

HALLIE FLANAGAN

Hallie Flanagan (née Ferguson, 1889–1969) began to teach at Vassar College in 1925 and infused the Experimental Theatre she founded with ideas imbibed in Professor Baker’s 47 Workshop at Harvard and from a Guggenheim-subsidized trip to Europe. German expressionism, Russian constructivism, the movement theories of Dalcroze and Duncan, the doctrines of Stanislavsky and Gordon Craig were fearlessly tried out on Flanagan’s students. When, at the height of the Depression, President Roosevelt’s Works Progress Administration appropriated six million dollars for a Federal Theatre Project, Flanagan was appointed to head it. Besides providing relief for unemployed theatre workers, Flanagan proclaimed that the Theatre’s one necessity would be “that it help reshape American life.” She hoped to offer plays that would “depict the struggle of many different kinds of people to understand the natural, social and economic forces around them and to achieve through these forces a better life for the people.” From the start she and the Theatre were attacked as communist, but their artistic success was uncontested. No touring was allowed so theatre could be cultivated within local communities; living newspaper techniques, children’s theatre, puppetry, plays in the languages of immigrants aided in bringing a high level of professionalism to segments of the American public for whom theatre had been a dead letter. These successes increased the virulence of the political attacks, leading to Flanagan’s summons before the House Un-American Activities Committee (described in the following excerpt from her autobiography *Arena*) and the eventual liquidation of the Federal Theatre Project by Congress in June 1939. Flanagan spent the rest of her career as chair of the theatre department of Smith College.

FROM
Arena

BEFORE me stretched two long tables in the form of a huge T. At the foot was the witness chair, at the head the members of the Committee. At long tables on either side of the T were reporters, stenographers, cameramen. The room itself, a high-walled chamber with great chandeliers, was lined with exhibits

of material from the Federal Theatre and the Writers' Project; but all I could see for a moment were the faces of thousands of Federal Theatre people; clowns in the circus . . . telephone girls at the switchboards . . . actors in grubby rehearsal rooms . . . acrobats limbering up their routines . . . costume women busy making cheap stuff look expensive . . . musicians composing scores to bring out the best in our often oddly assembled orchestras . . . playwrights working on scripts with the skills of our actors in mind . . . carpenters, prop men, ushers. These were the people on trial that morning.

I was sworn in as a witness by Chairman Dies, a rangy Texan with a cowboy drawl and a big black cigar. I wanted to talk about Federal Theatre, but the Committee apparently did not. Who had appointed me? Harry Hopkins. Was that his own idea or did somebody put him up to it? I said I had no knowledge of any recommendations made in my behalf; I said that while the Committee had recently been investigating un-American activity, I had been engaged for four years in combating un-American inactivity. The distinction was lost on the Committee. I sketched the project's concern for the human values, the return of over 2,000* of our people to jobs in private industry, but the Committee was not interested in any discussion of the project. Wasn't it true I taught at Vassar? Yes. Went to Russia? Yes. Wrote a book about it? Yes. Praised the Russian theatre? In 1926 I had been appointed as a fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation to study the theatre in twelve European countries over a period of fourteen months; Russia was one of the countries in which I carried on such observations. What was it I found so exciting in the Russian theatre? It was at that time an interesting theatre about which little was known. It was my job at that time to study it. That, I pointed out, was twelve years ago. It was part of the background of my profession—the American theatre. The Committee was giving more time to the discussion of the Russian theatre than Federal Theatre had in the four years of its existence.

Mr. Starnes was curious about my visits to Russia. Had I

*When I spoke before the Sirovich Committee the number returned to private industry totaled 1,500. At the time the project ended the figure was 2,660.

gone there in 1931 as well as in 1926? Yes, for three weeks. Was I a delegate to anything? No, I had gone, as had many American theatre producers, to see the Russian theatre festival. Did I meet at the festival there any of the people later employed in the Federal Theatre? Certainly not.

Hadn't I written plays in Russian and produced them in Russia? I had not (I remembered my struggles to learn to order a meal or buy galoshes in Russian).

Then back to the project. Had communistic propaganda been circulated on the project? Not to my knowledge. Were there orders on my part against such activity? Yes, stringent orders which appear in the brief. Mr. Starnes took a different tack: Did I consider the theatre a weapon? I said the theatre could be all things to all men. "Do you see this?" Congressman Starnes suddenly shouted, waving a yellow magazine aloft. "Ever see it before?" I said it seemed to be an old *Theatre Arts Monthly*. This described a meeting of workers' theatres in New York in 1931. Hadn't I been active in setting them up? No. I had never been connected in any way with workers' theatres. I wrote a report on such theatres for *Theatre Arts Monthly* under the title "A Theatre Is Born." This theatre, however, was not born through me; I was simply a reporter.

How about these plays that had been criticized by witnesses before the Committee? Were they propaganda? For communism? "To the best of my knowledge," I told the Committee, "we have never done a play which was propaganda for communism; but we have done plays which were propaganda for democracy, for better housing. . . ."

How many people had we played to so far? Twenty-five million people, a fifth of the population. Where did our audience come from? Was it true that we "couldn't get any audiences for anything except communist plays"? No. The list submitted would show our wide audience support. Back to the article, "A Theatre Is Born," and the phrase where I had described the enthusiasm of these theatres as having "a certain Marlowesque madness."

"You are quoting from this Marlowe," observed Mr. Starnes. "Is he a Communist?"

The room rocked with laughter, but I did not laugh. Eight thousand people might lose their jobs because a Congressional

Committee had so pre-judged us that even the classics were "communistic." I said, "I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe."

