

WHISPER OUT LOUD!  
*SPIROCHETE*, A LIVING NEWSPAPER  
1937-1939

PRODUCED BY THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT  
AN INSTRUMENT FOR PUBLIC HEALTH EDUCATION IN THE WAR ON  
SYPHILIS

by

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(ABSTRACT)

This historical case study examined the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper *Spirochete*, a dramatized history of syphilis, and its relationship to public health education during the late 1930s. The materials for this historical case study were found in the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Special Collection, Fenwick Library, George Mason University, and in materials from the Records of the Works Projects Administration located in the National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D. C.

The study sought to examine and establish *Spirochete* as an example of a special relationship among government, health, education and the arts. An investigation of *Spirochete's* relationship to public health education and an inquiry into *Spirochete* as a dramatic form provided the basis for the study.

The study found that *Spirochete's* origins lay in the unique socio-economic and political environment of Chicago, and of the nation, during the mid to late 1930s. *Spirochete* was similar to other

Living Newspapers in its goal to inform audiences about a pressing social problem, to present facts and information, and then to motivate action resulting in social change. *Spirochete's* form and techniques incorporated many of those found in other Federal Theatre Living Newspapers including many short scenes separated by Black Outs, experimental staging, and the innovative use of light, sound and spectacle to underscore and forward the dramatic action. *Spirochete*, however, was unique in its subject, syphilis, in its historical perspective, and its use of dramatized case histories juxtaposed with on-stage demonstrations of medical and scientific progress.

The study determined that the more than 100 performances of *Spirochete* in five cities made significant contributions to health issues and attitudes in the War on Syphilis. *Spirochete* helped break the silence that surrounded the nation's number one preventable killer andcrippler. *Spirochete* imparted facts about syphilis in dramatic vignettes and with creative, innovative stagecraft. Although *Spirochete* cannot be considered great theatre, according to the criteria of most theatre authorities, *Spirochete* was a vibrant, viable form of education. *Spirochete* was propaganda, presenting a definite idea for a definite purpose. Conclusions drawn from the study indicate that *Spirochete* was an intentional, unique, and vital weapon in the War on Syphilis.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	Page
1. INTRODUCTION: PROLOGUE AND STAGECRAFT.....	1
Background of the Problem.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Need for the Study.....	7
Method.....	11
Research Design.....	11
Sources and Materials.....	11
Data Collection.....	13
Analysis.....	14
Organization.....	15
2. DRAMATIC THEME AND VARIATIONS.....	19
Scene One: Philosophical and Theatrical Foundations and Precedents for Theatre as Education.....	20
Rationale for Theatre as Education.....	23
Precedents for Theatre as Education.....	25
Aspects of Education in Modern Drama.....	29
Aspects of Modern Theatre as Propaganda.....	36
Aspects of the Anti-thesis.....	43
Scene Two: Historiography and Literature Review of The Federal Theatre Project.....	48
Hallie Flanagan, Director of The Federal Theatre Project.....	53
The Federal Theatre Project Literature.....	56
Assessments of the Federal Theatre Project.....	72
Contributions of the Federal Theatre Project.....	79
Scene Three: The Living Newspaper as a Genre.....	88
Summary.....	102

CHAPTER	Page
3. <b>SPIROCHETE , ACT ONE: THE CURTAIN RISES</b> <b>ORIGINS AND FOUNDATIONS</b> .....	104
Scene One: Chicago: Social, Economic, and Political Origins.....	104
The Chicago Unit.....	107
Players and Politics.....	110
George Kondolf.....	111
Scene Two: Guiding Lights: Susan Glaspell.....	120
Arnold Sundgaard, Playwright.....	123
Scene Three: The Syphilis Scene and Public Health Education, 1936-38.....	130
Summary.....	137
4. <b>SPIROCHETE , ACT ONE, PART TWO: CHICAGO ACTION</b> .....	139
Scene One: Chicago Makes the War its Own.....	139
Scene Two: The Seeds of <i>Dark Harvest</i> .....	146
Scene Three: Threshing Floor: Themes and Action.....	168
Summary.....	181
5. <b>SPIROCHETE , ACT TWO, THE DRAMA UNFOLDS</b> .....	183
Prologue.....	183
Theme.....	183
And Variations.....	185
Scene One: Form.....	187
Scene Two: Format.....	195
Scene Three: <i>Dark Harvest</i> to <i>Spirochete</i> scripts.....	203
Summary.....	219

CHAPTER	Page
6. <i>SPIROCHETE</i> , ACT TWO, PART TWO	
DRAMATIC ACTION ON STAGE AND OFF.....	221
Scene One: Production Techniques.....	221
Sources.....	222
Stage and Set.....	225
Lighting.....	228
Special Effects and Spectacle.....	229
Sound and Sound Effects.....	233
Costumes.....	240
Clinical Sequences.....	242
Recapitulation.....	244
Scene Two: Promotion Techniques.....	246
Scene Three: Audience, Admissions, and Expenses.....	253
Scene Four: Reviews.....	259
Summary.....	267
7. <i>SPIROCHETE</i> , ACT TWO, PART THREE	
THE OTHER <i>SPIROCHETES</i> .....	268
Scene One: Seattle, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and	
Portland.....	269
Directors' Notes.....	272
Medical Support.....	275
Censorship: The Columbus Problem.....	276
Scene Two: On and Off-Stage Action, Other	
Actors.....	283
Budgets.....	285
Costumes.....	286
Scene Three: Promotion Strategies.....	294
Scene Four: Audiences and Reviews.....	300
Summary.....	304

CHAPTER	Page
8. <b>SPIROCHETE , ACT THREE, THE CURTAIN FALLS           ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF <i>SPIROCHETE'S</i>           CONTRIBUTION TO PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES AND           ATTITUDES.....</b>	306
Scene One: The War on Syphilis.....	307
Scene Two: Education, Issues, and Attitudes.....	310
Scene Three: Present-Day Assessments.....	317
Summary.....	320
9. <b>GREENROOM: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS.....</b>	321
Summary.....	321
Findings.....	326
Origins.....	327
Production Techniques.....	333
Other Productions.....	334
Contributions.....	335
Conclusions.....	336
Beyond <i>Spirochete</i> : Agenda for Research.....	344
REFERENCES.....	347
APPENDIX.....	361

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: PROLOGUE AND STAGECRAFT

*Whisper Out Loud!* explores the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper, *Spirochete*, and its relationship to public health education during the late 1930s. The title of this study was taken from dramatic promotional materials for *Spirochete* that depict a primly puritanical figure with a forefinger placed over her mouth in a silencing gesture, merged with a shrouded, grinning death's head, its skeletal claw grasping a globe of the world.

#### Background of the Problem

*Spirochete*, written by Arnold Sundgaard in 1937 and first produced in 1938; is an example of the Federal Theatre's topical Living Newspapers, a product and reflection of its time. *Spirochete* was a direct challenge to America in the 1930s. The American public was ignorant about many important health issues. Social conventions discouraged their discussion, echoing and enhanced by grim and desperate economic conditions. In 1935, the year that saw the creation of the Works Projects Administration, Harry Hopkins commented on the ill state of the health of the relief population in the *New York Times*. Tuberculosis (T.B.), typhoid, diphtheria, infantile paralysis and syphilis were killers. Syphilis regularly killed one and a half times more Americans annually than T. B.; 13 times more than diphtheria, 28 times more than typhoid and 50 times more than polio. Sixty thousand American babies were born

dead each year because of it; 25,000 were born deaf. Syphilis afflicted 75 percent of the nation's young men between the ages of 16 and 30. A hundred-thousand men and women died from it each year in this country, more than ten times the annual death rate from Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in the 1980s, as reported by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services in June, 1988. Syphilis left a million men and women paralyzed each year. The cost to the taxpayers was estimated to be \$50,000, 000 (Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection, *Spirochete Philadelphia Production Notebook*, 1939).

Despite the grim facts and figures the public and public health officials kept silent on the topic and did little to deal with the specter. It was not something for public discussion. In 1933 the Illinois legislature defeated an amendment that would have required "persons of both sexes to present a medical certificate stating they are free from venereal diseases." In 1936, Wisconsin was the only state in the union that had such legislation on its books (LCFTP, *Spirochete Chicago Production Notebooks*, Sundgaard, 1938).

*The New York Times Index* for 1935 lists only two entries under the "syphilis" heading, in 1934, there were none. One headline reads: "Dissemination of information by radio proposed" (*New York Times*, May 16, p. 32). In 1936, there are eight "syphilis" entries, among them the January 16 headline, "Statistics campaign against conspiracy of silence and for prompt treatment planned at meeting of the Social Hygiene Council of Greater New

York" (*New York Times*, January 16, p.23). Issues of the 1936 *The Northern Virginia Sun*, reported the start of First Aid classes, the opening of a well-baby clinic in Fairfax and diphtheria testing supported by funds from T. B. Christmas Seals. No mention was made of syphilis. Not even a whisper about syphilis.

Hallie Flanagan (1940), Director of the National Theatre Project, wrote of *Spirochete's* opening in Chicago, April 29 of 1938 (on "Syphilis" Friday!), that it took courage; these were not the days of Ibsen or Brieux. It was a "hazardous undertaking to trace the history of the most deadly social disease, to show its insatiable spread over the earth, to recount the unremitting battles of the scientists to isolate the germ and to effect the cure." The entire WPA staff was behind it, as were the medical profession and the press. "Chicagoans were proud of writer Arthur Sundgaard," said Hallie Flanagan (p. 144).

*Spirochete* represents a unique moment in time when the forces of government, art, health, and education met in an experimental response to a social problem. Forced out of work by Depression-born economics, actors, writers, and theatre artists and technicians were given work that utilized and parlayed their skills and talents in a government-sponsored production that dramatically presented syphilis history, facts and challenges to action to the American audience with theatrically new, and creative, captivating form, style and techniques.

After its grand opening in Chicago, *Spirochete* had just over a year and just over 100 performances in five cities to bring the history of the dread disease to the people in productions across the country. In the waning days of the Depression years and the numbered days of the ill-fated Federal Theatre Project, *Spirochete*, an original product of the Chicago unit, dramatically presented the history of syphilis from the days of Columbus to 1937 in the form of an FTP Living Newspaper. *Spirochete* carried the flag in the "war" on syphilis just begun and fervently championed by the U. S. Surgeon General. This Living Newspaper presented not only information, but an editorial slant embellished with the theatrical techniques of experimental theatre found in the Living Newspapers.

#### Statement of the Problem

The problem that provided the basis for the study is presented in the following statement: *Spirochete* was an unexplored example of a unique interweaving of a specific relationship, at a specific moment in time, from the elements of government, education, health and the arts. What was *Spirochete* as a theatrical presentation of the Federal Theatre Project? What was its relationship to public health education in the late 1930s? This is the foundational problem, theme, and unifying pattern, the focus of all the questions that provide the basis for the proposed investigation.

*Spirochete*, as a vehicle for health education, was part of a larger, complex whole. In one very direct sense it was a Living Newspaper, a unique creation of the Federal Theatre Project, which

itself was a creative product of the mammoth and equally unique project conceived by the federal government to provide work for the nation's unemployed millions during the Thirties. In the other and equally direct conception, *Spirochete* was a unique method to disseminate vital health information, to raise public consciousness and concern, in a program conceived and promoted by the government to fight the deadly disease and halt its spread. The government forces that were responsible for the fruition of these vital and unique concepts were equally responsible, for ending the Project itself, and the life of *Spirochete*. On June 30, 1939, after months of Congressional Hearings investigating the Federal Theatre Project's politics and persuasions, Federal funds were denied to continue the Project. No other Arts Project was cut.

Although the Federal Theatre and the Living Newspaper have been topics for research and comment, there is little evidence that the Living Newspaper *Spirochete*, as a dramatic form, has been explored as the unique synthesis of government, health, education and arts it appears to be. The study of *Spirochete* provided the focus for an investigation that demonstrates the relationship among government, health, education, and the arts.

The question categories that guided the research are described as follows: (a) the origins of *Spirochete*; (b) the production and promotion techniques of *Spirochete*; and (c) the contributions of this production and assessments and evaluations of these contributions.

The following questions provided the research framework for *Whisper Out Loud!*

1. What were the origins of *Spirochete* in the socio-economic and political setting of the mid-to-late 1930s?

1.1 What was *Spirochete's* relationship to the times?

1.2 What is *Spirochete's* relationship to other FTP Living Newspapers, not only in form and technique but in its goals, aims, and objectives.?

1.3 What personalities and social and theatrical forces guided the development of *Spirochete*?

1.4 What was *Spirochete* as a Living Newspaper in the context of the Federal Theatre Project?

2. What production and promotion techniques were used by *Spirochete* to convey its messages?

2.1 What were the sources of these methods and techniques?

2.2 How and why were these methods used in *Spirochete* productions?

2.3 What was their effect?

2.4 How and why did *Spirochete* productions vary from city to city, from initial concepts through production, local reaction and review ?

3. What was *Spirochete's* contribution to public health issues and contemporary attitudes of the 1930s?

3.1 What was the reaction of health professionals and what role did health professionals play in *Spirochete's* production?

3.2 What did the public and theatre critics in the various cities of its production think of it? What was the reaction of the theological community?

3.3 To what extent could *Spirochete* be considered education or propaganda?

3.4. By what standards was it assessed? Was it considered "good theatre" when it was produced? How well did it meet its goals?

### Need for the Study

Just as syphilis was not a popular or frequent topic of discussion for the average American in the 1930s, so a study of the Federal Theatre of the 1930s as an avenue of public health education, particularly for adult populations, has remained unexplored even though the area of the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspapers as channels and platforms for other policies of the New Deal administration continues to be a frequent area of research. The study of *Spirochete*, the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper with syphilis as its subject brings new understanding to a specific instance in our country's history, to a moment in its theatrical life.

*Whisper Out Loud!* was based on the significance of the concepts which follow. The first concept the study considered was the efficacy and instances of theatre as education. *Spirochete* was a special circumstance of government-sponsored theatre coinciding with a national campaign to combat syphilis in the late 1930s, during

FDR's second administration of New Deal politics and policies in the waning days of the Depression years. *Spirochete* was found to be a unique and specific vehicle for health education in the 1930s. *Spirochete* was a factor in the national movement to contain and prevent the spread of syphilis.

Until *Spirochete's* Chicago debut in the spring of 1938 underlined the Surgeon General's campaign in print, syphilis was not on the list of approved topics to talk, or even think much about. "It did not happen to nice people."

The importance of health issues to the American people in the Thirties was highlighted regularly by government spokesmen and in popular journals and advertising as well. But there were few mentions of syphilis. The American people remained vulnerable and at risk. The Depression years incurred a dreadful debt on the nation's health. *The Ladies Home Journal* in a 1936 issue tallied 3,000 dead of diphtheria in the previous year. Figures for syphilis were not so readily available to the American people. The Lynds reported in *Middletown in Transition* (1937), that although no one starved to death in Middletown, the Depression left a legacy of rachitic children, abscessed teeth and overlooked tuberculosis. During these years the American Medical Association reported that the American diet was at or below the level of nutritive safety. The Selective Service Commission rejected more than half of the first two million volunteers in 1940 (Wechter, 1948). But the AMA did not talk about syphilis "out loud," as it did of nutrition. The insidious

diffusion of syphilis was rampant but the broad diffusion of syphilis information, despite the efforts of the Surgeon General's anti-syphilis campaign, remained *sotto voce*. *Spirochete* whispered out loud. This study demonstrates that *Spirochete* helped break the silence surrounding the public health issue of syphilis.

The second concept which formed the basis for the study was the understanding that Living Newspapers utilized innovative theatrical production and promotion techniques. This study demonstrates that *Spirochete* incorporated many such elements, common to Living Newspapers and created several that were unique to this particular play. Living Newspaper production and promotion techniques involved their audiences with current subject matter of interest and importance to Americans in the 1930s, and made the theatrical experience relevant and meaningful. In doing so, the Living Newspapers, their content and production techniques were adult education. This study analyzed the Living Newspaper *Spirochete* and found it to be a unique form of adult education and force for social change.

The third concept upon which the study of *Spirochete* was based is illustrated by the understanding that significant and innovative theatrical techniques and concepts developed in Living Newspaper productions, utilizing scenery, lighting, audio, and visual effects, heightened the theatrical experience. This study demonstrates that these dramatic elements were used to underline and empower *Spirochete's* social themes and concepts. Many of

these effects have been translated into the theatre of today. This study examined the techniques displayed in *Spirochete* and explored their theatrical effects and contributions to the play's educational elements and dramatic presentation.

