

Theatre as Social Action

"Our Federal Theatre, born of an economic need, built by and for people who have faced terrific privation, cannot content itself with easy, pretty or insignificant plays. We are not being given millions of dollars to repeat, however expertly, the type of plays which landed 10,000 theatre people on relief rolls. By a stroke of fortune unprecedented in dramatic history, we have been given a chance to help change America at a time when twenty million unemployed Americans proved it needed changing. And the theatre, when it is any good, can change things.

"The theatre can quicken, start things, make things happen. Don't be afraid when people tell you this is a play of protest. Of course it's protest, protest against dirt, disease, human misery. If, in giving great plays of the past as greatly as we can give them, and if, in making people laugh, which we certainly want to do, we can't also protest—as Harry Hopkins is protesting and as President Roosevelt is protesting—against some of the evils of this country of ours, then we do not deserve the chance put into our hands. . . .

"Here is one necessity for our theatre—that it help reshape our American life.

"Nor do we work, hereafter, alone. We work not in isolated centers, but in a nationwide Federal Theatre. From that union we should gain tremendous strength. The greatest thing that this conference has given to me, personally, is the sense that in its endeavor we do not work alone in isolated units.

"We should, as we go out from here, forget all personal differences, all inevitable clashes or personality. We should remember the strong, the clear, the positive line, the line which expresses pride in having a part in Federal Theatre, the line which expresses our determination to make the best possible use of the talents of our workers, of the federal funds at our disposal, and of the theatre medium in which we work.

"There will be other such meetings, other such summer theatres, but to you, the pioneers, will always go the credit of having been the first to take the risks, first to encounter the difficulties in this new reaching out toward a stronger theatre.

"From it we shall all learn. Through it we shall mutually create a theatre which need not be just the frosting on the cake. It may be the yeast which makes the bread rise."

Hallie Flanagan, "Theater as Social Action," in Piere de Roban, ed., "First Federal Summer Theater: A Report," *Federal Theatre*, June-July 1937: 36 (A project newsletter available in Federal Theatre Project collection, Library of Congress).