unions to publicize "Spirochete". In short, a vast, untapped audience may have existed in Philadelphia, but because the promotions department failed to do its job news of the show did not reach it.<sup>37</sup> "Spirochete" was not the first Philadelphia FTP production with this experience. Earlier shows received good reviews, but their theatres had been two-thirds empty. Manisoff blamed the promotions department for the failure without acknowledging the Depression difficulties all theatres were having in Philadelphia.

Another problem was that promotions manager Hagerty had little experience beyond promoting burlesque. The result was that Federal Art Project posters for "Spirochete" were placed "... in every third-rate barbershop and hash-house in the slums of Philadelphia with [those of stripper] Ann Corio and [the production] had no notices whatsoever in the busy centers of Philadelphia."<sup>38</sup> Examples of Hagerty's unsatisfactory efforts were legion; on the initial program Hallie Flanagan's name was misspelled, there was no telephone number or address for the project, no telephone number for the theatre, and no indication of special group rates. Topping that, the huge three-sheet advertisement on the outside wall of the theatre misspelled syphilis as "siphilis". Thomas Maulsby, a promotional specialist temporarily assigned to Philadelphia, strongly advised the regional director to replace Hagerty with Ernest Pendrell, who had both newspaper and theatrical experience. It was advice that seriously backfired on the project even though it never went beyond the discussion stage.<sup>39</sup>

Rumors of Communist influence circulated around the Federal Theatre Project in New York for most of its existence, but the proposed appointment of Pendrell provided the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities, known as



the so-called Dies Committee after its Chairman, Martin Dies of Texas, with concrete evidence of Communist attempts to infiltrate the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Project. In August 1938, six months before "Spirochete" was to open in Philadelphia, Representative Michael J. Bradley, a Democrat in the city's Third Congressional District, had written a friendly letter to WPA Administrator Harry Hopkins. The letter was about rumors Bradley had heard concerning Communist propaganda emerging from the Philadelphia project. Although Congressman Bradley discounted many of the rumors as propaganda smears designed to undermine the Democratically-sponsored program, he claimed sources for others included Philadelphia WPA Director Harry Halloran. This was a clear warning from a friendly legislator that the issues later used to dismantle the entire Federal Theatre Program in July, 1939 existed as early as August, 1938. But no record exists to show that steps were taken to correct the problems. As late as February, 1939, the month "Spirochete" was scheduled to open, nothing had been done about the rumors. After the announcement of Pendrell's pending appointment it was quickly revealed that he was an avowed Marxist who had been a correspondent for the *The Daily Worker*. His nomination as Philadelphia's Federal Theatre publicity and promotion director initiated an internal struggle that ended only when Halloran refused to approve the appointment.<sup>40</sup> The rumors that Communists had infiltrated the Philadelphia FTP at the same time the Catholic Church opposed the opening of "Spirochete" was deadly for the play.

There were numerous failures in the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Project Promotions Department. To correct the problems Thomas Maulsby was sent to Philadelphia from the Federal Theatre Project National Information Service. Maulsby arrived on February 2, 1939, twelve days before the projected Valentine's Day opening for "Spirochete", only to find a non-functioning promotions department and a demoralized project in which communications had completely broken down. Tickets had not been ordered, notices of the opening had not been sent, and a sponsoring committee did not exist. Promotional arrangements for shows normally took six weeks because of theatre parties. Theatre parties were the sustenance of any play because their tickets were purchased far in advance of attendance, but nothing had been done to promote "Spirochete" because the FTP parties came from unions and one promotion director was anti-union. The opening was delayed until February 20 while Maulsby launched a quick promotion campaign

to give the production a chance of success. Despite Maulsby's efforts another promotion director, Jack Rose, probably supplied the Knights of Columbus—of which he was a member—with the information they used against the play. Not only did Rose try to sabotage the production through the Knights of Columbus but he also concealed the topic of syphilis in the publicity campaign. Newspaper advertisements mentioned no connection between the disease and the play for the first five days of the run. Even with this internal discord a special publicity letter resulted in Dr. John A. Kolmer, a professor at Temple University and world-renowned authority on syphilis, volunteering to coach the cast:

The Philadelphia Federal Theatre Project proudly announces that on Monday, February 20th, at 8:30 in the evening, at the Walnut Street Theatre, it will raise the curtain on its production of "Spirochete", Arnold Sundgaard's brilliant dramatization of man's conquest of syphilis—a play which will serve to illustrate again the tremendous power for good a theatre devoted to the real interests of the people can be.