This historical case study of *Spirochete* may be seen as part of a larger, emerging research agenda among scholars of adult education. In his paper "Defining and Organizing Adult Education History: An Agenda for Research," Stubblefield (1982) notes that historical research is particularly useful in demonstrating the relationship of education to social change and the role of adult education in change. History interprets actions and the events of the past. Thus it provides a study of the motives and actions of adult education in a specific context. Additionally there is the basic concept that describes education as a deliberate intention to acquire or to transmit knowledge, skills, sensitivities, and values, attitudes, or interests. Stubblefield sees the need for historical research regarding cultural diffusion and the roles played by institutions and social configurations. Education experienced in adulthood is a strategy for meeting changing social, economic and political conditions (Stubblefield, 1982). *Whisper Out Loud!*, the study of *Spirochete*, provides an historical perspective of a changing society and the roles played by the government, medicine, education and the arts. As such it provides another case study of adult education as an instrument of social change.

## Method

### Research Design

The research method for *Whisper Out Loud* was historical research. The study of *Spirochete* and its environment was an historical case study. Historical research provides a study of a bounded system; that is, a particular experience is examined within defined perspectives. The study of such a particular experience provides an accurate, descriptive account of events, personalities, institutions, and the times in which the experience occurred. Historical research should develop a pattern of meaning, illuminate patterns of behavior, of belief, of events and provide a "drama of the commonplace," a vicarious experience, another way of "knowing." Such a careful study of human activity, and the organization of social data that illustrates the unique case, may help us arrive at understanding, a "naturalistic" and research generalization, states Robert E. Stake in *Case Study Methods in Educational Research*, (n.d.). In this case, the historical case study of *Spirochete* provides an accurate and useful interpretation of the complex, dynamic system it observes. Consequently, this study presents an illustration of *Spirochete* as a unique synthesis of government, health, education and the arts.

### Sources and Materials

Research materials for this study were found in the archival materials in the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Special Collection, Fenwick Library, George Mason University (LCFTP) and

those of the United States National Archives (NA). The materials in the LCFTP include, but are not limited to, the original materials from WPA's Federal Theatre Project, 1935-1939 discovered in an airplane hangar outside Washington, D.C. in 1973. They lay unknown and unnoticed for almost forty years. These materials included 800 cubic feet of drawings, posters, scripts, card files, and many boxes of files. Now organized, catalogued, and more easily accessible for the first time, they include container registers, bibliographies of U.S. National Archives holdings, and other archival repositories across the country; Theatre of the Thirties gift collection, books, indexes of New Deal Culture holdings, play lists, reviews, production notebooks, costume, lighting and scene designs, and other such materials relating to the Federal Theatre Project. The United States National Archives contain the extensive FTP Administrative Records and National Office Correspondence in the archival Records of the Works Progress Administration.

Contemporary additions include oral history tapes and video tapes of persons involved in various capacities with the Federal Theatre Project, as well as listings of dissertations, theses and monographs that have been drawn from FTP materials.

Principal sources for research for the study of *Spirochete* incorporated materials from these primary and archival sources, such as play scripts, production notebooks containing the directors' notes, scenery plots, and lighting directives. Other production elements studied for *Spirochete* included costume designs,

photographs, personnel notes, promotional materials, and other cultural artifacts such as posters, playbills and programs. Popular publications, contemporary theatre commentaries, and critique, and medical and scientific journals also served as research sources for this project. In addition, contemporary and retrospective accounts accounts of the times found in oral history interview tapes and transcripts were assessed.

### Data Collection

Data collection was accomplished by wide reading and note taking in archival materials. A survey and examination were made of materials, incorporating production notebooks, graphics, (including posters, artwork, costume, lighting, and scenery designs) pertinent to the production of *Spirochete* to study the unique production techniques of the Living Newspapers. Scripts from various *Spirochete* productions were compared. Assessments of other Living Newspapers, and studies and scripts of the Federal Theatre Radio Division were evaluated. Correspondence and staff notes were examined and found to be an excellent source of production and promotion information. *Spirochete*'s author Arnold Sundgaard's notes, oral-history audio tape interview and interview transcript were examined. Various indexes and journals were surveyed to research *Spirochete*'s contribution to the "War" on syphilis, on public health, health policies and legislation, and served as sources to evaluate contemporary reaction to *Spirochete*

## Analysis

A synthesis of evidence and materials was made to provide an in depth description of the *Spirochete* episode in the American theatre, and socio-economic and political culture of the 1930s. This description provides not only an analysis of dramatic and educational qualities of the production but should contribute, in addition, an historical sense and background of the times in which *Spirochete* was created and performed.

The research examined facts and interpretations from various sources and identified each accordingly in order to address the questions that guided the inquiry. A reasoned pattern was developed and presented in an effort to make sense of the creation and production of *Spirochete*, what happened and how it happened in the years 1937-1939. This emergent pattern, a conceptual framework, formed from the various elements in the creation and production of *Spirochete*, was the product of the study's research, analysis, and synthesis. This conceptual framework presents statements about the origin, techniques and contribution of *Spirochete*.

The project's aim was to answer the previously proposed questions and to thereby describe the role that *Spirochete* played, not only in the theatre, but in the society of its time, where it served as a vehicle for public health education. The study's answers to those questions contribute to an understanding of the surrounding

events, institutions, persons, concepts, and cultural diffusion of the period; and note, as well, *Spirochete's* contributions to society in the late 1930s, and to the institutions and individuals touched by it.

### Organization

The study was organized into chapters detailing the origins of *Spirochete* as a Living Newspaper in the Federal Theatre Project, including background materials on the times, and the personalities involved, such as its author Arnold Sundgaard. Other chapters provide descriptions of the production and promotion techniques, and *Spirochete's* contributions, not only in the theatre, but to the contemporary public health issues of syphilis prevention and control. The chapters are organized in the following manner.

### Synopsis of Scenes

Chapter One, Introduction: Prologue and Stagecraft, provides an introduction to the study and presents the statement of the problem and the questions framing the research, need for the study, research method and materials.

Chapter Two, Dramatic Theme and Variations, introduces the background of the problem including philosophical and theatrical precedents for theatre as education; a scene-setting discussion of the socio-politico-economic environment in which the Federal Theatre lived and died, the historiography of the Federal Theatre Project and a review of the literature of the Federal Theatre Project. Hallie

Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theater Project is introduced. This chapter also describes the Living Newspaper as a theatrical genre .

Chapter Three, *Spirochete*, Act One: The Curtain Rises - Scene: Chicago, presents the origins and foundations of *Spirochete* . The social, political and economic milieu in Chicago during the period 1935-1938 is discussed. Particular emphasis is given to the Chicago Unit of the Federal Theatre Project.

Chapter Four, *Spirochete*, Act One, Part Two: Chicago Action, surveys Chicago's "social hygiene" battle and the concurrent writing of *Dark Harvest* , *Spirochete's* first title. The chapter concludes with the discussion and plot outline of Chicago's *Spirochete* .

Chapter Five, *Spirochete*, Act Two: The Drama Unfolds, traces the metamorphosis of *Spirochete* from the author's preliminary outline through various versions of the script to the copyrighted edition which was the basis for *Spirochete's* April 29, 1938 Chicago debut.

Chapter Six, *Spirochete*, Act Two, Part Two: Dramatic Action On Stage and Off, presents a discussion of the production elements of staging, scene design, lighting techniques and special effects, costumes and sound that contributed to the theatrical presentation of *Spirochete* . How and why these elements were used to present and underscore *Spirochete's* themes and concepts is examined. Other scenes examine the Chicago production's promotion strategy, expenses, audiences, and contemporary assessments and critical reviews.

Chapter Seven, *Spirochete*, Act Two, Part Three: The Other *Spirochetes* , describes *Spirochete's* production in Seattle, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Portland, Oregon in February, 1939. Chapter scenes compare these productions to the original Chicago *Spirochete* , examining similarities and differences among these productions and the original. Possible contributing factors to those differences in production provide discussion. Local promotional efforts and critical and community reaction are surveyed.

Chapter Eight, *Spirochete*, Act Three: The Curtain Falls - *Spirochete's* Contributions to Public Health Issues and Attitudes, presents contemporary and present-day assessments and evaluations of *Spirochete's* contribution to public health issues and attitudes of the late 1930s.

Chapter Nine, Greenroom: Summary and Conclusions, contains main findings and conclusions from the study of *Spirochete* . This chapter also includes implications for the discipline of adult education, and research themes and issues for future research.

The list of references for the study which follows includes original source materials found in the text such as scripts for *Spirochete* productions and other materials from the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collections. These scripts are identified in the text as "S1877" and another numeral to indicate which script is referenced, for example S1877(3), indicates the *Spirochete* script with this number in the collection.

The reference section includes categories such as books, periodicals and dissertations. There are separate sections for materials cited from the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection (LCFTP) and for those materials found in the National Archives and Records Administration. These materials include citations of letters, memos and reports and are identified by location (NA), author, and date. These references and those from the LCFTP are cited according to the LCFTP suggested citation, for example, LCFTP. Production Bulletin. *Spirochete*. Chicago, 1938, p.9 . The shortened form for references in the text after the first is LCFTP. PBSC. p.9.

An Appendix follows the list of references with a list of the abbreviations used in the text to designate specific materials, such as production bulletins, set designs, posters and playbills from the LCFTP and the NA collections, and their place and date of origin.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DRAMATIC THEME AND VARIATIONS

This chapter contains three scenes on the theme of education in the theatre and sets the background for the study of *Spirochete*. Scene One provides a definition of terms for the purposes of this study and offers a discussion of the philosophical and theatrical foundations, rationale and precedents for theatre as education. Examples are drawn from the origins of drama, the classical Greek drama, and medieval liturgical drama. The influences of neoclassicism and the age of the Puritans are noted. Other examples of particular interest to this study are the French thesis plays and the problem plays of Ibsen and Shaw. Aspects of education/propaganda are noted in the agitational propaganda theatre pieces of the post-World War I Russia and Germany, and the Left-wing and labor plays of the 1920s and early 1930s in the United States.

Scene Two introduces the Federal Theatre Project with a brief discussion of Hallie Flanagan, its director, the aims and objectives of the Federal Theatre Project, and the socio-economic and political times in which it was born, lived and died. An historiography of doctoral research and contemporary writings concerned with the FTP follows, including a survey of present-day works which focus on the Federal Theatre Project. A review of Federal Theatre Project

literature then presents the Project's record in facts and figures, theatre critics' evaluations of the Federal Theatre, and reflects on the end and the contributions of the Federal Theatre Project.

Scene Three considers the FTP's Living Newspapers as a dramatic genre, looks at their antecedents, and outlines their construction, characteristic form and techniques. Contemporary and present-day theatre critics' evaluations are noted.

Scene One: Philosophical and Theatrical Foundations and  
Precedents for Theatre as Education

Throughout theatrical history, the concept of education in the drama has often been so subtle as to be amorphous and not immediately recognizable as "educative." For example, in the classical theatre of the Greeks, catharsis, a great change in the audiences emotions and attitudes, was simply accepted as a natural element in the drama. Northwestern University Classics Professor and author of *Introduction to Poetry of the Aeneid* (1984) and other classics works, Daniel Garrison (1986), in his essay on the origins of drama in *Critical Survey of Drama*, observes that the great classical tragedies were accepted as inherent cultural avenues which inspired noble behavior. The stinging social satire of Aristophanes (448-380 B. C.) brought attention to current matters of contemporary concern with discussions of the powers, equality and place in society of women. *Parliament of Women* and *Lysistrata* are classic examples of Aristophanes' satirical treatment of such material. Aristophanes' plays were composed of topical reference, yet the message

encouraged thought and discussion and is applicable to all eras. (Garrison, 1986).

In other instances the educative, instructional qualities of theatrical presentations have been so blatant, so evident and sometimes serving other than the needs of the audience that they have been labeled didactic, instructional, or propaganda. Several examples in the material that follows will illustrate this point

It is important to have some common ground in the discussion of such terms as education, didactic, instruction and propaganda. For the purposes of this paper these terms of reference are defined as follows: *Education* is identified as the process of educating, teaching, training; or the learning or development which results. It is a kind of schooling or instruction. *Educative* connotes having the power to educate. To *educate* means to lead forth, to bring up, to advance the mental aesthetic, physical or moral development; to instruct a person or a group of persons.

*Didactic* from the Greek *didaktik(os)* conveys the meaning apt or skilled in teaching. The verb form, *didaskein*, to teach, indicates that the material or method is intended to instruct; that is, the material contains doctrine, principles, rules or moral precepts. To *instruct* means to impart knowledge or information.

*Propaganda* means simply, allegation, facts, opinions, systematically spread with the intention of helping, or harming, some individual, group, institution or movement. The term today is

frequently used disparagingly to denote half-truths, distortions, or biased information distributed by political factions.

Defining terms with particular application to adult education, Lindeman (1962) spoke of adult education as using the experience of the learner and focusing on situations. Bergevin (1967) noted the term in relation to experiential learning as well as to systematic, planned learning activities, while Knowles (1962), in some instances, it denotes a process to continue the learning of men and women. The synthesis and distillation, for the purposes of this study, incorporates these elements into this essence from Cremin (1977) and Houle (1972): *Education is the deliberate intention of persons, groups, association or institution to acquire or to transmit knowledge, skill, sensitivity, values, attitudes or interest* (Stubblefield, 1982, 1987).

With this understanding of education it would be difficult to identify any theatrical presentation from the days of the Dionysian dancers to the present day entertainments of the phantoms in the opera or the strangeness of presidential figures in the Orient, or off-off Broadway and experimental theatre offerings that does not contain within it such a philosophy of education as stated above. Perhaps, indeed, it is because education is such an inherent element in the drama that it goes unspoken and unidentified as such with great consistency throughout the ages.

In fact, plays are often spoken of as "socially conscious," "political plays," "problem plays," "documentary," "didactic,"

"Theatre of Fact," or "propaganda;" but not often as education unless we are speaking of "educational plays" for children such as *Eli Whitney and the Cotton Gin*. Good drama appeals to our emotions and makes us feel. Plays should also be recognized as bearers of new experience, appealing as well to our intellectual and cognitive powers, giving us the opportunity to think and reason.

### Rationale for Theatre as Education

Many contemporary critics in discussing the goals and purposes of theatre maintain that theatre influences, communicates, stimulates, enlightens, raises issues and educates. One such commentator, Professor of Performance Studies at New York University and essayist, E. T. Kirby ("Ur-drama: the Origins of Theatre," 1975), calls theatre "recycled Wagner" in his book *Total Theatre* (1969). That is, observes Kirby (1969, p.8), the essence of drama is knowing through feeling. Unless we know innately, then the process of "getting to know" may be said to be learning. Understanding drama, then, is the process of learning through feeling.

Theatre scholars Hoffman and Cameron, in *A Guide to Theatre Study* (1974, p. 4), speak of theatre as a communication, a process, an ongoing transaction among the performers, the audience and the performance itself. Meaning is communicated and received. Art communicates meaning. It communicates experience symbolically. When functioning successfully, the audience responds to the

symbols that awaken in the audience experiences and perceptions of life.

British theatre scholar Phillip Cooky, in his *How to Enjoy Theatre* (1984), states that "theatre is a powerful medium capable of influencing the thought and feeling of its audience to a remarkable degree . It can delight the mind and engage the intellect, take you into yourself enabling you to discover new frontiers within your mind, opening up heretofore unexplored territories." Theatre engages your attention on unfamiliar issues; it communicates and stimulates a response to laugh to cry to think (Cooky, 1984, p. 12).

Cooky goes on to explain that the aim of the playwright is to make the public more aware and provoke discussion in the hope that better solutions may be found.

By presenting problems in a dramatized way and confronting the audience with the question 'what would you have done', 'what will you do', it serves a positive role in society.

Theatre can question; inform; expose; coax an audience to respond actively to many topics and situations. Often times (the playwright) has used shock tactics to insure the audience is not unmoved. (p.16)

Theatre has the power to shock, to provoke, to enlighten, to educate. It can make an audience question previously accepted viewpoints and assumptions. Theatre raises issues, suggests that old ways need to be rethought. The questioning nature of theatre can

open up for discussion subjects previously thought to be too delicate or taboo .

