

Milton Meltzer Interview

Milton Meltzer: We thought it was a very exciting thing to be part of and that we were lucky to be in on it, not only because economically that we were getting bread and butter, but by the way, our pay was \$23.86 a week, and everybody, the vast majority of us, got exactly the same money; the only people who got more were those in supervisory positions and of course the top officials who were not in relief category. They could come in without going through the relief strainer, and they got more. But I remember I think the head of the whole project—Hallie Flanagan, who ran the whole Federal Theater, got as little as perhaps \$4- or \$5000 a year. In those, that was about \$100 a week, four or five times what we got. But in those years that was a decent living. And we survived on the \$23.86 a week. We got along decently on it.

So we were glad to be part of this thing for cultural and economic reasons. The project was always in danger. Washington, the Congress, was always threatening to cut relief funds and many times succeeding in putting through Congress appropriations bills which cut us savagely. So we were very often on the picket line in front of Project headquarters in New York and sometimes we took the train down to Washington for that purpose, lobbying to protect our jobs. And some of us were fired several times and then rehired. Congress would cut the budget and then more funds would be found some how by some miracle or they would reappropriate funds and we would be rehired. Some people in the Project, some now great names such as Jackson Pollock, the painter he was fired at least six times in the three or four years he spent on the Project and got back on, again and again. I don't remember that I was ever fired but I knew of others, you know, who were, sometimes just ruthless cuts by seniority. They said, "Everybody who was hired in the last six months say, must be fired." They did it that way. We had our own union, too, which had recognition—the Workers Alliance it was called. It was a union of the unemployed and those on relief projects, and it was national in scope, and it had local, city-wide chapters, and all of us were very busy in that union because it was the one means to protect our jobs. And every time there were cuts threatened, the union, came forth to try to protect our jobs, to give us leadership and organization.

Elizabeth C. Stevens: And there wasn't any feeling that you were spending too much time protecting your job and not enough time on...

Meltzer: Oh, yes, there was that feeling. Many of us regretted it, especially the more creative people were, the more bitterly they resented the fact that they were giving up time—say a painter who for the first time in his life—or in American history,—was being paid to paint and to paint what he liked. The painting was never dictated to by the government. You did what you liked, or to sculpt or to compose—you know a symphony or a song or an opera, or what have you—or to write a play. They resented the government and the people, culture lost every time they were spending hours, giving hours, taking hours away from their creative work to picket for their jobs. But there was no choice. That was the way to get back on, and you didn't always succeed.

Stevens: In your book you talked about *The Cradle Will Rock*.

Meltzer: Oh, yes, the Marc Blitzstein-Orson Welles production.

Stevens: Right. Could you elaborate on your experience with that? You were there the night it was supposed to be premiered, and...

Meltzer: Yes, it was supposed to open after a long period of rehearsals, and while it was in rehearsal there was considerable tumult in Washington over it because Blitzstein, the composer — who wrote the lyrics, too—was known as a radical in his point of view. And the theme of the play, the play's setting, was a steel strike which was going on right then—a major steel strike in our country. And Blitzstein took the side in his musical play of the strikers, not of the steel industry. And Washington was having troubles trying, I guess, to mediate a settlement between the steel mill owners and the steel workers, and here was a play financed by government money, the taxpayers' money, coming out and very obviously taking one side as against the other. So considerable pressure was put on Washington to stop what they called radical propaganda, and they succeeded at the last moment in getting an order from the Washington headquarters of the Federal Theater to halt the production—I don't remember whether it was to kill it completely or to postpone it, but we all took it as, you know, the knell of doom. And the very night it was supposed to open, word came through the last minute. And the theater was full and the actors were all set in their costumes and so on.

Stevens: And you were there in your seat?

Meltzer: Yes. And so when word came that this was not to open. And police were sent and project guards to prevent it being opened. I think a speech was made from the stage that these were the circumstances and that the producers—Orson Welles and John Houseman were producing it; it was part of their unit on the project—that they had obtained at the last minute a theater in the Columbus Circle area, which is no longer there (I think it was on the site of the present Coliseum, as I remember it) and they said, “The audience is welcome to join the actors and march all the way up Broadway (from wherever the other theater was—I don't remember now) to Columbus Circle” and then the cast would put on the production (because they couldn't use government costumes; they were forbidden to do that or the government orchestra)... they would just do it with the composer, Marc Blitzstein, sitting in the pit and playing the piano, playing his score only on the piano, though it was fully scored for a complete orchestra, and the actors would in their street costumes, their own clothing, you know, go through the play, the musical. And that's what happened. It was one of the most thrilling nights of theater probably in American theater history.

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