"Spirochete", like "... one third of a Nation [*sic*] ..." is done in the Federal Theatre's masterful Living Newspaper technique. It traces the history of man's struggle against the scourge of syphilis since the sailors of Columbus introduced it into Europe in 1493 and holds a spotlight on the malevolent disease as it spreads to every corner of the earth. It vividly shows the tireless efforts of great men of science, working day and night, to discover the nature of the disease, to discover the illusive spirochete, to discover a cure, to discover means whereby the people of this country can be induced to accept the CURE [*sic*] these men of science struggled to perfect.

You may be assured "Spirochete" contains no trace of cheap or vulgar sensationalism. For writing it Arnold Sundgaard received a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship and it has the endorsement of the most eminent physicians, churchmen, labor and civic leaders. Dr. Walter Clarke, Executive Director of the American Social Hygiene Association wrote, "This organization commends "Spirochete" to the attention of all persons who are interested in stamping out syphilis, the disease which strikes one a minute, and which costs the nation almost \$500,000,000 annually."

We know you are aware of the importance of the drive to stamp out syphilis. It is the nation's number 1 health problem. If the fight is brought into the open, syphilis can be wiped out in one generation; it was in the Scandinavian countries. An absolute cure has been available to the people for nearly thirty years, but because of a false morality, a morality upon which the syphilis germ has fed as surely as it has fed upon the bodies of countless thousands of our people, the fight on a broad front has just begun.

It is of the utmost importance that you and your friends see this drama, with its message so vital to the welfare of every man, woman and child. To enable the largest possible audience to see "Spirochete", the price scale has been reduced to 25, 50 and 75 cents, with reductions from thirty to forty per cent for theatre parties of twenty-five or more.

Yours very truly,  
Herbert H. Humphreys  
State Director  
Federal Theatre Projects Of Pennsylvania <sup>41</sup>

The Knights of Columbus's complaint about blaming Columbus's crew for the introduction of syphilis to Europe was ignored by the letter, but not by the play.

FTP volunteers contacted local organizations to distribute promotional coupons that were made available for group sales. Price reductions were made so students could see the production. Volunteers from the cast traveled throughout Philadelphia on their own time to encourage people to see the Living Newspaper and to downplay the sensationalist rumors that the show encouraged prostitution and defamed Italians. <sup>42</sup>

Despite the controversy and internal problems, reviews for Philadelphia's "Spirochete" were unanimous in their praise and commended the organization for tackling a difficult subject:

The subject of "Spirochete" does not always lend itself to such effective drama, but the play packs plenty of punch in certain scenes and here it sometimes recalls such scientific films as "The Story of Louis Pasteur" and "Yellow Jack," when failure followed on failure as scientists sought cures for man's ills. <sup>43</sup> "Spirochete," Federal Theatre's dramatic and somewhat clinical plea for less prudery on the subject of social disease, opened last night at the Walnut, and the Government players are to be commended for bringing this much-shied-at problem into the open, and for their temerity, their forthrightness and the thoroughness with which they have gone into the matter. <sup>44</sup> "Spirochete" . . . sets out to tell a very definite story and plant the seed for a definite purpose. It never for a moment deviates from its course. It never falters when it comes to the dramatic incidents which might be diverted to high art rather than continue in the purpose of an ideal. And with it all "Spirochete" is a play that should be seen by every well-thinking, serious minded, foresighted man and woman. <sup>45</sup>

Additional compliments came from Judge Eugene C. Bonniwell, Chief Judge of the city's Family Court, who supported the production after attending the special

preview. He wrote that "Spirochete" "... brings home with startling effectiveness the deadly menace of this heretofore uncontrolled disease."<sup>46</sup>

"Spirochete" ran for 35 performances between February 20 and March 25, 1939, a total of five weeks. Only "One-Third of a Nation" had a longer run for FTP serious drama in Philadelphia and 10,039 people attended, an average of 287 for each show.<sup>47</sup> The decline in attendance from the earlier Living Newspaper production may be attributed to the nature of the subject, the negative publicity generated when the Knights of Columbus objections were picked up by local newspapers, and the inability of the promotions department to counter adverse news with a successful campaign of its own.