### Precedents for Theatre as Education in the Origins of Drama

Most theories concerning the origins of drama regard the drama as fulfilling a social function. More important than the entertainment value, the ancients believed that drama in its social function should serve as an inspiration, exhibiting a model for noble behavior, states Garrison (1986, p. 2081). Serving yet another social function, serious and comic theatre, in the view of modern anthropologists, functions as a mechanism for promoting group solidarity. In an expansion of the social aspect of theatre, Victor Turner, author of *From Ritual to Theatre* (1982) and *The Anthropology of Performance* (1986), in his essay on the societal contributions of the drama remarks that social drama at all levels from puppetry, shadow theatre and dance, to professional story telling is a "means to probe a community's weaknesses, to call its leaders to account, portray its characters and conflicts; to suggest remedies for them and generally take stock of its current situation in the known world" (cited in Garrison, 1986, p. 2081). Thus the theatre serves as an active spur to social consciousness, as a purveyor of information, and an impetus for action in society.

There is evidence to believe that drama, in a clearly educative function, served the ancient Egyptians. Garrison (1986), observes that the origins of medicinal drama, predating the classical Greek theatre, can be traced to the ancient Egyptian Metternech stele which

portrays in hieroglyphics the text of a shamanic drama recounting how the goddess Isis' child, Hora, was stung by a scorpion and cured by magic and artificial respiration. This divine paradigm, Garrison tells us, would have been used to promote healing of real patients (p. 2086).

### Liturgical Drama

The origins of modern drama in the Middle Ages lie in the very institution, the church, that later silenced the theatre during the regime of the Puritans. The early Miracle, Mystery, and later the Morality plays, of liturgical drama were a "by product" and in some respects, elaborations of church ritual (Brockett, 1982, p. 176).

The earliest example of liturgical drama, the Miracle plays dramatized moments in the Easter mass and were performed by the church in the church all over Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries. They were the forerunners of the English "Mystery" plays (Gassner & Quinn, 1977).

The Mystery plays came out of the church and were performed in the vernacular, out of doors, spoken, not chanted and, again, illustrated biblical occurrences and lives of the saints. These little dramatic tableaux in the church yard were a series of dramatic scenes of biblical subjects staged by the trade guilds in cycles. The word "pageant" originally referred to the movable stage for these static tableaux, or scenes of the 14th and early 15th centuries (Brockett, 1982). These Mystery plays staged outside in the church yard were a reinforcement of the teachings within the church. They

were a "means of setting before an unlettered audience the fundamental doctrines of Christianity" ( Gassner & Quinn, p. 580-581).

The later Morality plays of the middle 17th century were allegorical pieces personifying vice, virtues and the souls of man: Everyman.

### Puritan Influences and Neoclassical Precedents for Theatre as Education

During the 1600s and 1700s, two seemingly conflicting forces, neoclassicism and Puritanism, worked to shape the modern theatre. In doing so , moral instruction came to be a *raison d'etre* of the theatre. In 1577, John Northbrooke expressed the views of the some of the English Protestant dissidents, the Puritans, who looked askance at the professional theatre beginning to develop during the first Queen Elizabeth's reign. His *A Treatise Against Dicing, Dancing, Plays and Interludes* and Stephen Gosson's *The School of Abuse* (1579) foreshadowed the coming onslaught on the theatre . In these harsh diatribes the theatre was declared to be an "instrument used by the Devil to encourage vice and take people away from honest work and other useful pursuits" (Brockett, 1982, p.190). To answer these charges, Sir Philip Sidney wrote *In Defense of Poese* (1583), and argued that "literature is the most effective of all human works in teaching morality and moving men to virtuous action" (cited in Brockett, 1982, p.190).

The long English Civil War had erupted out of religious controversy, pitting the Puritan dissident Protestants against the Royalists, resulting finally in the ascendancy of the Puritan Oliver Cromwell in 1649. Cromwell, acting as dictator, ruled England through a government appointed committee. During the period 1642-1660 he attempted to eradicate theatre activity altogether. In the Puritan view, the theatre was profane. A law was passed in 1642 suspending performances for five years. The Globe theatre, the Elizabethan theatre built in 1599 on the south banks of the Thames and first home to many of Shakespeare's plays, was torn down. In 1649 a new law decreed that all actors were apprehensible and should be regarded as rogues. Theatres were demolished; acting troupes disbanded. These and subsequent actions of the Puritan forces are not surprising since "in the preceding reign drama was used as a weapon" (Brockett, 1982, p.196) against church and state alike, so much so that in 1559, Queen Elizabeth had banned the treatment of religious or political subjects on the stage. A hundred years later, Cromwell's dictums carried her action several steps further.

Neoclassicism, a second force to shape the theatre in the mid 1600s to the late 1700s, spread from Italy through the rest of Europe and was to provide a counterweight to the harsh Puritan provisos. The resurgence of the classical expression of the Aristotelian ideal, guiding precepts for literature and drama, came to fruition in neoclassicism. Neoclassic ideas demanded that drama

teach a moral lesson; that the dramatist reveal the ideal moral pattern. All plays were said to have as their main function "to teach and to please." The neoclassicists noted that this didactic ideal was often stated in classical drama. Drawing inspiration from the classical world where humanism first emphasized "concern for the worth of people," the Italian Humanists of the Renaissance "emphasized the instructional nature of the classic ideal to justify the study and writing of literature when moving away from purely theological concerns" (Brockett, 1982, pp. 155, 160). Neoclassicists wished to employ drama as a useful tool. Brockett (1982) states that "they tended to emphasize the instructional over the pleasure potential of literature. Comedy was said to teach by ridiculing behavior that should be avoided; tragedy to show the horrifying results of mistake and misdeeds. These ideas about the functions of drama were to dominate critical thought until the end of the 18th century" (p. 160).

#### Aspects of Education in Modern Drama

With the advent of the English Restoration in 1660, the modern drama, throttled by the Puritans, found its voice loud and clear. Nonetheless, through the years in some parts of the globe, the influence of the Puritans was still strong. Puritan echoes existed almost 300 years later in many areas of life in the United States. Writing in 1940, Hallie Flanagan reports a conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt in 1934, on the eve of the birth of the Federal Theatre Project. She remembers that "there was another thing, (Mrs.

Roosevelt) went on to say, the whole question of whether the time had come when America might consider the theatre, as it was considered abroad, a part of education...Probably not. This country's Puritan heritage made theatre the last of the arts to be accepted" (Flanagan, 1985, p.120).

The theatre that Mrs. Roosevelt noted was considered a part of education abroad is exemplified in the problem plays and the thesis plays, the social dramas that flourished in western Europe in the 1800s. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) the Norwegian dramatist, is generally acknowledged to be the "father" of the modern drama. He is considered to be the master of the prototype of the modern problem play. Ibsen's works presented drama centered in controversial social questions and realistic studies of contemporary life such as the emancipation of women in *A Doll's House* (1878), and family relationships (*Hedda Gabler*, 1891). Personal vs. bureaucratic ethics were dramatized in *Enemy of the People* in 1883 (Gassner and Quinn, 1969).

Ibsen provided a new and stimulating means of expression for contemporary social and psychological problems with his bold choice of subject matter for the theatre. Venereal disease--syphilis--is used as a symbol, a metaphor for the hold of the past on the present, an image of corruption in family life in the 1890s in Ibsen's *Ghosts*, written in 1881. *Ghosts* best expressed, drama critics agree, the spirit of the age, an age whose dysfunctional social and intellectual patterns were crippled by conventional morality. *Ghosts*, with its

allusions to syphilis, was a storm center and banned in most countries but was well accepted in Paris and Berlin. In London, where it did not receive public production until 1914, it "took strong abuse." In the United States, the great Eleanor Duse finally took it on tour in 1923, "at great risk to her career" (*Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 1983, p. 406).

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), Anglo-Irish iconoclastic dramatist and theatre critic, writing for the stage, among his many other pursuits, used the theatre to dramatize his concern with social problems and to dramatize his revolutionary and radical ideas. Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, written in 1893, was banned from the London stage. It dealt with prostitution. This play was one of a series of such Shavian works as *The Doctor's Dilemma* (1906) and *Getting Married* (1908) that deliberately set out to deal realistically with subjects previously considered taboo (Brockett, 1982, p.556).

In France after the Revolution, Emile Augier (1820-1889) and Alexandre Dumas fils (1824-1895) writing in the mid-to late 1800s, brought efforts at social reform to the stage by showing morality in action in serious social drama. Augier and Dumas fils, who often shocked their audiences, were viewed by their society not as extremists, but as sane citizens seeking to raise the moral tone of their times. They brought subjects of concern and relevance to the middle-class citizens of their audience, such as the influence of the church on politics and the power of money (Brockett, 1982). Augier and Dumas fils "accustomed their audiences to discussions of social

and ethical problems in the theatre, generating a favorable climate for later social drama and moving toward a new realism." Dumas *fils* first came to public attention with his dramatization of his own novel *La Dame Aux Camellias* (Camille), finally performed in 1852, and upon which Verdi based his opera, the triumphant *La Traviata*. The play, which "seems nothing more than the proverbial story of the good hearted prostitute," had been banned for three years nonetheless, even in broad-minded Paris, because of its realism. Augier's *Olympe's Marriage* (1855), intended as a direct reply to Dumas' *Camille*, was the first prose and most didactic piece to show the disastrous results of a courtesan marrying into an aristocratic family (Brockett, 1982, p. 491).

The favorable theatrical climate for the drama of ideas encouraged the great French novelists Balzac, Flaubert, Zola and the brothers Goncourt to bring their realistic and frank ideas of social history and naturalism to the theatre where social ills were sought, revealed and recorded, and solutions were explored (*Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, 1983, p.302).

The thesis plays of Dumas *fils*, concerning social themes, were marred by their didactic qualities, declares Brockett (1982). In most, the message was clearly stated by an articulate *raisonneur*, the author's mouthpiece, with a lack of objectivity. Dumas felt the betterment of society to be "the duty" of a realist. He wrote in an open letter to the critic Sarcy that, "If I can exercise some influence over society...if I can find some means to force people to discuss the

problem, and the lawmaker to revise the law, I shall have done more than my duty as a writer, I shall have done my duty as a man" (Brockett, 1982, p. 421).

Of particular interest to the study of *Spirochete* are the works of French playwright Eugene Brieux. His naturalistic style presented facts and called for social action, constituting an attack on a current social problem--in one instance, syphilis. Many of these same elements were to appear on the other side of the Atlantic in *Spirochete*. In 1887 Antoine's Theatre Libre, in Paris, first staged a production from Eugene Brieux (1858-1932). Brieux, following in the naturalistic style of Zola and Becque, "presented a plea for the amelioration of a particular evil" which, according to the *Oxford Who's Who in the Theatre* (1983, p.302), "degenerated into sermonizing. Brieux best combined the didactic with feelings of pity for individuals."

George Bernard Shaw gave high praise to Brieux and in particular to his *La Robe Rouge*. Produced in 1900, *The Red Robe* lectured on the abuses of the French judiciary. Professor of English, A. E. Kalson (Purdue University), author of works on formalist and performance theatre, states in his essay on Brieux, (1986) that *La Robe Rouge* is Brieux's best. Kalson observes that Brieux used clearly defined contemporary settings for his plays, incorporating a social question. Brieux believed implicitly in the perfectibility of man. In his treatises he attempted to eradicate a social evil by dramatizing it. Each play was a thesis and suffered artistically

thereby, according to today's contemporary critics. In these didactic scenarios, the drama came from the situation not from the characters, and became a platform for information and expounding ideas (Kalson,1986).

*The Red Robe* may have been Brieux's best work, but *Les Avarés* (1902) (the damages/deterioration), better known to the English-speaking world as *Damaged Goods*, became his best known work and attained great fame and wide production throughout France, England and the United States. It was so successful that Upton Sinclair turned it into a novel, *Dirty Dishes*. Brieux's *Damaged Goods*, according to modern critics, is a prime example of how the didactic can undermine the drama. *Damaged Goods* is a "lecture on venereal disease," notes Kalson (1986, p. 249). In fact the protagonists, a young man and woman hoping to be married, do not appear at all in the third act. This act is taken over by a physician lecturing the would-be father-in law, and the audience, on venereal disease and birth control. Nonetheless, states Kalson ( p.249), " A world-wide audience heeded this illustrated lecture."

Brieux's works may well have played a part in social reforms of the period, most specifically requiring blood tests of prospective partners in marriage. The makers of the thesis plays, Dumas fils , Augier, Zola and Brieux, notes Kalson, considered "theatre a valid weapon of social reform" (Kalson,1986, p. 247). The importance of Brieux's *Damaged Goods* to the study of *Spirochete* is that the play takes the social problems of syphilis as its topic and specifically

treats the subject in a dramatic, theatrical presentation. *Damaged Goods* presented the issue of syphilis in the early 1900s in a stark and clinically realistic manner, and lobbied actively for change, much as *Spirochete* was to do almost forty years later.

*Damaged Goods* was an earnest lecture about the harm caused by widespread ignorance of a taboo subject. It was a daring subject matter treated factually and honestly, although with little dramatic skill, and *Damaged Goods* became a *cause celebre*. Originally banned in Paris, the play was read by its author to public officials and doctors on November 1, 1901. The censors finally allowed a public performance at Antoine's Theatre Libre in Paris early in January the next year. Brieux himself introduced the play. It became a popular success on the Continent and in England. Twelve years later, it premiered in the United States, March 14, 1913. Less than a month later, on April 6, *Damaged Goods* opened at the National Theatre in the nation's capital before an invited audience and was introduced by a minister who offered a prayer (Kalson, 1986).

Kalson finds the dramatic flaws in *Damaged Goods* obvious when compared with Ibsen's *Ghosts*. *Ghosts* is timeless. In it, venereal disease is used as a metaphor of the past acting on the present. The Brieux play is a clinical discussion about venereal disease. It is a thesis play, and, states Kalson, sadly out of date (Kalson, 1986, p. 247). Notwithstanding its obvious artistic faults, *Damaged Goods* reached a wide audience through the popular

theatre. *Damaged Goods* brought a relevant problem, the widespread ignorance of venereal disease, to the public .

In sharp contrast with those who considered theatre to be a valid weapon of social reform, yet in simultaneous, albeit grudging agreement with this premise, professional curmudgeon George Jean Nathan, American social and theatre critic of the 1920s and '30s, casts copious, albeit stylish aspersions on the influence of drama on society. "Such influences," he claims, "upon persons other than playwrights and critics or upon institutions other than the theatre itself may be counted on the fingers of one hand" (Nathan, 1970, pp. 226-227). For the purposes of this study it is significant to note that among those fingers, Nathan counts, "Brieux's trashy *Damaged Goods*, back in 1902, was momentarily another." Later he notes that "If ( in its century and a half of history) the theatre has demonstrated any influence at all, that influence is confined largely -- apart from the specific directions already noted-- to matters of supreme cosmic unimportance...; a *The Red Robe* (Brieux) may cause several Paris professional letter-to-the-editor inditers to yowl, entirely without effect and result against the methods of French jurisprudence" (Nathan, 1970, pp. 226-227.)

#### Aspects of Modern Theatre as Propaganda

The realistic social dramas of Ibsen, Shaw and the French naturalists and the Russian and German propaganda pieces of the workers' theatre, as well, illustrate another example of dissimilar, tangential forces shaping and molding the drama.

## Russia

Russia in the early Revolutionary 1900s saw its own social drama and problem plays played out. In 1917 Theatre October presented a fusion of theatre and propaganda, mass meeting and play. The agitational, propaganda pieces of the Red Army performed by the "Blue Blouses," Communist party members, exhorted the workers to strike, to rise, in the Russian Civil War that continued after the Revolution into the 1920s. Following the Socialist Revolution the "agit-prop," agitational propaganda, of the Soviet workers' theatre presented propaganda in the form of revues that were to have a strong influence on theatre of Meyerhold, Brecht and Piscator. The great Russian actor and director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940), together with Bertolt Brecht (1891-1956), the brilliant German dramatist, poet and theoretician, and Erwin Piscator, (1893-1966) the first major practitioner of militant expressionism, or epic theatre, developed a theatre that was revolutionary and experimental in concept, topics, techniques and presentation for the 1920s and '30s ( Gassner, 1977).

