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Lee Grant and John Randolph in "Free, Adult, Uncensored" at LATC.

Sentimental Trip Back to Federal Theater Years

By SYLVIE DRAKE, *Times Theater Writer*

By far the most conspicuous aspect of "Free, Adult and Uncensored" Monday at the Los Angeles Theatre Center was how little things have changed.

This 50th anniversary celebration of the stormy Federal Theatre Project was staged as a well-intentioned evening of supportive reminiscence sprinkled with irony, stars and loving sentiments.

On hand were many celebrated and uncelebrated old-timers who personally had participated in the vulnerable experiment (1935-39) which, despite its fiscal soundness and phenomenal rate of success at employing the unemployed (nearly 10,000 people performed for 30 million other people), became the stepchild of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA). It ultimately was felled by partisan politics.

Monday's program, presented in association with LATC,

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was aptly brought to us by the TheatreWorker's Project, a company of "working people and the unemployed," according to its director, Susan Franklin Tanner.

The \$50-\$100 cost of the tickets was designed to raise money for a West Coast Federal Theatre archive. The program began with an amusing appearance by the impish Burgess Meredith, who regaled the audience with bracing tales of his misadventures as president of Actors' Equity during the infamous four years of the Federal Theatre Project.

Then on to the main event: the reading of Martha and Hubert Morehead's "A Cast of Thousands!," a didactic and unwieldy

Living Newspaper-ish docudrama that exemplified the best and worst of what was the Federal Theatre.

Having the fervent Lee Grant play Hallie Flanagan, director of the Federal Theatre Project, was a definite plus. "Cast of Thousands!" chronicles and excerpts some of the plays spawned by the project, interspersing those sequences with ironic snippets of Flanagan's 1938 appearances before the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities chaired by Rep. Martin Dies Jr.

We were treated to snatches of plays we're not likely to see again: "Triple-A Plowed Under," "Power," "Sing for Your Supper" and the controversial children's play "The Revolt of the Beavers." (The latter prompted Brooks Atkinson to suggest that now children had been instructed in how to make a revo-

lution—and Flanagan to respond that she didn't do plays for drama critics, but for children.)

But except for these touches of humor, the Morehead piece is dramaturgically naive and clumsy—too preachy for its own good.

One of the evening's choice ironies was the casting of those passionate endorsers of liberal causes—Ed Asner, Jeff Corey and John Randolph—as the committee villains: Reps. Dies, J. Parnell Thomas and Joseph Starnes, respectively.

And so it went. Not quite as lively an event as one might have hoped for (some people left at the intermission), but utterly enthralling for that substantial portion of the audience that had lived the reality 50 years before and was there to rejoice in its memory. Roscoe Lee Browne served as a

narrator. Ron Culver and Peter Milio provided percussive support.

At the evening's heart, however, throbbed a question that was central to artists' concerns then and that hasn't gone away: "Can a theater subsidized by the federal government be kept free?" The naively optimistic answer in the '30s provided Monday's program with its title: "Yes—free, adult and uncensored." But that was *before* the project was killed by an act of Congress on June 30, 1939.

In the late '80s that question is more ubiquitous than ever. In these days when certain Congressmen show dismay with the National Endowment for the Arts' participation in exhibits they find questionable (the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano), the threat of censorship may be rearing its head again.