In "Spirochete" the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Project produced a critical success that was underappreciated by the general public, despite the problems of venereal disease during the Depression. There were several reasons for this lukewarm treatment including the FTP Publicity Department's rushed campaign to advertise the show. But the complaints of the Knights of Columbus and their affiliation with the city's powerful Catholic church was probably the most important. Those objections stirred very familiar memories of the earlier campaign to clean up motion pictures. That campaign resulted in the creation of the Catholic Legion of Decency and the enforcement of the Motion Picture Production Code of film conduct by 1935. One of the most stringent rules of that code was the avoidance of sexual impropriety, yet "Spirochete" was a live show in which sexual contact formed the unspoken core on which the drama unfolded. "Spirochete" never mentioned sexual contact and no scene in the drama comes close to suggesting lewdness, nudity, or improper moral behavior, but even the ardent support of health organizations, civic leaders, physicians, the city's official censor, and the Federal Government could not fly in the face of strong church opposition. Philadelphia's "Spirochete" addressed a social problem that the city's moral guardians preferred to ignore.

Living Newspaper productions favored reform and were sharply critical of big business. They demanded government attention for large social problems without going to the extreme alternative of advocating revolutionary action. Even when reforms were condemned by a drama's conservative characters others answered them by stating that reforms were always attacked on spurious grounds as either intrusions into private rights or as unconstitutional. The point of the Living Newspapers, however, was that change had to be given a chance to work. All too often it had

been condemned before it was even implemented. The call for change seemed to work with "One-Third of a Nation" but failed with "Spirochete." By 1940 the city had taken definite steps to improve housing conditions and to alleviate the shortages. Three major housing projects were privately funded and the Public Works Administration provided money to develop three more between 1939 and 1940: James Weldon Johnson Homes, Tasker Homes, and Richard Allen Homes.<sup>48</sup> "Spirochete" however, was the victim of censorship that condemned the play before anybody in the city had even seen it.

Philadelphia only had two Living Newspapers during the operations of the FTP, "One-Third of a Nation" and "Spirochete," because the small number of participants in the local unit made such productions enormously difficult. After "Spirochete" the Philadelphia FTP only presented one more show, a modern dance interpretation called "Prelude to Swing," before the Emergency Relief Act of 1939 permanently closed the Federal Theatre Project.

Each of Philadelphia's Living Newspapers showed how local interests affected plays with established national reputations. They differed in perceived success because "One-Third of a Nation" made a concerted effort to examine an existing problem in terms immediately acceptable and recognizable by the local population. Although the small Philadelphia FTP struggled throughout its three years of activity and presented several successful straight plays, "One-Third of a Nation" became one of its most critically, and publicly, acclaimed presentations because it directly addressed an acknowledged local problem, slum housing. "Spirochete", however, was censored because its subject, syphilis, was too sensitive for powerful religious organizations to accept in a dramatic presentation which called for the elimination of the social stigma to pursue a cure. Although rewriting helped "One-Third of a Nation" by making it locally relevant, similar rewriting damaged "Spirochete" because material was removed without sufficient replacement. "Spirochete" still drew an audience, but the presentation suffered because local censorship undermined the message of the drama and compromised its effectiveness.

The Philadelphia response to "One-Third of a Nation" and "Spirochete" mirrored national reaction to the Federal Theatre Program. When the problems dealt with issues of the economy and were topics of national concern such as those expressed in "One-Third of a Nation", support was widespread. But when topics touched upon sensitive areas, or showed public figures ignorant of facts or unwilling

to make difficult decisions, conservative opposition mounted as it did with the Knights of Columbus and "Spirochete" in Philadelphia. Living Newspaper experiments with contemporary topics were theatrical reflections of the New Deal's experiments with relief during the Depression. Just as some of the administration's programs worked while others did not, some of the public relief art programs were more successful than others. Unfortunately for the Federal Theatre Project it was one of the programs that made both headlines and enemies. The combined elements of suspected Communist participation in the project and conservative opposition in Congress doomed the project in 1939 when the Emergency Relief Act cut off all funding for Federal Theatre.

### Notes

The author gratefully acknowledges the advice of Dr. Nan Woodruff, Penn State University Department of History, and the staff of the Federal Theatre Project Collection at George Mason University.