## Germany

The Russian Blue Blouses traveled to Germany bringing their agit-prop reviews. In Germany, Bertolt Brecht dramatized social and political interests in the theatre, interwoven with complex human material, to illustrate his theses. His Marxist preoccupation is most evident in *Three-Penny Opera* (1928), which is an attack on bourgeois society and standards. His plays of this first period contain

direct instruction. The most successful effort of this early period of dramatic production was done with Kurt Weill, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, 1930 (Taylor, 1966; Taylor, 1972, p. 42).

Brecht's brand of epic theatre sought through obvious theatrical technique to lead the audience to relate what they saw on stage to social and economic conditions outside the theatre; ultimately he wished the audience to apply its new perceptions by working for changes in the social and economic system. "He wished to assign an active role, of thoughtful, contemplation asking questions, to the audience" (Brockett, 1982, p.599).

### The United States

Changes in the social and economic system were also the focus for concern in America. John Mason Brown (1963) theatre critic and author of several books on drama wrote in 1929 in *The Changing Scene* :

A continent away in the United States, Young America, like the rest of the world, was sick; sick from old abuses, sick with the disillusionment of a war fought seemingly in vain, sick from a peace treaty which had made the world safe for dictators, sick from a host of diseases which had suddenly become manifest in its own social and economic system. Discontent was in the air...Injustices, long tolerated or overlooked were dragged into the light. The 'haves' became increasingly aware of the 'have not's', as strike followed strike in the front-page news...Labor was on the move. Unrest was all around us. Agitators of every

kind were plentiful; so were the causes for agitation....But the public good became everyone's concern. So did politics and economics...Fanatical groups screamed their dogmas shrilly....The good society" did not appear to be so good. (p.18)

In the terrifying conditions of the Depression, theatre again was a weapon in a class struggle against the old ways, the ways that had contributed to the social and economic conditions, against perceived injustices perpetrated against labor and the "little man"-- and a weapon for the public good. New York's German-speaking amateur-theatre group, Proletarian-Buhene, appeared in 1925. In 1931 this labor-theatre group, influenced by the workers' theatre movement in Germany, was actively engaged in propaganda and mass meetings promoting the necessity of organizing the unemployed (Gassner, 1968).

Agit-prop presentations debuted in the United States by the English speaking Workers Laboratory Theatre in New York in 1929, a group that had been patterned on the Proletarian-Buhene. The Workers Laboratory Theatre encouraged similar units elsewhere and groups soon made their appearance in Canada, in Los Angeles as the Rebel Players, in the Chicago "Blue Blouses", and as Boston's "Solidarity Players." Adding to the list, the New Playwrights Theatre, (1926-29), forerunner of the Theatre Union, joined the Theatre of Action and the Theatre Collective, the Labor Stage of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union on the workers' theatre front (Poggi, 1968). Taylor observes that there were "perhaps a

dozen worker's theatres" in New York at this time, "all inspired by the agitation theatre of the Soviet Union which had been disseminating revolutionary axioms in 'factories and fields'" (1972, p. 31). Respected New York theatre critic, Brooks Atkinson notes ironically that the agit-prop plays were derived from Russia "where workers never struck" (1970, p. 291).

Agit-prop plays and radical presentations were workers' plays, popular first among workers in the Soviet Union, then in Europe and the United States. These pieces explored socially oriented themes emphasizing the struggle for a better life. Designed to arouse protest and to advocate action for change, they often appeared in *Worker's Theatre* magazine which had grown to a circulation of 1,000 printed copies in 1932 (Gassner, 1968, p. 427). In the United States in the 1930s, labor theatre groups proffered "a radical examination of American beliefs and institutions in a significant number of plays that were powerful commentaries on their society" (O'Connor & Brown, 1978, p. 90).

The socially conscious one-act plays of agit-prop, such as Clifford Odets rousing, revolutionary *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) and Irwin Shaw's powerful anti-war *Bury the Dead* (1936) were stylized and rhythmical, adapted to chants. Agitation and propaganda, their object; doled out with stock characters and developed situation, these one-act plays were propaganda for a social cause. John Gassner (1968, p.423), drama critic and theatre scholar writing in 1938, discusses "The One Act Play in the Revolutionary Thirties" and

notes that " To students of dramatic literature (as art) they are 'worthless' with their broad types and strident harangue....But (their political satires) signify a return to folk theatre, to the common people where voices are raised in resentment against masters." Gassner (p.426) points out that the "Frontal satire of agit prop spared no one, not even socialists and labor leaders who were accused of misleading the working class."

Howard Taubman (1965, p.209), New York drama critic in these years, comments that "The thesis plays of the 1930s, though not lasting art, reflected a concern with the urgencies of the day that made the escape stuff seem particularly anemic." He identifies John Wexley's, *They Shall Not Die*, the story of the Scottsboro boys; Albert Maltz's dramatic statement of the hard lot of the coal miners in 1935; and Albert Bien's, *Let Freedom Ring*, the story of Southern mill workers, as eloquent examples

"Theatricalizing of the thirties" consisted of two extreme forms, according to John Gassner (1968). These forms, he states, included "caricatures, harangues and slogans, and didactic theatre ranging from the epic theatre ( of Brecht. Toller and Piscator) to the Living Newspaper productions" (Gassner, 1968, p. 465). Earlier Gassner (1962) noted in his essay "Social Realism and Imaginative Theatre" that the revolutionary theatre of the Thirties was useful to the theatre as a whole, developing as it did a new audience for theatre with its principle of low-price theatre. He offered this footnote to

the theatre of agit-prop: "it started shading off into illustrative personal one-act plays."

In 1934, one of the best, states Gassner (1968, p. 464), was *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, a play adapted by Hallie Flanagan, then professor of drama at Vassar, from a story by Whittaker Chambers originally published in *New Masses*. Written and produced by Hallie Flanagan and a graduate student while she was Director of Vassar's experimental theatre, *Can You Hear Their Voices?* displayed a theatrical, agitational essay on the appalling plight of the nation's farmers during the Depression.

Karen Malpede Taylor (1972), calls *Can You Hear Their Voices?* a depression documentary, the "first nonworker's play agitating for an end to depression misery" (p. 61). The strength of *Can You Hear Their Voices*, Taylor states, lies in the accuracy of the Depression scenes, researched and written in ten days. Each scene is based on episodes documented in newspapers, magazines and Congressional record accounts of the armed up-rising of drought-stricken, Depression-ridden farmers in England, Arkansas. The setting for the play consisted of platforms and pillars. A stage direction in the script notes "By this simplification realism is disregarded and reality gained" (Taylor, 1972, pp. 62-63).

Slides projected factual background. The great Russian theatrical designer Meyerhold's experiments in staging were adapted at Vassar in the innovation at the play's end where projected slides called upon the "educated minority to hear the farmers and help

them." Taylor (1972, p. 64) observes that, "Radical theatre understandably objected to this interpretation (which was influenced, as Flanagan continued to be, by strong faith in New Deal-like reforms!)" In other, subsequent, productions by radical groups, the play ended with preparations for the coming confrontation between the farmers and the national guard .

Drama critic John Mason Brown (1963), writing in 1929, declared that "Many of these propagandist scripts may have been childishly unfair. More of them may have been crude. Most of them have been feeble. But all of them have given a new vitality to our theatre. Their significance cannot be over stressed. They have not only widened the limited horizons of our stage, they have burst upon it, bringing to it new subjects, new performer, new aims, new interests, new techniques and above all, new audiences." Brown continues, "Propagandist scripts were known to America before the Depression. Each season produced them, for propaganda in the theatre is as old as the Greeks and as new as today's cause. Troubled times, hunger and old abuses do not make for moderation" ( pp. 19-20).

### Aspects of the Anti-thesis

#### Education is Not Theatre

There are those who would argue the place or the very existence of education in the theatre. Swedish dramatist August Strindberg, in a preface to his play *Miss Julie* (1888) (cited in Gassner, 1965), a savage, intense psychological study of human

frailties in the modern realm of naturalism, derisively attacked the popular didactic theatre. Strindberg expressed his displeasure that the "modern" drama, just beginning to develop reflection, inquiry, and analysis, was at risk of being abandoned, as a dying art form "like religion," for the simpler, more direct theatrics of the current day. Strindberg wrote:

In common with art generally, the theatre has long seemed to me to be a *biblia pauperum*, i.e. a bible in pictures for those who cannot read the written or printed word...Thus the theatre has long been a public school for the younger people not too well educated, and for women who still possess that primitive faculty of deceiving themselves and letting themselves be deceived, or in brief, who are impressionable to illusion and susceptible to the suggestions of the author....Some of the audiences have been so impassioned by partisan polemics and propaganda that it has been impossible to enjoy the play in a purely objective manner while one's innermost feelings and convictions are being assailed....And, furthermore, the new content has yet been given no fresh form; as a result, the new wine has burst old bottles. ( pp. 259-60)

The new wine of social content and audience involvement would have to wait for the agit-prop, the epic theatre, the experimental stage, to burst upon a new world of theatre in the 1920s and 30s. From these sources would be fashioned new bottles for the heady new wine of reflection, inquiry and analysis.

### Theatre is Not Education

Critic and gadfly George Jean Nathan (1970), commenting on the state of the theatre art in the 1930s, inferred that theatre with meaning or message has no lasting benefit. Such theatre, Nathan declared, preaches to the already converted. These audiences do not obtain any new thoughts nor are they changed in any way by their evening in the theatre. Such theatre

may for the fleeting moment enrich their hearts and spirits.

But in any other graver directions and for any greater length of time it does not in the least alter and change them. All the communist plays written since Lenin's day haven't made any more converts to Communism than all the Capitalist plays written since Taft's have made converts to Capitalism....the countless audiences of the scareful *Ghosts* are still, if we may believe the recently revealed and staggering statistics, going out and merrily contracting syphilis...It seems to be the fate of the drama that audiences will frequently accept and abide by its artistic and cultural injunctions but seldom, if ever, by its political, social, religious, or economic. (p. 226)

A present-day opinion expressed by actor, director and drama professor, Jack Poggi, writing in 1966, echoes the same tune: educational theatre is an oxymoron. "I am somewhat skeptical of the notion that the theater can have a great effect in changing society; at best, it can reflect and reinforce the values of a dissident group within that society and maybe bring a few people from the

borderline. Euripides, perhaps the first playwright to challenge established values, was reflecting the views of an already existing minority. The most daring theaters today do the same. The theater is only one force - and not a very powerful one in the age of mass media, that can stimulate changes in society" ( p. 285).

Or is it?

Eric Bentley (1953, p. 368), internationally known and respected theatre critic, philosopher, and champion of Brecht, states that "One of the by-products of social theater in America is an abdication of taste and judgement on the part of people capable of both." He goes on to quote Brecht indicating that pleasure is the prime theatrical criterion. Bentley later qualifies this with the Brecht's important modification that the prime theatrical criterion should be *beneficial* pleasure."

Bentley's recapitulation of Brecht's thoughts on the beneficial aspects of the theatre find a focus in Hallie Flanagan's remarks in defense of theatre before the Congressional Hearing of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938. Hallie Flanagan defends the proposition that the theatre must surely be a force for education, for "beneficial pleasure" in the following exchange with Congressman Starnes:

Congressman Starnes: "Do you believe that the theatre is a weapon?"

Hallie Flanagan: "I believe that the theatre is a great educational force. I think it is an entertainment. I think it is an

excitement. I think it may be all things to all men" (Rabkin, 1964, p. 94).

Earlier, in a 1936 essay for the *New Republic*, Hallie Flanagan had written, "Drama, through rhythmic speech, dynamic movement and contagious intensity can influence human thought and lead to human action." The idea that drama can affect society was especially appealing in the 1930s (O'Connor and Brown, 1986, p. 25). Hallie Flanagan, Director of the Federal Theatre Project, muses in *Arena* (1940), her account of that experience, about the Senators: "Were they afraid of the Federal Theatre because it was educating the people of its vast new audiences to know more about government and politics and such vital issues as housing, power, agriculture and labor? (Flanagan, 1940, p. 361). Hallie Flanagan said: "Theatre is one of the great mediums of understanding against the death forces of ignorance" (Flanagan, 1940, pp. 372-373).

In essence, it appears that theatre from its earliest origins, has relentlessly included some elements, themes, theses, concepts, or ideas for learning and change and growth. Theatre informs. Theatre presents its audience with ideas, with something not known before. The theatre offers knowledge, sensitivities, values, attitudes, interests and even perhaps, skill. If it is meaningful, we are changed. Perhaps it is because of the lingering effects in this country, the half-life, of our Puritan heritage; perhaps it is because the theatre often served to point out elements and incidents in our society that were not pleasant to contemplate that we find it

difficult or uncomfortable to consider that a theatrical experience may well be a beneficial pleasure. But the evidence of the ages points to the many aspects and variations of education in the theatre in the dramas of instruction, of social problems and concerns, and in the documentary dramas and the propagandà play. In whatever form, theatre has the power to influence, communicate, stimulate, enlighten, raise issues and educate. Theatre can be a weapon against ignorance and for social change.

### Scene Two: The Federal Theatre Project

The Great Depression touched every area of American life. In 1933 more than 15 million Americans were unemployed. In some counties 90 percent of the population was on relief. One third of the nation was ill housed or homeless. Banks closed and life savings were erased. The droughts and dust storms of the early Thirties left the nation's farmers destitute and powerless and with increasing foreclosures, some farmers banded together to make matters into their own hands. There were fears that the radical left would gain enough adherents to spark a revolution (Chute, 1966).

The moral tenor of the early Depression years had been set perhaps by the President of the National Association of Manufacturers when he said in 1930 that it was "important to make people understand that suffering of the unemployed is not the product of economic breakdown but was the direct result of their moral infirmity" ( cited in Leuchtenberg, 1958, p.250). Nonetheless, Leuchtenberg states in his *The Perils of Prosperity 1914-1932* ,

"Most families were able to make out on shorter rations but the plight of utterly millions of destitute was appalling" ( p. 253).

In the world of the theatre in 1933 half the New York theatres were closed. Half the actors and theatre people across the nation were unemployed; half the plays produced were revivals. Highly skilled actors, designers and theatre technicians found themselves competing with manual laborers for whatever jobs could be found or standing in relief lines. The people looked to Washington for help. John Reed Clubs agitated for government sponsorship of a government sponsored agency that would offer assistance to artists and writers (Mangione, 1972).

President Roosevelt promised to experiment with a "New Deal" for the people. The unemployed would be given purchasing power by government expenditure for public works (Chute, 1966.) In April of 1935 the Works Progress Administration was organized by Congress to take people off the relief roles and offer them employment in their own trades and professions. In September 1935, a major relief appropriation of five billion dollars of federal funds set the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in motion, immediately attracting conservative opponents' ire and the strident, accusatory labels of socialism, communism, doom and destruction (O'Connor & Brown, 1978). As early as 1933, Harry Hopkins had begun sending Federal Emergency Relief agency funds to a few unemployed artists, actors and musicians. In the next two years 450 persons were employed. The 1935 appropriation included barely

one percent of the five-billion dollars for the establishment of arts projects including regional theatre projects. John Houseman, in the forward to *Free, Adult and Uncensored* attests, "It was a relief measure pure and simple, conceived in a time of misery and despair...from the drab and painful relief project there sprang the liveliest most innovative original theatre of its era" (O'Connor & Brown, 1978).

A relief measure it may have been to those in the WPA who created the idea but to its Director, Halli Flanagan it had a far greater purpose. It was to be the nation's theatre. "A national theatre must have government subsidy because its scope (is) beyond that of private enterprise," said Hallie Flanagan, as she was sworn in on her forty-fifth birthday August 27, 1935. She had been chosen by Roosevelt, at the suggestion of Harold Hopkins, to be the National Director of the Federal Theatre. The September 22 issue of the *New York Times* declared: "Mrs. H. Flanagan to direct WPA Theatre project. WPA to spend \$3,000,000 for reviving drama" (*New York Times*, Sec.10, p.1). That figure was but a fraction of the total \$27 million budget for the total for Arts Relief and the headline told but a fraction of the story that was to unfold ( Flanagan, 1940, p. 46).

Within a few months of this bannered beginning, crafted from agit-prop and relief politics, the premier edition of the Federal Theatre Project's dynamic, dramatic creation, the Living Newspaper appeared. *Ethiopia*, using actual excerpts from the speeches of Roosevelt and Mussolini, was to have been the first Living

Newspaper to reach the public. In early January, 1936, last-minute censorship from the Department of State banned its public debut. Instead, March 14, 1936 saw the production of *Triple A-Plowed Under*, the New York unit's first publicly produced Living Newspaper. Three days earlier the Cleveland, Ohio staff had produced *The Living Newspaper*. A little more than two years later, the Living Newspaper *Spirochete* was first produced by the Chicago Federal Theatre unit.

