

## Play celebrates Federal Theater Project

By Sandra Kreiswirth  
THEATER CRITIC

"Although 'Free, Adult, Uncensored!' is a celebration of a glorious era of American theater, our intention tonight is not merely to engage in an exercise in nostalgia but to hold a mirror up to the state of government funding for the arts today."

Those are the words of Susan Franklin Tanner, director of TheatreWorker's Project and producer of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theater Project held Monday at the Los Angeles Theater Center.

The event brought together, both on stage and in the audience, not only people who remembered the four-year (1935-39) government-funded theatrical experiment that put unemployed actors back to work but some who were actually members of the FTP.

Presented as a "Living Newspaper," the evening featured a dramatic reading of "A Cast of Thousands," a cumbersome but telling piece written by Martha and Hubert Morehead that documents the House Un-American Activities Committee's (Jeff Corey, Ed Asner and John Randolph) investigation of the FPA, specifically its national director, Hallie Flanagan (Lee Grant).

Before the reading, which included excerpts from several of the plays investigated, Randolph, a member of the FTP who was "a cheerful witness against the HUAC," led off the proceedings by

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saying that only in Los Angeles could this evening happen, gathering together a cast, crew, writers and theater. He also expressed Burt Lancaster's gratitude to the project where, as a young, unemployed acrobat on home relief, he got his professional start.

E.G. Marshall, in a recorded message, remembered his participation in the FTP 50 years ago as he toured the country playing Shakespeare. "Even during the gloom of the Depression," he said, "it brought a little cheer and brightened the evening."

Burgess Meredith recalled his days as a young actor who, at age 25, served as president of Actors Equity in 1938. Winning by a margin of one vote, he likened himself to Warren G. Harding. "I wasn't bad for a while," he said, laughing, describing the internecine warfare within a union that embraced all the isms: fascism, communism, Catholicism and liberalism.

He called the FTP "a magnificent natural phenomenon. You could soon see how nobody was going to let it go further. It will never be forgotten by any of us who had anything to do with it."

The facts are these: The Federal Theater Project came into being when in the summer of 1935 the relief rolls in American cities showed thousands of unemployed theater professionals were destitute. The FPA was born thanks to

Harry Hopkins, head of the Works Progress Administration under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration, who believed theater people's skills were worthy of conservation.

Under Flanagan's directorship, the project presented the classics, imports, cycles of Shaw and O'Neill, Gilbert and Sullivan, children's plays, dance and, most important and ultimately most controversial, new American plays, including "Living Newspapers." There were also Yiddish and black wings.

At a time when most theaters across America were dark, plays sprung up not only in the playhouses but in hospitals, parks, schools, circus tents, prisons, churches and CCC camps across the United States.

During its four years, the project produced 2,200 plays, gave 60,000 performances, employed 12,000 artists and played to an audience of 30 million.

But in spite of Hopkins' early promise of a free, adult, uncensored theater project, censorship did, in fact, occur because of some of the plays' subject matter, which addressed the problems of everyman, the problems of the masses, the problems of war.

When called before the HUAC in 1938, Flanagan told the panel that she was "concerned with combating un-American inactivity." The committee focused on specific plays as examples of a theater, funded by a government, producing works that they felt caused class hatred. They cited Elmer Rice's anti-Mussolini play, "Ethiopia"; "Triple-A

Plowed Under," which pitted bankers against farmers who were going broke (a familiar ring); and Sinclair Lewis' anti-fascist play, "It Can't Happen Here," which opened simultaneously in 21 cities on Oct. 27, 1936.

The HUAC saw "Injunction Granted" as an attack on the judiciary. Flanagan said it dealt with fair labor relations. "Power" promoted public ownership of utilities, and the committee saw "The Revolt of the Beavers," ostensibly a children's show, as workers revolting against capitalism.

When the new WPA budget was sent to the House in the spring of 1939, Congress was no longer in the mood to subsidize the FTP. It was given a month to close the shows and pack up.

Ironically, when the FTP was shut down, the Library of Congress had no room for the boxes and crates that carried the project's four-year history; so they were stored in warehouses. They were rediscovered in 1974, and the move is on now to raise funds to establish its West Coast archive at UCLA.

As narrator Roscoe Lee Browne says late in the play, "If less alive, FTP might have lived longer."

The evening was directed by Scott Reiniger. A partial list of performers also includes Dave Clennon, Ellen Geer, Peter Kwong, Janet MacLachlan, Tuck Milligan, Michael Ontkean and Ron Taylor, with vocals by James Doucette and percussion by Ron Culver and Peter Milio.