1. *Manual for Federal Theatre Projects of the Works Progress Administration*, October, 1935, page 1, copy in Folder 1-1-3 of the Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress material on deposit at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia, hereafter referred to as FTP Collection.
2. Hallie Flanagan to Ellen Woodward, October 1, 1937, "Penn.-September 1937" folder, Box 2442, RG 69 Work Projects Administration, National Archives, Washington, D.C., hereafter referred to as N. A.
3. *Philadelphia Record*, March 10, 1938, Container #1068, FTP Collection.
4. Hallie Flanagan, *Arena, The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York: Benjamin Bloom, Inc., 1940), 20.
5. Gerald Rabkin, *Drama and Commitment; Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 114.
6. Arthur Arent, "The Technique of the Living Newspaper", *Theatre Arts Monthly* 22:11 (November 1938): 823-824. Most Living Newspapers were collaborative efforts by Federal Theatre staffs, including those written by Arent. Because of this they were in the public domain and any local acting company could recreate the drama. The exception to this rule was "Spirochete," created for the Chicago Federal Theatre unit by Arnold Sundgaard. See also Davis, *Arena*, "Appendix: Production Record and Financial Statement," 390.
7. Davis, *Arena*, 63-65.
8. *Ibid.*, 390.
9. *Federal Theatre Plays* (New York: Random House, Publishers, 1938), pages 3-7, 3-8, 5-10. Pagination in this collection reverts to page 1 at the start of each script, thus the apparent repetition of pages.
10. *Variety*, March 30, 1938, p. 57. The title for the play came from President Roosevelt's Second Inaugural Address on January 20, 1937: "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." Samuel I. Rosenman, comp., *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 1937 volume, *The Constitution Prevails* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), 5.
11. *Housing Code for Philadelphia*; Bernard J. Newman, *Housing in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Housing Association, 1935); and Bernard J. Newman, *Housing in Philadelphia* [1936]

- (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Housing Association, 1937), all material found in "One-Third of a Nation" folder, container #1052, 1934-1939, FTP Collection.
12. *Housing in Philadelphia* (1935), 2, 5, 8.
  13. *One-Third of a Nation*, Philadelphia Version, Act II, Scene 2, FTP Collection.
  14. *The Philadelphia Tribune*, August 1, 1935, p. 1 and September 29, 1938, p. 1. Additional information found in Newman, *Housing in Philadelphia*, (1937), [2]. The city is still plagued by unsafe homes. A row house collapsed on Tuesday, March 8, 1994, killing the owner. See *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 9, 1994.
  15. Edward Malle and Harold Burman, adapters, "One-Third of a Nation", a Living Newspaper about Housing, originally written by Arthur Arent, (Philadelphia research incorporated into the script prepared by the Writers' Project in Philadelphia under the direction of Aubrey H. Baldwin, completed July 29, 1938, opened October 17, 1938); Act 1, Scene 1, pages 3-4. Original Philadelphia production script given as gift by Harold Burman to Research Center for the FTP Collection.
  16. Russell F. Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia, a 300-Year History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1982), 317-318 and 496.
  17. "One-Third of a Nation," Philadelphia Script, Act 2, Scene 4, pages 2-4.
  18. *Ibid.*, Act 2 Scene 4, pages 5-6.
  19. James Light, "Director's Report on Production," from Production Bulletin in *One-Third of a Nation* (Philadelphia) folder, p. 1, Production Title File 1934-1939, container #1052, FTP Collection.
  20. Herbert H. Humphreys to Hallie Flanagan, October 20, 1938, "Penn.-August 1938" folder, Box 2445, RG 69, N. A.
  21. Irving R. Glazer, *Philadelphia Theatres A-Z: A Comprehensive, Descriptive Record of 813 Theatres Constructed Since 1724* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 235.
  22. "Houses Creak but Don't Fall; 'One-Third' Stage Too Weak," *Philadelphia Record*, October 18, 1938, from Production Bulletin, *ibid.*
  23. Production Bulletin for "One-Third of a Nation," p. 3, production title file, container #1052, FTP Collection.
  24. *Variety*, November 2, 1938.
  25. Henry T. Murdock, "The Mummers Parade," *Evening Public Ledger*, October 29, 1938, volume 14 of the stage and screen clippings collected by Murdock, Theatre Collections Department of the Free Library of Philadelphia.
  26. *Ibid.*
  27. "'Third of a Nation' Adapted to Phila.," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 18, 1938, p. 2.
  28. Edythe Roth to W. P. A. in New York, "Correspondence with Converse Tyler [Supervisor - Play Reading, National Service Bureau] folder 1-1-54, container #4, FTP Collection. A copy of the Philadelphia version was loaned to the teacher. The New York version was published in *Federal Theatre Plays* (New York: Random House Publishers, 1938), but the Philadelphia version is very hard to find. Only one copy exists at the FTP Collection.
  29. "One-Third a Nation" (Philadelphia) folder, Act II, Scene 5 from the script, container #1052, FTP Collection.
  30. *Variety*, December 21, 1938, p. 45. It needs to be pointed out that Federal Theatre plays in Philadelphia rarely made money. The object of the program was temporary work relief, not financial gain. Furthermore, the national Federal Theatre Project was embarrassed several times when agent-cashiers in New York City were caught stealing funds. At first local units controlled their own income with successful productions covering the failures, but when the agent problems were uncovered all income was turned directly over to the Theatre Project to defray operating expenses. Despite this adjustment sale of tickets was a problem the Federal Theatre Project never adequately resolved. See William F. McDonald, *Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works*