The vast experiment in Government supported theatre, identified as Federal Project Number One, was not to last long. In the spring of 1939, after a fall and winter season of strong-voiced discontent fomented by the Dies Commission, through the House Un-American Activities Committee, there was no more money in the new WPA budget for the Federal Theatre. The Federal Theatre Project was finished.

#### Aim and Objectives of the Federal Theatre Project

The goal of the Federal Theatre Project, set by the WPA, was to employ the out of work theatre professionals to get them off relief roles. Hallie Flanagan's plans for the FTP were to do this and much more. The scope of the project was vast: regional theatres throughout the nation, directed by professionals presented Shakespeare and other old-world classics, and the modern classics of Eugene O'Neil and T. S. Elliot. The Federal Theatre set the stage for the innovative, original theatrical form, the Living Newspapers. Ballet, marionettes, vaudeville, the circus and radio shows were all

part of the Federal Theatre Project. The radio shows included several series on health-related topics including "Crusade Against Infantile Paralysis," "Dr. Ed Jenner," "Leeuwenhoek: First of the Microbe Hunters," "Pasteur and Koch Revisited," "Plastic Surgery," "Vitamins," and, "T.B. Campaign" (LCFTP, Radio Scripts File).

Under the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Theatre employed vast numbers of the hundreds of thousands of professional theatre people, actors, artists, designers, technicians across the nation whose jobs had evaporated in the early years of the Great Depression. The Federal Theatre had the broadest, most varied repertory of any company and utilized theatrical vehicles from circuses to puppet shows, through Shakespeare to musicals and original drama by contemporary playwrights working with American material. It employed the most at one time of any of the federal projects; it spread nation-wide, and it was committed to administrative and technical innovation. Harold Clurman (1974), called it "the most truly extraordinary effort ever undertaken in the American theater."

One of the Federal Theatre's aims was to reach a wide and varied audience that had not been touched by the theatre before. In four years the Federal Theatre played to more than 30 million people, many of whom had never seen live actors before. The Project was to demonstrate that the unemployed theatrical professional deserved socially useful jobs; talents would be preserved and an audience of Americans "virtually untouched by the

arts" would have a community theatre with regional roots that was socially relevant ( Mathews, 1967).

A national theatre should reach the people--all the people, not just those in New York who could afford high-priced theatre tickets, but those in large and small towns across the country, particularly those who had never had the chance before. Theatre should be free or very low priced so that all could come. Theatre was not just plays on a stage. A national theatre was to incorporate regional history and folklore; it was to encourage new playwrights and original drama. It was to train and retrain theatre professionals.

#### Hallie Flanagan: Director of the Federal Theatre Project

Hallie Flanagan was a remarkable woman for and of her times. Described as a diminutive college professor of great courage, indefatigable, and intrepid in her leadership of the Federal Theatre Project, her undergraduate days had been spent at Grinnell College, in Iowa, along with Harry Hopkins, who later was to become President Roosevelt's top relief administrator. She suffered an early widowhood when her husband of a few short years died of tuberculosis. She and two young sons returned to Grinnell. She became a high-school English teacher, later prevailing upon the principal to let her teach drama. She excelled to such an extent as she shared her talents with college classes, that she was recommended for and accepted at George Pierce Baker's prestigious "47 Workshop" and experimental theatre laboratory at Vassar in 1926. Later the same year, she became the first woman to win a

Guggenheim fellowship. With it she studied theatre all over Europe and was especially influenced by the activity and ferment of the Russian theatre of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold. She was later to fervently deplore the Stalinist policies that transformed the Russian stage into an indoctrination center. But in 1926 she saw a theatre of great artistry and tremendous vitality seeming to serve a force beyond itself, daring to respond to a changing world. In her book, *Shifting Scenes of the Modern European Theatre* (1928), she tells of these experiences (Mathews, 1967).

She returned, newly inspired, to teach, write, direct, and produce at Vassar's famous Experimental Theatre. In 1931 she and a student wrote, and produced, *Can You Hear Their Voices?*, a drama based on the novel of Whittaker Chambers' testimony on the Arkansas drought. It was composed of seven scenes, narrative, blackouts, and vignettes. In this play, "Propaganda did not defeat drama, it was all propaganda, scaring, biting, smashing....", said critic J. W. Krutch (cited in Mathews, 1967, p.22). When other playwrights of the time were trying to fictionalize history, economics, and current events, Flanagan had produced theatre that was experimental, challenging and relevant to a world of privation and hunger (Mathews, 1967). Hallie Flanagan discussed her theories of drama and wrote of her days in Vassar's of experimental theatre in *Dynamo* (1943).

In 1934, Flanagan again traveled to Europe to direct for a year in England and to continue the work begun almost ten years earlier

studying comparative theatre methods. Because of a remark by her Grinnell classmate, Harry Hopkins, questioning the feasibility of an American trying to direct English theatre, she told the school at Dartington Hall that she did not feel she was the person for the job (Flanagan, 1985). But she did stay abroad to continue her quest for theatre. During that same year, Hallie Flanagan married Vassar professor of Greek, Philip H. Davis, a widower with two children (Chinoy, 1980).

Upon Flanagan's return to Vassar in 1935, Harry Hopkins summoned her to Washington to "talk about the unemployed actors" (Flanagan, 1985, p.7). With the advocacy and encouragement of Harry Hopkins, who thought there was no reason why "we can't do some good plays with these people," Hallie Flanagan was told to "draw up a plan" (Flanagan, 1985, pp, 9-10).

At its height the manifestation of Hallie Flanagan's plan, Federal Project Number One, supported and subsidized an arts program of unprecedented size here or elsewhere, employing as many as 10,000 persons in 40 states. Tickets were free or at prices ranging to \$1.10 (Aaron and Bediner, 1970). Hallie Flanagan said in her testimony before the Dies Commission in late 1938, with the FTP standing accused of being composed of largely non-relief amateurs, that 90 per cent of its members were theatrical union professionals taken from relief rolls. Accused of inefficiency, Flanagan stated that despite the fact that the Federal Theatre was created to give employment and not to make money, it turned back to the Federal

Government more than \$200,000, a sum never approached by any other relief project (Flanagan, 1940). Hallie Flanagan, the little college professor, proved to be the indomitable captain of a glorious and fleeting enterprise.

### The Federal Theatre Project Literature

This section surveys the scholarly and critical literature of the Federal Theatre Project. Through a survey of the literature the background of the times in which the Federal Theatre was conceived and established is noted. Critical evaluations of the Federal Theatre Project, both contemporary to it and of more recent date are described. This section includes the stated aims of the FTP, statistics of the FTP, and the events surrounding the end of the project as found in the literature. Contributions made by the Federal Theatre Project are identified.

### Historiography

In this section the literature of the Federal Theatre Project, doctoral dissertations, contemporary critique and commentary of the 1930s, and more recent review and discussion are briefly examined.

Doctoral dissertations. Doctoral dissertations concerning the Federal Theatre Project may be seen to focus on three major areas: Hallie Flanagan, the Federal Theatre Project and the Living Newspaper. Patricia Lin Ridge (1971) discusses Flanagan's academic and experimental work in the theatre at Vassar, calling her one of the American theatre's foremost leaders. Her contributions to the

documentary form, later evidenced in the Living Newspapers and her encouragement of technical research in the theatre are discussed. Barbara Mendoza (1976) makes Flanagan's role in Vassar's experimental theatre and her contributions to American educational theatre during this period the main focus for this work. Flanagan's objectives, theories, procedures and Vassar productions are detailed and analyzed.

The Federal Theatre Project and its contributions are examined by Swiss (1982), Kazacoff (1987), Kreizenbeck (1979), Ross (1981), Williams (1967), and Billings (1967). The form and techniques of the Federal Theatre are studied in Billings (1967), *Design in the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theatre Project . Scenery, costumes and lighting in FTP productions are described and analyzed to chart the development and style of design in the FTP. Billings concludes that low budgets and Hallie Flanagan's earlier work in experimental theatre were conditions which encouraged experimentation, ingenuity and imagination in the scene designs in the FTP.*

Elwood P. Williams (1984) concludes in his examination of selected Federal Theatre plays that these plays reflected American society and political concerns of the time in which they were produced. The protagonists and antagonists of these plays were symbols of the ideals and opposing forces of the first administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Alan D. Kreizenbeck (1979) presents a description of the vast panoply of lesser known FTP productions including highlights of the vaudeville and minstrel shows, traveling troupes, CCC camps, circus and many other such productions .

George Kazacoff (1987) concludes that the FTP's most extraordinary contribution was its dynamic audience development which gave many millions of Americans the opportunity to see a theatrical performance for the first time. He also notes the conflicting aims and purposes of the Project and numerous bureaucratic problems which it encountered.

The conflict within and around the Federal Theatre Project is the subject examined by Theophil Walter Ross, Jr. (1981). His study concludes that "the absence of clear, hierarchical objectives and the subservience of administration goals to personal preferences so weakened the Project that it became susceptible to attacks by Roosevelt's political opponents and eventually expired at the hands "of the Congressional Committees.

The contributions of the Federal Theatre are the focus for Cheryl Swiss (1982). Swiss examines Flanagan's bold experimentation with a variety of forms which, she concludes, left a legacy of technical innovations to the American theatre. Through the efforts of the FTP a generation of theatre artists and technicians were trained and retrained; an emerging generation of playwrights, actors and directors were nurtured. Swiss states that the Living

Newspaper remains " the most vivid example of the unique contribution of the Federal Theatre to American drama."

The Living Newspapers are the subject for McDermott (1963) and Hammouda (1968) . Daniel Howard Freidman's work, *The Prolet-Buhene: America's First Agit-prop Theatre* (1979), is, although not directly concerned with the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper, of interest because of its study of the development of American agit-prop theatre, to which many of the forms and techniques of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers may be traced. Freidman's work examines the development of the Prolet-Buhene. This New York based, German language amateur worker's theatre performed short political plays for a primarily labor audience between the years 1928 and 1934.

Douglas McDermott (1963) examines the formal elements of the Living Newspaper, and concludes that it was a significant dramatic form, part of an international movement. McDermott also concludes that " the Newspaper was a perfect expression of the social ferment in America during the 1930s". Hammouda (1968) traces the possible sources of the Living Newspaper and the structural pattern and characteristics of the form.

Contemporary theatrical critique and commentary. In addition to the dissertations cited above contemporary critique and commentaries of the era with the Federal Theatre Project as their subject are examined here. Such commentaries include the writings of Hallie Flanagan, its director, other personalities involved with the

Federal Theatre Project, and the commentary of various drama critics and theatre scholars of the period.

Hallie Flanagan's *Arena*, first published in 1940, ranks as the definitive, seminal document of the Federal Theatre Project. *Arena* is Flanagan's memoir of the Federal Theatre, her personal, vivid readable account of the Project's origins, its goals and organization. It offers a detailed accounting of FTP productions based not only on Flanagan's immediate recall and personal recollections but on the voluminous reports and records of the FTP as well as Congressional records. These myriad sources give this work validity and immediacy. Further, Flanagan's vignettes of individual productions, dress rehearsals, personalities and small moments, in addition to her personal thoughts and reactions, provide a remarkable, and restrained, factual, exceptionally annotated and detailed study in depth of the Federal Theatre project.

Well-known and respected drama critics of the period Brooks Atkinson, John Gassner and Howard Taubman offer critical insights into the Federal Theatre Project and its activities and productions. John Gassner, respected drama critic and essayist and late Sterling Professor of Play writing and Dramatic Literature at Yale University offers thoughtful discussions of the Federal Theatre in several volumes, most especially *Dramatic Soundings* (1968) in which his chapter "The Thirties" contains essays on the "Depression Playwrights and Reaction, Revolutionary Theatre," and "Politics and Theatre." Gassner considers the Federal Theatre Project a remarkable effort, as

a theatre for the people, presenting many and varied productions, often of high quality, that reached a wide audience. Brooks Atkinson's *Broadway* (1970) and many of his other publications are scrapbooks of his thirty years as *New York Times* drama critic. In *Broadway*, the section "Paradox of the Thirties" examines the Federal Theatre project as an example of the theatre's seeming paradox of social concern and experimentation. His critical reviews of actual FTP productions are particularly useful for their details on staging and techniques. Atkinson concludes that the Federal Theatre was often great on showmanship if not consistently adept at producing great theatre.

Howard Taubman, *New York Times* music and drama critic for more than 30 years, utilizes plays, memoirs, letters, diaries, playbills as he traces the American theatre and the forces that revolutionized it in the 20th century in *The Making of the American Theatre* (1965). His chapter "The Loud, Rude, Vigorous Thirties" includes an examination of the FTP and several of its ventures. Taubman's discussion depicts the Federal Theatre Project as enormous in scope and diversity, achieving greatness in several instances, and as a treasure-house of national wealth in its preservation and encouragement of theatrical skills and talents.

Other critical commentary is available in the writings of John Mason Brown's *Dramatis Personae, a Retrospective Show* (first published in 1929). His chapter "The Changing Scene" is particularly useful in its description of the labor theatre of the late 1920s. Brown

concludes that the propagandist scripts whether good, bad or worse than indifferent proved themselves socially significant and perhaps would later be considered theatrically important. Harold Clurman (1974), noted director and critic, was actively involved in the ferment of this period. His remarks about the social and political reflections in the theatre during these times, in *Theatre Essays*, salute the "documentaries" of the Living Newspapers for their audience impact produced through immediacy and novel staging.

*Violins and Shovels : The WPA Arts Projects* (1976) by Milton Meltzer, historian and biographer, recounts his personal remembrances of the period. Meltzer was assigned to Federal One, the Works Progress Administration designation for the relief project for the arts. His book is based on interviews, memoirs, reports of the period as well as his own recollections. The chapters, "Theatre That Takes a Chance," "The Living Newspaper and the Deadly Censor," and "Shaw and O'Neil: 50 Cents" describe the Federal Theatre Project. Meltzer concludes that despite high hopes, heroic efforts and considerable success, mixed political fortunes and the very immensity of the Project defeated its greatest hope--to become a national theatre.

More recent review and discussion in the literature of the Federal Theatre Project is manifest in Jane DeHart Mathews' definitive discussion of the Federal Theatre as an instrument and victim of politics during the New Deal Administration. Her *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939, Plays Relief and Politics* (1967)

stemming from her doctoral dissertation at Duke University, is a detailed, exceptionally well researched and documented account of the political aspects of the FTP. She draws a detailed picture of the political environment of the FTP and examines the Dies Sub-Committee Hearings in great detail. Her extensive research is drawn from government documents and personal interviews with Hallie Flanagan and other personalities of the FTP, and Flanagan's autobiographical notes, made for Mathews, as well as her personal papers. Mathews details the bureaucratic problems of the FTP in its central and regional offices and devotes an extensive section to "Art, Relief and Politics: Conflicting Forces Examined." Mathews study forcefully demonstrates that this Depression-born venture achieved power, originality and popular appeal but the naive hopes of this often controversial and highly visible effort proved insufficient defense against the political and administrative arena in which it played.

In *Free, Adult and Uncensored, the Living History of the Federal Theatre Project* (1978), editors John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, associate Directors at George Mason University's Federal Theatre Project, offer up a marvelously illustrated scrapbook of original Federal Theatre Project files now assembled at George Mason University. The book is made up of selections from the original FTP plays, radio scripts and a section on the Dance Project along with an elaboration of the background of the era and descriptions of the materials interspersed with recent oral histories

from the artists who were involved. Cultural artifacts from the collections such as posters, photographs, set and costume designs illustrate the volume. Sections on the Living Newspapers, including commentary on techniques and graphic illustrations of set and costume designs are especially useful. In a brief overview of the project O'Connor and Brown see the end of the Project as the result of cognitive and emotional dissonance over the purpose of the Project. Begun as a relief project, Hallie Flanagan thought it could accomplish that task and become the nation's theatre as well. In the late 1930s, with the rumblings of a fast-approaching war-time economy, the Congress no longer felt such an acute need for relief and was unwilling to support a national theatre.