"Tell us who Marlowe is, so we can get the proper references, because that is all we want to do."

"Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare."

Mr. Starnes subsided; Mr. Thomas of New Jersey took over. How about this play, *The Revolt of the Beavers*? Didn't Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* disapprove of the play? Yes, he did. But Mr. Hearst's *New York American* thought it a "pleasing fantasy for children," and an audience survey by trained psychologists brought only favorable reactions from children such as "teaches us never to be selfish"—"it is better to be good than bad"—"how the children would want the whole world to be nine years old and happy."

Was it true that we had been rehearsing *Sing for Your Supper*, the musical in New York, for thirteen months? It was true and the delays were not of our choosing. We kept losing our best skits and our best actors to private industry. Was that, I asked, un-American? Mr. Mosier brought us back to the question of propaganda. Had we ever produced any anti-fascist plays? Some people claimed that Shaw's *On the Rocks* was anti-fascist and others thought it was anti-communist; Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* caused the same discussion.

"We never do a play because it holds any political bias," I declared. "We do a play because we believe it is a good play, a strong play, properly handled, with native material."

Was it true that Earl Browder appeared as a character in *Triple-A Plowed Under*? Yes. Did he expound his theory of communism? He did not; he appeared as a shadow on a screen along with Al Smith, Senator Hastings, and Thomas Jefferson. Had we ever produced plays that were anti-religious? On the contrary, we had produced more religious plays than any other theatre organization in the history of the country. Was I in sympathy with communistic doctrines? I said:

"I am an American and I believe in American democracy. I believe the Works Progress Administration is one great bulwark of that democracy. I believe the Federal Theatre, which is one small part of that large pattern, is honestly trying in every

possible way to interpret the best interests of the people of this democracy. I am not in sympathy with any other form of government.”

What percentage of the 4,000 employees on the New York project were members of the Workers' Alliance, Mr. Thomas wanted to know. We had no way of knowing. Was it a very large percentage? No, we knew it could not be large because the vast majority belonged to the standard theatrical organizations like Actors' Equity and the various stage unions, and these unions did not permit their members to join the Workers' Alliance.

Chairman Dies asked if we were out to entertain our audiences or to instruct them. I said that the primary purpose of a play is to entertain but that it can also teach.

“Do you think the theatre should be used for the purpose of conveying ideas along social and economic lines?”

“I think that is one justifiable reason for the existence of a theatre.”

“Do you think that the Federal Theatre should be used for the purpose of conveying ideas along social, economic, or political lines?”

“I would hesitate on the political.”

“Eliminate political, upon social and economic lines?”

“I think it is one logical, reasonable, and I might say imperative thing for our theatre to do.”

Could I give the Committee one play, dealing with social questions, where “organized labor does not have the best of the other fellows”? Certainly. I mentioned *Spirochete*, the living newspaper on the history of syphilis, endorsed by the Surgeon General of the United States Public Health Service. I mentioned the living newspapers being prepared on flood control (*Bonneville Dam*); the history of vaudeville (*Clown's Progress*); the history of California real estate (*Spanish Grant*). The Chairman waved these examples aside. Didn't *Power* imply that public ownership of utilities is a good thing? Is it proper for a government theatre to champion one side of a controversy? We do not choose plays by picking sides in a controversy.

On this matter of the writing of plays it was apparent that the Committee confused the Theatre and the Federal Writers' Project. Chairman Dies insisted that he had received

admissions from Federal Theatre workers who were Communists, Communists who had placed their signatures openly in a book. I said this had not happened on our project.

“Well,” declared the Chairman triumphantly, “Mr. De Solo said he was a Communist.”

“But he is not on the Federal Theatre Project.”

“He is on the Writers’ Project.”

“Yes, but not our project.”

Suddenly Mr. Starnes remarked that it was a quarter past one, the Chairman announced an adjournment for an hour and said that Mr. Alsberg would be heard when they resumed.

“Just a minute, gentlemen,” I interrupted. “Do I understand that this concludes my testimony?”

“We will see about it after lunch,” the Chairman promised.

“I would like to make a final statement, if I may.”

“We will see about it after lunch,” the Chairman repeated and the gavel fell. We never saw about it after lunch.

As the hearing broke up I thought suddenly of how much it all looked like a badly staged courtroom scene; it wasn’t imposing enough for a congressional hearing on which the future of several thousand human beings depended. For any case on which the life and reputation of a single human being depended, even that of an accused murderer, we had an American system which demanded a judge trained in law, a defense lawyer, a carefully chosen jury, and above all the necessity of hearing all the evidence on both sides of the case.

Yet here was a Committee which for months had been actually trying a case against Federal Theatre, trying it behind closed doors, and giving one side only to the press. Out of a project employing thousands of people from coast to coast, the Committee had chosen arbitrarily to hear ten witnesses, all from New York City, and had refused arbitrarily to hear literally hundreds of others, on and off the project, who had asked to testify.

Representative Dempsey, who throughout the hearing had been just and courteous, came up and told me that he felt my testimony had been “completely satisfactory.” Congressman Thomas was jovial.

“You don’t look like a Communist,” he declared. “You look like a Republican!”

“If your Committee isn’t convinced that neither I nor the Federal Theatre Project is communistic I want to come back this afternoon,” I told him.

“We don’t want you back,” he laughed. “You’re a tough witness and we’re all worn out.”

Mrs. Woodward and I weren’t satisfied. We told the secretary of the Committee that I had not finished my testimony. He said, “In any case your brief will be printed.” He accepted the brief for inclusion in the transcript. It was not included.

1940