*Progress Administration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969), 515 and 530-532. See also Herbert Humphreys to Hallie Flanagan, Jan. 26, 1939, "Penn. Jan.-Feb. 1939" folder, Box #2445, RG 69 Works Projects Administration, N. A.

31. "Prologue to Glory" opened at Maxine Elliot's Theatre in New York City on March 15, 1938 while "Abe Lincoln in Illinois" opened in Washington at the National Theatre on October 3, 1938, with the New York opening on October 15, 1938.

32. Cornelius C. O'Brien to Herbert Humphreys, February 10, 1939, "Penn. Jan.-Feb. 1939" folder, Box #2445, RG 69 Works Projects Administration Central Files by state, N. A.

33. Meeting notes composed for Blandings Sloan, Regional Director, February 10, 1939, "Penn. Jan.-Feb. 1939" folder, Box #2445, RG 69 Works Projects Administration Central Files by state, 1935-1944, N. A. It should be noted that Columbus never set foot in North America, a point that O'Brien either conveniently ignored or simply did not know.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Telegram, J. Howard Millar to Blandings Sloan, February 10, 1939, *ibid.*

36. Arnold Sundgaard, "Spirochete, a History," *Federal Theatre Plays* (New York: Random House Publishers, 1938), 16-19 and 20-26.

37. Memorandum from M. Manisoff to Blandings Sloan, March 9, 1939, "Penn. March-April 1939" folder, page 5, Box #2445, RG 69 Work Projects Administration, N. A. References do not indicate Manisoff's first name. Very few documents exist with his name because he led the project only temporarily.

38. Thomas E. Maulsby, Report on the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Promotion Department, undated, (Penn. March-April 1939) folder, Box 2445, RG 69 Work Projects Administration, N. A., 14. "Hash-

house" was slang for a poor restaurant. The name was usually assigned to restaurants near factories and referred to a quick, inexpensive meal consumed by laborers during a break.

39. *Ibid.*, 15.

40. *Variety*, March 22, 1939, p. 57. See also Kenneth C. Martis, *The Historical Atlas of United States Congressional Districts, 1789-1983* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 190. Letters found in folder "Penn.-Aug. 1938," Box 2445, RG 69, Works Projects Administration, N. A.

41. "Spirochete" file, Theatre Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

42. Maulsby, "Report on the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Promotion Department and the promotional activities for "Spirochete," "Spirochete" publicity - Living Newspaper Report Philadelphia, Pa. folder 4-10, container #1052, Production Title File, 1934-1939, FTP Collection.

43. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 21, 1939. This review and the following two were newspaper clippings without pages in "Spirochete" Production Bulletin folder for Philadelphia, Production Title File 1934-1939, container #1074, FTP Collection.

44. *The Evening Public Ledger*, February 21, 1939, *ibid.*

45. *The Philadelphia Daily News*, no date indicated, *ibid.*

46. Eugene C. Bonniwell to an unnamed recipient, undated, microfilm roll #6 of Hallie Flanagan Davis Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY. Original papers held by the New York Public Library Theatre Collection, Lincoln Center Branch.

47. Card for "Spirochete" in Federal Theatre Productions by Title, a collection of 3200 5" X 8" cards alphabetized A-Z in three metal card files, containers 72 to 75. FTP Collection.

48. Weigley, *Philadelphia*, 616.