The economic aspects of the American theatre are the focus for Jack Poggi's *Theater in America : The Impact of Economic Forces , 1870-1967* (1968). This volume highlights the economic trends that affect drama. In his chapter "The Thirties," he examines the economic influence on and of the Federal Theatre Project. Poggi sees the Federal Theatre Project as a reflection of New Deal excitement, fervor, the feeling of new things to be done in society--and the theatre. When political reaction dampened those enthusiasms, the Project was doomed.

Rabkin (1964) and Taylor (1972) examine the radical and political content of the theatre in the 1920s and 1930s. Gerald Rabkin's *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre of the Thirties* takes note of the problem of political content and the

impact of politics on American drama in the 1920s and 1930s. His book details three theatres that developed during the Depression Years: the Theatre Union, the Group Theatre and the Federal Theatre. The chapter "Theatre is Men Working" describes political influences on and in the works of The Federal Theatre Project. Rabkin's study concludes that the Project's main contribution was theatrical not dramatic; that the Project was unable to reconcile its commitment to the principle of economic relief with its commitment to a viable, socially-conscious theatre.

Karen Malpede Taylor's *People's Theatre in Amerika* has its preface by John Howard Lawson, a founder of The New Playwrights Theatre, director and playwright, author of *Processional* (1925) and other socially conscious theatre pieces. Taylor's book outlines the history of the people's theatre movement in the 1920s and uses critical commentary interspersed with documentary texts of the times. Taylor's provocative presentation underlines the thesis that a radical political perspective provides the only fertile theoretical basis for meaningful theatre, "peoples" theatre, because it seeks to transform societies and personalities until their human potential is realized. Her chapters "Living Newspaper" and "Federal Theatre" deliver the conclusions that the Living Newspaper's challenge was to find theatrical analogs to contemporary social problems; its purpose was to educate the public; that the Federal Theatre Project was silenced because it was dangerous.

## The Revolutionary, Evolutionary Environment of the Federal Theatre Project

Brooks Atkinson (1972), drama critic of the *New York Times*, observes that in the 1920s Broadway tolerated revolution, the radical ideas of Ernst Toller's *Man and Masses* and John Howard Lawson's *Processional*. Atkinson called *Processional* a "socially aware, politically motivated jazz symphony of American life, a rhapsody in red" (p.216). Contemporary wit Alexander Woolcott, Atkinson says, referred to Lawson and other socially aware, politically motivated dramatic authors as the "revolting playwrights" (1972, p. 287).

In the 1930s, says Atkinson, the American system seemed to have failed, while in Moscow there were 35-50 theaters packed every night; their actors had parts and regular meals. The traumatic experiences of the early years of the Depression in the United States raised doubts about the validity of the American political and economic system. In the theatre, "anxiety was universal, privation was common" (Atkinson, 1970, p. 285). Five thousand actors were out of work on Broadway. In New York during the season of 1932-33, half the New York theatres were dark and speeches were made in Congress denouncing the critics as villains, undermining the welfare and prosperity of the theatre (Taubman, 1965, p. 287).

"Theatre as a Weapon!" became a belligerent slogan for local dramas of social protest. The New Theater League and the Theatre Union produced passionate drama to indoctrinate the working class.

"Politics became a social diversion and on Broadway "Left-wing productions became fashionable. The mood was fiercely anti-war, as evidenced in Irwin Shaw's powerful *Bury the Dead* (1936), in which dead soldiers get up from their graves and speak to the audience.

Theatre took a new interest in minority groups with "sensationalist naturalism" exemplified by Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* and *Tobacco Road* (Atkinson, 1970, pp.187-91; Gassner, 1965, p. 415). The 1930s' milieu was a creative period in the theatre and "by some inscrutable paradox, one of Broadway's most stimulating", says Atkinson in his chapter "Paradox of the Thirties." The Depression permanently changed values of national life and the "happy folklore about a rosy future" (Atkinson 1970, p.286).

"The realities of the depression changed the tenor and direction of American drama," observes Gerald Rabkin (1964). Writing in his book, *Drama and Commitment: Politics in the American Theatre in the Thirties*, he notes that drama in the 1930s experienced and exhibited "Brechtian technique and Marxist agit-prop." The Thirties were "characterized by the domination of theatre groups in an age in search of collective alternatives....There was a sense of social and theatrical social obligation" (pp.30-39).

Drama critic Harold Clurman (1974), writing in 1946, recalled that "the Depression of 1929-39 shook us up. For a time we responded politically, although when the crisis passed many of us grew impatient with Roosevelt and his reforms. But the Depression

was a condition no one could overlook, and our theatre gave striking evidence of the fact" (p. 192).

John Gassner's chronology of the modern theatre illustrates the theatrical ferment surrounding the birth of the Federal Theatre Project: Broadway in 1934 saw the production of Gertrude Stein's dadaist-surrealist *Four Saints in Three Acts* and Sidney Howard's *Yellowjack* in which epic theatre dramaturgy was employed by "one of the American theatre's most successful realists." The year 1935 saw the advent of "idealistic naturalism, or didactic naturalism," and "sociological realism" winning great success in the American theatre. The application of theatricalism to social drama resulted in Odets' *Waiting for Lefty*, the "leftist agitational" one-act play. This year also saw the production of Maxwell Anderson's now classic "major effort to create poetic tragedy," *Winterset* (Gassner, 1965, p. 416). From this creative, innovative, experimental theatrical environment during the years 1935-1939 came "the government-subsidized Federal Theatre, the first (and thus far only) 'state theatre' in the United States noted for 'epic' productions, called 'living newspapers,' such as *Power* and *One-Third of a Nation*, as well as for other types of theatricalist experimentation with productions of *Murder in the Cathedral*, *Pinocchio*, *Doctor Faustus* and a *Negro Macbeth*" (Gassner, 1965, pp. 416-417).

#### For the Record: Federal Theatre Project Figures

Facts and figures are such an integral part of the documentary expression of the 1930s era that it is an important function of this

examination of the background of *Spirochete* to present an assembly of Federal Theatre Project statistics. It is important to recall that in 1933, 15 million were unemployed. Six million were on the charity rolls and 40,000 of those were theatre people (Rabkin, 1964, p. 96). Half the New York theatres were dark. Half the actors were unemployed. One-third of the plays produced were revivals (Matthews, 1967, p. 302).

The Federal Theatre Project was officially approved August 27, 1935. The Federal Theatre project put 12,000 people to work in its first year (Chinoy, 1980, p. 238). Ninety-five per cent of those were from relief rolls; 80 percent belonged to accredited theatrical unions (Matthews, 1967, p. 302). In May of 1936, the New York Unit had 5,385 persons on its payrolls at a salary of \$103.40 a month (Atkinson, 1970, p. 301).

The Federal Theatre Project gave 1,200 or more individual performances in four years throughout the United States, 830 of those were productions of major works and 105 were original productions not previously produced (Poggi, 1968, p.161). The 150 separate units of the Federal Theatre Project produced 2,715 stage plays, including "a classical cycle, a religious cycle, Americana, modern plays, Living Newspapers, dance, vaudeville, musical comedy, marionettes, pageants and circus productions", according to Hallie Flanagan (Taylor, 1972, p.161; *FTP 50th Anniversary Brochure*, n.d.). Sixty-five percent of all the productions were free

( Brockett, 1982, p.629). Even so, at the closing of the Project, \$2,000,000 was taken in and the top price for a ticket had been set at no more than \$1.10 (*Federal One*, 1980, p. 4).

At its peak the Federal Theatre Project employed 10,000 people in 40 states (Brockett 1982, p. 629). After the closing, June 30, 1939, Flanagan wrote in "What Was Federal Theatre" (1939) that 7,900 people with an average of three dependents each were without jobs (Taylor 1972, p.162). The next year when the dust had settled, the balance sheet for the Federal Theatre Project showed that an average of 10,000 people working on the project had supported an average of four dependents for four years (Flanagan, 1940, p. 436).

The Federal Theatre Project played to an audience with an average 500,00 persons a week for a total some 30 million composed young and old, men, women and children, many of whom had never seen a play before (*Federal One*, 1980).

The Federal Theatre was far-reaching. In April, 1936 Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* played in the town hall in Littleton, Massachusetts; Detroit witnessed *Lilliom*; Asheville, North Carolina, saw *Camille*; while Los Angeles had a choice of attractions at six different "WPA theaters ranging from *Six Characters in Search of an Author* to plays in French, Yiddish, and Mexican (sic) (Leuchtenburg, 1963, pp. 126-27). In Omaha the actors learned that 90 percent of the audience "had never seen a play and could not believe that the actors were not moving pictures: but after every

performance " would wait in the doorway to see 'whether the people are real.'" In Valley, Nebraska one thousand persons tried to get into the schoolhouse to see the first play ever presented in the region (Morris, 1953, p. 346).

Orson Welles described the Federal Theatre audiences as "fresh, eager. To anyone who saw it night after night as we did it was not the Broadway crowds...One had the feeling every night that here were people on a voyage of discovery in the theatre" ( cited in O'Connor, 1980, p.5).

In the two weeks in January of 1937 during the Cincinnati flood , Federal Theatre played 40 engagements for the flood victims by flashlight and lantern light. During the same two weeks New York units produced a new play, *Native Ground*; and Orson Welles' *Faustus*. Harlem and the other New York units contributed two news plays, a puppet show and Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*. In Chicago there was a new ballet by Katherine Dunham. In Los Angeles the offerings included revivals of *Uncle Vanya* and *Redemption* . Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here* played in Yiddish. Seattle saw a new musical and a new Negro play. There were FTP productions in Indianapolis and Cedarhurst, New York. An Italian play in Boston was played in its native language. Omaha and Peoria greeted "stageworthy stock perennials." It was one of the largest coordinated theatrical experiments in the history of the world (Rabkin, 1964, p. 95-96).

### Assessments of the Federal Theatre Project

What was the Federal Theatre? Obviously it was many things viewed from many perspectives. Was it relief? Was it theatre? Was it social protest? What was the final review? The Federal Theatre was excitement and diversity cascading out of a multi-faceted project that was to encourage the survival of "the talents of the professional theatre workers together with the skills of painters, musicians and writers, part of the national wealth which America could not afford to lose" (Taubman, 1965, p.230).

The Federal Theatre was often startling. It was attention-getting; it was not docile or innocuous. How could it be in the middle of a catastrophic depression and unsettling world events? It was a grand "wide-ranging experiment in national support of the arts...For a time it looked...as if it would not only change the country but change it permanently. That it did not do so is attributable in part to its very magnitude and even in larger measure to the forces that created it" (Taubman, 1965, p. 229).

The New Deal forces that created it became targets for the conservative opposition which did not applaud the Federal Theatre. No WPA project turned out to be more controversial than the Federal Theatre. Although some productions were of unusually high quality and it played before 25,000,000 Americans some politicians resented the "unmistakable leftist coloring" in many productions and saw in the Living Newspaper a medium for New Deal propaganda. Conservative disapproval of the WPA crystallized in the Dies

Committee report of January 1939 which declared the Federal Theatre to be Communist dominated (Aaron and Bendiner, 1970, p. 404). These charges were eloquently and factually rebutted by Hallie Flanagan and the Project staff in page after page of Congressional testimony. (A discussion of the Congressional controversy which ended the FTP is found in the following section. The "leftist" and "propaganda" allegations are discussed in the discussion of the Living Newspaper as a genre. The Federal Theatre Project was a "product of social necessity and as such was inevitably involved in political issues (Rabkin, 1964, p. 39).

In the Federal Theatre social and political issues of the day were frequently dramatized and the result was education, excitement and uplift. The Federal Theatre made the theatre relevant to its audience (Greene, 1980 p. 1). Biographer Helen Chinoy (1980, p. 238) states that Hallie Flanagan "took what was intended as a relief measure for theatre people and turned it into a daring, innovative national network of regional theaters dedicated to education, social comment and entertainment. "

Eric Bentley (1968, p.123) observed that the Federal Theatre was "an improvisation of characteristically American sort—a triumphant piece of private enterprise in the public domain." The Federal Theatre's low priced productions played before millions and reached both young and old who were "brought together, organized and educated instead of being left to accumulate by good fortune or accident," declared John Gassner (1968, p. 356).

Yes, it was a relief project; but what else was hoped for? Hallie Flanagan, writing for *Federal Theatre Magazine* in 1936, said "It is of no value whatever to stimulate theatre-going unless, once inside our doors our audience sees something which has some vital connection with their own lives and their own immediate problems" (Mathews, 1967, p. 84). It was aimed "at making theatre an integral part of peoples lives. The FTP was intended to entertain and to instruct Americans in the increasingly serious business of surviving in America during the 1930s" ( *FTP 50th Anniversary Brochure*, n.d.). "The Federal Theatre Project was America's most exciting experiment in Federal support of the theatre arts. Nothing of its astonishing scope has happened here before or since. It is a theatre phenomenon" (Lewis, 1969, p. 53). The Federal Theatre Project, begun as a government- supported relief endeavor for the arts, became a daring, stimulating and often controversial mixture of theatre, politics and social change that reached millions with its often vital, exciting, and relevant presentations .

### Finis for the Federal Theatre Project

The theatre of astonishing scope, the exciting experiment, the theatre of education and uplift came to an abrupt end much as it had begun, at the hands of politicians making yet another deal. Inevitably involved, as Rabkin (1964) notes, in political issues, the Federal Theatre Project was the object of an investigation by the House Appropriations Committee and the House Sub-Committee on Un-American Activities. The Project was charged with

being "subverted by communists" and full of "immorality and mismanagement" (Poggi, 1968). Both committees, made up of the New Deal's conservative political foes, were not friendly.

Conservative, Anti-New Deal sentiments were rampant. The Federal Theatre Project was accused of being a "boondoggling and shovel leaning waste and a hotbed of radical activity." The Hearst press called it an adjunct to "New York Leftist literary junta." All responsible critics thought the charges "manifestly absurd" (Rabkin, 1963, p. 101).

Months of testimony before the House Committee on Un-American Activities began in the early autumn of 1938. The level of the investigative inquiries that brought an end to the Federal theatre Project on June 30, 1939 are reflected in the following exchange (December 6, 1938) between Congressman Joseph Starnes and Hallie Flanagan, as he inquired about a Mr. Marlowe she had mentioned in an article for *Theatre Arts Magazine*.

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

"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 it in the record," Hallie Flanagan replied, "that he was the greatest dramatist of the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare."

Later she recalled the bizarre Washington episode: 'The room rocked with laughter, but I did not laugh. Eight thousand people might lose their jobs because a Congressional Committee had so prejudged us that even the classics were 'communistic'" ( Flanagan, 1985, p. 342).

The Federal Theatre Project was a very large, very public and very political experiment in New Deal relief. Mathews (1967) observes that "as a work project the Federal Theatre was undeniably more expensive than direct relief; as a professional project it was more expensive than other work programs." The WPA paid \$1,250 to a Federal Theatre employee for an entire year. It only cost \$732 to support a construction worker because local agencies contributed additional aid ( Mathews, 1967, p. 304). Those figures could hardly offer a viable excuse for ending the project. Hallie Flanagan observed that the "arts projects used less than three fourths of one-per cent of the total WPA appropriation and that appropriation was not cut one cent by terminating the Federal Theatre Project " (Flanagan,1985, p. 334). Mathews (1967) points out that the bill cutting the Project's appropriations was attached to a much larger Relief measure. President Roosevelt reluctantly signed the bill, noting that he could hardly withhold his signature and thereby stop the entire work relief system .

Economic issues aside, Mathews (1967) noted that the Project was surrounded by "too much controversy and supported by too few constituents. It was far louder than other artistic projects and

attracted greater publicity than the others which were less dramatic and had less far-reaching impact" (pp. 304-310). Editors on the Federal Writers Project could edit and rewrite passages, as did Flanagan in several FTP scripts, but there was little she could do once the production was on the stage. The Federal Theatre Project developed a radical image. The main objects of the controversy were the FTP's Living Newspapers.

The Project lacked grass roots support and remained highly centralized. Flanagan could count on the active support of Congressmen from New York, California and Illinois, and perhaps a few other states with local projects. "But 56 out of 192 members of Congress was not enough" to prevent the demise of the Federal Theatre Project ( Mathews, 1967, p.311).

Although the Federal Theatre was a professionally respected production unit, it was ended because Congress treated it as a political issue rather than a cultural or human one. And "there was resentment of the equal opportunity given to negroes in the Southern states," Flanagan said in *Arena* , in her chapter "Blasting: Work Suspended" (Flanagan, 1985 , p. 334-335). In a time when blacks were not always assured of equal access, even to other New Deal Agencies, the Federal Theatre Project offered professional opportunities and money for fresh designs and productions, time for rehearsals and sufficient casts. A growing awareness of what black artists could achieve became evident with each success (Mathews,1980, p.298-99). Flanagan, in an article titled "Congress

"Takes the Stage" written for the August 20, 1939 issue of the *New York Times* ( cited in Mathews, 1967, p. 313 ), describes the final Congressional decree as " a vicious report of a biased committee and the mass action of a great many other people in Congress...taken in by false fears."

Despite last-minute educational efforts by the Project 's supporters and staff, it was too little, too late. Rabkin comments on the Federal Theatre's final curtain: The continuation of the Project was urged in the letters and telegrams that poured into Washington from the greatest names in the theatre and in the theatrical unions. The New York drama critics composed a joint letter of protest to Congress pointing out the Project's great value in the life of the community (Rabkin,1963, p. 121).

But the issues involved in the Federal Theatre's final curtain were those with which it was surrounded from the first moments of its conception and more than last-minute letters and telegrams could ameliorate. Conflicting purposes, social and political demands and commitments, high, wide and perhaps unrealistic aspirations, and rapidly changing times formed it; and finally eliminated it four years after it was first begun. Growing disenchantment with New Deal policies found a sticking point in the very visible theatre that reflected those New Deal policies, not only on its stage but in its policies of equal opportunity, social consciousness and government responsibility for the arts. Despite its many significant and far-

ranging accomplishments, the Federal Theatre Project was not strong enough to survive the political hurricane.

### Contributions of the Federal Theatre Project

This section describes the contributions of the Federal Theatre Project to the socio-political-economic culture of the 1930s as identified in the literature. In addition to the notable Living Newspaper, other accomplishments of the Project include the employment of thousands of out of work theatre artists, technicians and personnel, a policy of free or very-low priced theatrical presentations, a wide and varied audience of millions, educational and professional services to the theatre, educational and social commitment to its audiences, a system of regional theatres; and opportunities for the growth of new acting and playwriting talents.

### The Living Newspaper: Synopsis

The most innovative and creative contribution to American society and the arts among all the Federal Theatre's presentations was the Living Newspaper. Based on documented facts and gleaned from the stories and headlines of the day's newspapers, brief sketches became active forms of reporting, dramatizing and giving conscious theatrical design to the topics of the day replete with big casts and innovative staging techniques. The Living Newspaper has been called by theatre scholars and critics the one original form of drama developed in the United States (Gassner, 1968; Mathews, 1980). The Living Newspaper was called "vaudeville with a basic idea" in a Seattle review. "Partly history, partly propaganda," said

Chicago reviews. "Powerful dramatization, brave and exciting", said other contemporary commentary (Federal Theatre Project Collection, *Spirochete* Production Notebooks, 1938, 1939).

A collaboration, in most cases between out-of work Newspaper Guild members and playwrights, the Living Newspapers presented in a series of scenes, with great numbers of actors, accurate information on social and political topics of the day. They dramatized the news and, through form and technique emphasized a point of view, often that of the New Deal Administration.

The goal of the Living Newspapers was to show the importance of a news event to the people it affected. Its aim was to persuade, so authority was often quoted on the stage and footnoted in the program; and evidence was presented graphically. And always there was "an everyman," a protagonist asking questions. The Living Newspaper was, says Mathews (1967), documentary exploration of public issues that stimulated emotions as well as the intellect. It was quintessential people's theatre. Through the Living Newspapers the public learned about Fascism, government programs in agriculture, housing, industry and scientific fields - and how they were affected. Eleanor Roosevelt came backstage after a production of *One-Third of a Nation* (the Living Newspaper that dramatically presented the plight of the ill-housed), and declared that "it achieved something for which we will be grateful for many years to come, something which will mean a tremendous amount in the

future, socially and in the education and growing up of America" (cited in Flanagan, 1985, p. 222) .

The Living Newspaper was, of course, only one aspect of the many-hued Federal Theatre project, but without doubt it was the most prominent. Contemporary and present-day critical evaluations of the Federal Theatre Project's socio-economic and theatrical contributions to society and the arts are in predominantly favorable accord with regard to the total value of this "Joseph's Coat" endeavor. Begun as a relief measure for theatre artists and technicians, the FTP nourished far more than the corporate bodies of those who received their \$23 each week. Rabkin (1964) evaluates the contributions of the Federal Theatre Project in the following manner: "for a brief moment in American Theatre history it proved that two commitments, a viable, socially conscious theatre and the principle of economic relief were not irreconcilable (p. 123).

#### Employment of the Unemployed

It has been previously noted that the main purpose of the Federal Theatre Project was to put unemployed theatre people back to work in jobs that would retain and promote their talents and skills. This the Project did with great success. Howard Taubman (1965) who reviewed Federal Theatre performances during the Project's lifetime wrote: "If the government poured millions into project activities, it got back not only the satisfaction of putting people back to work for which they were equipped but also unparalleled enthusiasm and devotion...Of course the project had

troubles and defects...Its accomplishments were uneven - incompetents, amateurs as well as professionals, found their way onto the pay roll...It was riven by inner dissensions and riddled by outside attacks" (Taubman,1965 , pp. 229-30).

### Free, or Low-priced Theatre for a Wide Audience

Hallie Flanagan had often stated that a national theatre should be for all the nation's people, not just those that could afford it. For a while, because of the Federal Theatre Project, theatre was accessible to wide, new audiences. John Gassner (1968, p. 356), writing in 1941 in an article for *Current History* , said that the total expense for the FTP, "did not exceed the approximate cost of one battleship for four useful seasons of the theatre...When Congress lowered the curtain on hundreds of productions two years ago, a good deal of life departed from the American stage. Hundreds of cities have been left without a theatre...the folk spirit will go begging and a large sections of the population will be unable to meet the tariff imposed by the commercial stage. Gassner further reminds us that a vital theatre goes to its audience. The Federal Theatre played in hospitals, city streets, parks, greens and CCC Camps . Hallie Flanagan remembers, "They traveled by truck through rural state areas of Illinois, Michigan, Main, New York, Oklahoma. In Florida... people came in ox cart carrying lanterns... barefoot, to see Shakespeare" (Taylor, 1972, p.164).

### Educational and Professional Services for the Theatre

The Federal Theatre project also offered other services besides theatrical productions. It encouraged local and community drama with training. It established the national Service Bureau which supplied advice, training, research and scripts to communities and universities. Flanagan states that "The service Bureau engaged in extensive theatre research answering about 5,000 inquiries a week" (Taylor, 1972, p.165). The Federal Theatre of the Air put on 2,000 radio programs each year. These myriad corollary activities fulfilled Flanagan's dictum that a theatre had to meet the needs of the community it served. The Project had a dual purpose: to fulfill a social need as well as physical hunger (Rabkin, 1964, p. 97).

### Training and Opportunity

The Federal Theatre offered its hundreds of stages across the country as a training ground for young actors and actresses, theatre artists and technicians who would have had no school but the street during the Depression years. The Federal Theatre encouraged unknown playwrights in the creation of original dramas. Hallie Flanagan (cited in Taylor, 1972, p.165), writing for the *New Republic* in 1939, described the Federal Theatre Project in "What Was Theatre." She wrote that "It gave an opportunity to employ hundreds of unknown young dramatists;" it gave actors and actresses the opportunity to "perform plays on American built and equipped and manned stages in tents, on trucks, showboats; on platforms, in parks, schools, playgrounds, tables in remote CCC camps

and in the wake of floods and disasters." And, she continued, "they reclaimed literally through their own labor, working long hours without watching the time clock, many old theatres ."

John Gassner (1968) comments on the opportunities for theatrical education and training: "Leaders of the Federal Theatre strove to perfect its product: the young were schooled and the old reconditioned; the performances improved...(The Project) gave opportunities to young talent: Orson Welles, John Housman....Often its theatre for children was outstanding such as Yacha Frank's *Pinocchio* . The Project brought masters of the modern drama (O'Neil, and Shaw) to a vast population that had never seen their work on stage...(Its )major productions became outstanding examples of theatrical art " (Gassner, 1968, pp. 356-358).

#### Education and Social Commitment

Federal Theatre became a contributing member of the communities in which its units were based. Hallie Flanagan recalls that "Federal Theatre marionette companies in Buffalo were so valuable in teaching health to children that the Board of Health paid all their costs other than labor and gave them a place to work ... Boards of Education in Florida, Michigan , Ohio, New York paid transportation and other costs for our companies touring the schools with the classics" (Taylor, 1972, pp. 164-166).

John Gassner (1968) speaks of the Federal Theatre as a vital theatre and then goes on to discuss the characteristics of such a theatre.

A vital theatre is communal. Drawing its sustenance from the manners and interests of common folk it explores local customs and finds a common bond...(Such a theatre encounters problems) when it speaks out plainly, as did the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers, instead of rationalizing and equivocating subtlety; in attack, it bludgeons instead of using a rapier...Metropolitan critics noted such crudities and forewarned that the legislators might object to so much plain speaking...But a people's theatre could not have been anything other than robust, sometimes critical and sometimes bluntly aggressive. (p.356)

### Regional Theatre

The Federal Theatre was to be accessible theatre that came to the people, and a true people's theatre reflecting a region's history and concerns. Writing in 1941 after the Project's close, John Gassner gave these examples of the influence of the Federal Theatre Project: the Theatre Guild was touring revivals; a state theatre was underway in Virginia, promoted by Robert Porterfield as the "Barter" theater where farm produce could be bartered for admission. North Carolina was host to a flourishing annual theatre festival celebrating its beginnings with Paul Greene's *The Lost Colony*, originated under the Federal Theatre Project and playing on Manteo Island, the site of Sir Walter Raleigh's Lost Colony. Low price theater was found in the "Dollar Top" Shows and the Labor Stage. Experimental theatre on Broadway was giving opportunities to new talent and scripts. The

Government was sponsoring theatrical entertainment for service men. (Gassner 1968, p.359).

Summary: The Living Newspapers in Review

The Federal Theatre Project was a vast design, an enormously innovative and exciting enterprise. It touched millions of lives during the Depression-numbered years of the mid and late 1930s. In her book *The Federal Theatre , 1935-1939 Plays, Relief, and Politics* (1967), Jane DeHart Mathews pays tribute to Hallie Flanagan's unflagging spirit and summarizes the exhilaration, the excitement, the dissension and the political battles of this massive undertaking in art and government. Even in its career cut short, the Federal Theatre Project, risen from the ashes of the Depression, achieved power and popular appeal. Mathews lauds (1967) the Project's originality and its creed of service and laments its political innocence:

Out of an enforced union of art and government this indomitable woman labored at great personal cost to bring forth an American theatre relevant enough to the lives of the audience and regional enough in its local roots to insure its institutional place...Dedicated to the idea of an involved, socially committed theatre, she failed, as do many idealists to appreciate the political and administrative context within which such a theatre would have to be created...

Created at the high tide of New Deal reformism the Federal Theatre enjoyed not only the virtues but also the faults of the Presidential program of which it was a part. Idealistic,

imaginative, highly experimental, above all, it aspired boldly, creatively, and perhaps unrealistically to be more than a relief measure. It aspired also to reform. (p. 307)

Hallie Flanagan felt that if government was concerned with making people better citizens and individuals then it should concern itself more and more with theatre. Not theatre as a luxury but as a necessity (Mathews, 1967). Flanagan stated boldly, "The arts are useful in making people better citizens, better workmen, in short better-equipped individuals--which is after all, the aim of a democracy...The theatre...should not be regarded as a luxury. It is a necessity because in order to make a democracy work the people must increasingly participate; they can't participate unless they understand; and the theatre is one of the great mediums of understanding" (Flanagan, 1985, p.372).

In sum, the Federal Theatre Project was created to employ thousands of out-of-work theatre professionals and preserve their skills; but Hallie Flanagan saw it also as a commission to create a truly national theatre made available, accessible and relevant, and including regional theatres, not only to entertain but to inform, to influence, and to educate by producing original, regional and socially conscious material, based in the history and contemporary problems of the country.

It is apparent from the preceding survey of the literature that the Federal Theatre Project, a product of the fervent and fervid Depression years in this country, under the inspired leadership of

Hallie Flanagan, exhibited an excitement and a commitment to its audience that made it responsive and relevant to the times and the American people. The Federal Theatre was imaginative, creative and diverse in concept and implementation. In the short period of its existence it fulfilled the goals set forth in its founding by putting theatre people to work, taking them off relief rolls and saving their professional skills. In so doing it brought education and uplift, entertainment and exhilaration to millions across the country .

### Scene Three: The Living Newspaper as a Genre

This section presents the Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project as a genre, outlining their antecedents, the process of their construction, their themes and purposes, and the form and techniques that distinguish them. The section concludes with contemporary and later-day evaluations.

#### Antecedents of the Living Newspaper

Hallie Flanagan observed that Living Newspapers were as American as Walt Disney, the "March of Time," and the Congressional Record (*Arena*, 1984 p. 70). She also recognized that like most Americans their roots could be traced elsewhere. Flanagan said that some persons thought they were borrowed from the London Music Halls but in actuality their source was "Aristophenes, the Commedia del'arte, Shakespearean soliloquies and Chinese pantomime." The Living Newspaper, she said, was a flexible technique with occasional references to the Volkesbuhne and the Blue Blouses, to Bragaglia and Meirhold (sic) and Eisentein (Flanagan, 1985, p. 70).

The Living Newspaper's progenitors, as listed by Flanagan, are delineated as follows: The classical Greek playwright, Aristophanes (448-380 B.C.) noted for satirical situations, simple plots and broad farce. In addition, his utilization of the "Parabasis," the formal address to the audience, permitted the dramatist to put over his own ideas and views directly. His subjects were contemporary issues and he was often outspoken in his presentations.

The Commedia del'arte productions in Italy in the 1600s relied on stock characters and improvisations. In the 1920s, the German-speaking Volkesbuhne sought to arouse intense emotional response with masses of people, movement, sound, and shifting, colored lights. Mei Lan-fan (1894-1961) is perhaps the most famous of Chinese stage actors. Using only a few props and singing, speaking and moving according to conventions, he raised the art of Tan (male actors playing female roles) to prominence in the Peking Opera ( Brockett, 1982).

In 1919, The Russian Blue Blouses after their creation by the Communist Party in the Revolution, toured Germany, reading ordinary newspaper texts and using lantern slides and bits of film. Agit-prop theatre, debuted in the German Worker's Theatre League, the same year (FTP Living Newspapers File, n. d.).

An "Alive" or "Living Newspaper" in Russian, "Zhivaya Gazeta," was first produced by the Red Army during the Civil War of 1919. In it were many short scene connected by a player known as

the "Editor" who commented on them and made their points clear to the audience (FTP Living Newspapers File, n. d., p.3).

The German-Language Prolet-Buehne (Proletarian-Buhene) performed agit-prop in New York in 1925, similar to the presentations of the German Worker's Theatre League. Also in New York, two plays called Living Newspapers were reported as presented by Left-wing groups in 1931 and 1933 (FTP Living Newspapers File, n. d., p.3).

"The most original dramatic style ever developed in America," said Gassner ( 1968, p. 391), the FTP's Living Newspaper was produced by compounding film and lecture techniques, minstrel shows, revue and other dramatic elements into documentary drama in support of the New Deal.

The creation of the Living Newspaper for the Federal Theatre Project was a communal act. Elmer Rice, the first Director of the New York project, thought of a way to put hundreds to work instead of just a few, which of course was to be the primary goal of the FTP. In an agreement with the New York Newspaper Guild, hundreds of reporters were put to work as if they were on a city daily. Arthur Arent was their managing editor who refined their ideas and put them into dramatic form. Topics were assigned and the reporters researched them, probing newspapers, magazines, books , the Congressional Record. All of the Living Newspaper scripts bear extensive footnotes and documentation ( Taylor, 1972, p. 147).

The Living Newspaper were an improvised technique that made efficient use of the Federal Theatre's "most conspicuous asset: manpower." The form itself was conceived to create plays on socially important topics that would use a lot of characters (Atkinson, 1970, p. 301).

### Themes for the Living Newspaper

In theory, the Living Newspapers were objective. Atkinson (1970) observes that "They were learning plays that presented information in capsule form, terse, trenchant, stimulating.. It was impossible for anyone to have objective opinions about topics like Ethiopia. Few could be dispassionate about...the plight of the farmers...These were partisan issues" (p. 304). So partisan, so passionate, in fact that what was to have been the premiere edition the Living Newspaper, *Ethiopia*, never received public performance. The State Department, apparently fearful of offending the Italians with *Ethiopia's* literal translations of Mussolini's speeches, juxtaposed with those of Roosevelt, banned the play.

The Federal Theatre's New York Project's first publicly performed edition of the Living Newspaper, *Triple A- Plowed Under*, appeared in March 14, 1936, and dealt with profiteering in food distribution resulting from the desperate Depression-era farming conditions in drought stricken areas. *Power* (1937) advocated Government ownership of electric power. *One-Third of a Nation* (1938) advocated Federal and state development of low-cost housing. Director Arthur Arent, referring to these Living Newspaper

productions of the New York project, noted that "with their driving energy and enthusiastic partisan appeal they were not strictly objective. They editorialize as well as report, but at its most partisan (the Living Newspaper) never went beyond the New Deal Position" (Taubman, 1965, p. 230). To Hallie Flanagan, the Living Newspapers were "written objectively with no adherence to any party line...with regional themes and bold, visionary, imaginative dissemination of new ideas" (Mathews, 1967, p. 96).

Following the New York unit's examples, other Federal Theatre companies created their own Living Newspapers, some never produced, some met with success, like the Chicago unit's production of *Spirochete*, premiered in in the spring of 1938 and played in more than a hundred performances in five cities across the country.

Hallie Flanagan said the Living Newspaper sought "to make theatre out of every day factual material...to dramatize a new struggle--the search of the average American today for knowledge about his county and his world; to dramatize his struggle to turn the great natural and economic and social forces of our time toward a better life for more people" ( LCFTP. the living newspaper, article, Living Newspaper file, n.d., p. 1).

The Living Newspapers were representations of news events and their effect on the people. They were the dramatization of a problem. They inspected current social problems and "sought to turn the spectator audience into active participants in the solving of these

problems" (LCFTP. *The Federal Theatre 50th Anniversary Brochure*, 1985, p. 7).

The Living Newspapers were dramatically presentational productions with the common aim of didacticism, states Rabkin (1964). "They confronted their audiences with special social issues and political alternatives. The Living Newspaper continually stressed the need for intervention where the New Deal formulated social programs." In *Federal Theatre Magazine*, Hallie Flanagan (cited in Rabkin, 1964, p. 120) said, "Our plays concern themselves with the conditions back of the conditions described by President Roosevelt in his (second) inaugural address" ("I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished...." January 20, 1937).

When New Deal Policies advocated the Tennessee Valley Administration, in the face of Supreme Court opposition, the FTP's Living Newspaper *Power* presented the problem (the play opens with a power failure) and educated the consumer audience about the whys and wherefores of electricity. *Power* was a dramatic advocate for the Administration's position and the need for TVA (O'Connor & Brown, 1978).

The Living Newspapers' advocacy extended to other current social problems. "Such pressing national problems as farm poverty, the harnessing of water power, and even syphilis were dramatized. The Living Newspaper editorialized; but it never expressed anything more radical than the familiar New Deal panaceas, contrary to (the statements of some) outraged conservatives (Lewis, 1969, p. 54).

"The challenge of the living newspaper (sic) was to find theatrical analogs to contemporary social problems. Its purpose was to educate the public. The living newspaper's inherent virtues (were) its muckraking ability, its elasticity, its focus on a theme instead of a plot, situation instead of character" ( Taylor, 1972, p.148).

### Form and Techniques

In essence, the form of the Living Newspapers is documentary. Many sources refer to it as cinematic, or montage and episodic, presenting as it does short scenes and individual dialogues in its "more abstract, often didactic presentations." Director Arthur Arent, in an article written in 1938 for *Theatre Arts Magazine*, refers to this form as being "patterned closely on the revue with the same kind of spotting, flash scene, full stage, down in one, factual, the comic, the realistic sketch, and the musical interlude between scenes, as a chance for the audience to catch breath before "chewing on the next morsel" (Taylor, 1972 p.156).

The Living Newspaper form varied and developed noticeably. from production to production. Rabkin points to *Ethiopia's* format (never publicly produced), wherein the loudspeaker "The voice of the Living Newspaper" served in the role of narrator, introducing the scenes. Subsequently, in *One-Third of a Nation* the loudspeaker took on a larger role when it acted as "a *raisonneur* cajoling, inquiring, polemicizing and pointing the moral of the dramatic action" (Rabkin, 1964, p. 115). Another example of the evolving form of the Living Newspaper points to *Triple-A Plowed Under*, wherein historical

characters spoke only in direct quotations. In the later *One-Third of a Nation*, this strictly factual material was balanced with creative scenes introduced to point up the effect of the situation on the average man (Rabkin, 1964).

The characteristic format of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper may be seen as the illustration of a current social problem, illustrating that problem, educating the audience, and advocating action for social change.

For the most part Living Newspaper formats are "concise and compact built for action and speed." An example of this format can be seen in *One-Third of a Nation* which begins with, "the presentation of problem (usually a recent, sensational example of the problem); recognition of its importance; determination of its cause, and examination of alternatives; (leading up to a) decision" (LCFTP. L N file, article n.d, p.1).

In describing the format of the Living Newspaper in his 1938 article, Arthur Arent, the director of the New York unit's Living Newspapers, disclosed that "one aspect of the problem should be explained or dramatized fully and completely in one scene and then forgotten, with the next scene going on to another point. A single idea diffused over two or three scenes becomes diffused and lacks wallop" (Taylor 1972, p.156).

This rapid succession of concepts frequently sacrificed plot progression for ideas and situations advocating a position. The dramatic sequence of facts and ideas then culminated in a stunning

visual climax that completed an action. Characteristically, the Living Newspapers traced the history of a problem, laying out details and implications for the audience confident that a solution to the dilemma would be found and a brighter future would follow (Gassner, 1968 p. 466). A map of a Living Newspaper would look like this: "the education of an ordinary citizen characteristically provides the first step in social reform; armed with new knowledge and understanding, the citizens organize for change, and the play ends by exhorting the audience to join battle...The central dramatic tension is ignorance vs. knowledge" (Melosh, 1986, p.40).

### Theatrical Techniques of the Living Newspapers

The techniques of the Living Newspapers were indeed a creative compound, a mixture drawn from the media and other dramatic forms. Gassner (1968) describes them as "social realism and imaginative theatre; non-realistic stylization." The Living Newspaper was an "amalgam of motion picture, epic theatre, Commedia dell'arte, and American minstrel show kept within a framework of a question asked, usually by a puzzled little man who represented the public. (This protagonist, average citizen, little man was variously identified as "Angus K. Buttonkooper," "Timothy Taxpayer," "Homer Bystander," "John Q. Public," "Mr. Average Citizen," or "Elbert Q. Expert"). (LCFTP. LN file, n.d.).

Answers were supplied by a series of presentational devices consisting of scenes, demonstrations, slide lectures, and argument. "symbolism was not excluded. Pageantry was...not foreign, (as

exhibited in the procession celebrating TVA in *Power*). Naturalism could also be assimilated" as dramatically conceived in the bleak tenement house in *One-Third of a Nation* (Gassner, 1968, p.463).

Arent, writing about the techniques of the Living Newspaper for *Theatre Arts*, November of 1938, remarks on the loudspeaker. *Ethiopia* was to have introduced the loudspeaker; it was a "nonparticipating dateline introducing various scenes. The original idea was to have a Teletype across the top of the proscenium arch...(like the Times Building). This proved impracticable. A loudspeaker was hurriedly requisitioned and remains in use to the present" (Taylor, 1972 p. 154-155). After its non-debut in the censored *Ethiopia*, the loudspeaker was "at various times ignorant, thirsting for information, and a veritable Britannica of esoteric facts and statistics; it became helpful and sympathetic at one moment, bellicose, disdainful and sly at others" in *Power* (LCFTP. LN file, n.d., p. 2).

Other techniques characteristic of the Living Newspapers are described by Arent (1938). "In the Living Newspapers, the motif is cause and effect. The action builds the dramatic emphasis to a dim-out or repetitions, or spotting with use of projections, as in *Triple A-Plowed Under*, noteworthy for the use of projections, and the shadowgraph device--with this device shadows with historical or contemporary figures were superimposed on the shadows for striking effect" (Taylor, 1972, p.155-156).

Drama Critic Brooks Atkinson describes *One Third of a Nation*'s "spectral set with dramatic lighting perfectly synthesizing all the theatre arts" (1970, p. 305). Staging, lights, background, sound effects, music, dance, pantomime, projections; all were devices and techniques used in Living Newspapers to "create illusion as well as understanding" ( LCFTP. LN file, MacGowan, n. d. p. 2).

Arthur Arent (1938) summed up the creative, dramatic, characteristic, and affecting techniques of the Living Newspapers in this manner: "Each production brought forth changes in content of stagecraft and changes in dramatic abstraction , which is the essence of the Living Newspaper--the business of unrolling ten feet of grass carpet on a stage and saying 'this is five acres of land' and what is more making your audience believe it" (Taylor, 1972, p. 158).

Living Newspapers were particularly successful in their ability to translate abstract concepts into concrete visual actions, making editorial points with theatrical devices. Rabkin (1964) illustrates this point with *Power* , where the complexities of a holding company were reduced to the simple act of a man creating pyramids of different colored boxes; in *One Third of a Nation* "the fact of slum congestion is transmitted through the farcical device of a great number of persons crowding on to a small rug" (Rabkin, 1964, p. 116).

The brash amalgam of abstraction and other innovative stagecraft to present and dramatize a current social problem was examined by John Gassner in 1941 when he wrote: "the Living

Newspaper combined the comic strip Caspar Milquetoast with gusty American journalism, brash loudspeaker of radio advertising and other native elements" to create "an earnest sociological drama in which amusement, excitement and information were simultaneous" (Gassner, 1968, p.358).

In his evocative January 18, 1938 review of the Living Newspaper, *One Third of a Nation* in the *New York Times*, Brooks Atkinson (1970) declared this Living Newspaper a "galvanic theatre form" and went on to describe the construction on the Adelphi Theatre's huge stage of the skeleton of a tenement house. In this spectral home, "Fires and cholera plagues are acted with equal excitement and on the ample forestage the editors hold housing committee investigations, court trials and examinations of the building industry, and they also crack a few folksy jokes" (p.196).

Atkinson declares that even Broadway would call this result of the FTP's months of tinkering and the efforts of a cast of 80 colossal. Even a cash customer, Atkinson declares, would call it vivid theatre. Impressed by the exertions of myriad researchers, he labels the FTP's *One Third of a Nation* a stimulating lesson in a social problem that traces New York's housing plight from Colonial days to the slums of the present.

Atkinson however, faults the "metallic" voice of the Living Newspaper that, he remarks, becomes more voluminous with each issue. He finds it increasingly tiresome. "What is done in a theatre," this thoughtful commentator reminds us, "is always more important

than what is said; primarily the theatre is a place for shows. And what this edition has accomplished in the way of showmanship is particularly exhilarating" (1970, p.196).

Perhaps not great theatre, if one accepts Atkinson's criterion that "what is done in a theatre is always more important than what is said", the Living Newspapers of the Federal theatre without doubt were "exhilarating showmanship" as well as documentary, didactic, cinematic, abstract, realistic, epic presentations with outspoken commentary and a bold, visionary, imaginative dissemination of sometimes controversial new ideas. Some perceived them as blatant Left-wing pieces of propaganda. Many disagreed but acknowledged that the Living Newspapers "editorialized," had a point of view, were "white propaganda," that is tried to educate, to inform and influence public opinion on contemporary issues (Stott, 1973).

John Gassner rebuts the "Left-wing" accusation. "When propaganda was evident as in the Living Newspaper, it was propaganda emanating from the desires of the American people. Propaganda is legitimate in any genuine democracy; propaganda indeed is necessary for a working democracy" (Gassner, 1968, p 358).

Harry Hopkins at the opening of the Federal Theater Project had promised that it would provide a theatre that was "free, adult and uncensored" (Flanagan, 1985, p. 28). But the first Living Newspaper planned for production in 1936, *Ethiopia*, was canceled

abruptly after government officials attending a dress rehearsal became worried that the speeches of Roosevelt and Mussolini, direct quotes, that formed the production's content might be offensive to the Italian government. It was over this perceived breach of contract that the New York's project director, Elmer Rice left the Federal Theatre. (p.66).

Of the Living Newspapers that were produced, "all shared a strong reformist bias; all were sharply critical of the practices of private enterprise; all cited the need for specific governmental action; all criticized to a greater or lesser degree certain aspects of the administration's social programs--but none advocated any revolutionary alternative" ( Rabkin, 1963, pp. 117-118).

In exploring the issue of propaganda in the Living Newspapers, (Mathews,1967) notes, "It is ironical indeed that those plays designed to contribute most directly to the nation's education were the highly controversial Living Newspapers. They were always propaganda and often art. They have remained in the judgement of some critics as perhaps the Federal Theatre's most significant contribution to dramatic form" (p. 307).

In a letter dated July 6, 1939, the Senator from North Carolina, Josiah W. Bailey stated, "The object of the WPA is to relieve distress and prevent suffering by providing work. The purpose is not the culture of the population" (Mathews 1967, p. 308). Nevertheless the Living Newspapers did provide culture for the population. This brash new form contemplated the social concerns of the nation and

advocated solutions. The lively formats introduced innovative techniques that caught the attention of and involved their audiences in the solution of common problems. Their unique presentations brought journalists and actors together to present and comment on the headlines of the day. The result was remarkably dramatic journalism and often sensational staging techniques advocating social reforms. Living Newspapers were recognized as, "a new and vital art form expressing in American epic theatre, in documentary form," the period's analysis of social ills and zeal for social reform (Gassner, 1956, p. 301).

#### Summary: The Living Newspapers in Review

Living Newspapers, as created and staged by the Federal Theatre Project, were an original theatre form that presented fact instead of fiction. Although these Living Newspapers made up less than ten per cent of the entire Federal Theatre's four brief seasons of endeavor, their very topics and their methods of presentation created the controversy which contributed to the downfall of the entire Federal Theatre project. Their editions headlined current social problems in America in the latter half of the 1930s in a unique, exciting, involving format with techniques and theatrical devices that brought immediacy and excitement to the dramatic documentary presentations of the Federal Theatre.

Chicago's Federal Theatre made a daring choice of subject material for a Living Newspaper: syphilis. *Spirochete* was the result. This Living Newspaper's acceptance by its community, the medical

profession, and *Spirochete's* subsequent productions in cities across the country constituted a public consensus of the "awareness of how desperately ignorant the public was" ( Flanagan, 1940, p.144 ).

## CHAPTER THREE

### *SPIROCHETE*, ACT ONE: THE CURTAIN RISES

#### ORIGINS AND FOUNDATIONS

The three scenes in this chapter discuss the social, political and economic milieu in Chicago during the period 1935-1938. Particular emphasis is given to the Chicago Unit of the Federal Theatre Project in which *Spirochete* was spawned and developed. The relationship of *Spirochete* to the social, political and economic elements of this time and place will be drawn, culminating in this Living Newspaper's premiere in the spring of 1938. Scene One presents the rocky political and theatrical battleground of the Chicago Federal Theatre Unit. Scene Two profiles Susan Glaspell, Director of the Midwest Play Bureau of the Federal Theatre, and *Spirochete*'s author, Arnold Sundgaard, the major personalities who guided the development of *Spirochete*. Scene Three, "The War on Syphilis," outlines the national campaign spearheaded by Surgeon General Thomas J. Parran, Jr. against this dread disease.

#### Scene One: Chicago. The Home Front -

#### Social, Economic and Political Origins of *Spirochete*

Hallie Flanagan (1985, p. 131) called Chicago a "place where plays should be written and designs created." And that it was. In the Thirties, Chicago was a town of turmoil whose own grand design was a mixed bag of politics and political criticism that was to shape the tenure of the Chicago Federal Theatre Unit. In 1931 Democrat Anton Cermak was elected mayor, defeating "Big Bill" Thompson to

become the first in an unbroken line of Democratic mayors to rule Chicago that extends to this day. In 1933 the city marked its one hundredth birthday, and even in the depths of the Great Depression, Chicago put on its Great Century of Progress Exposition to celebrate. The central theme of the great fair was "applied science." One of its star attractions was Sally Rand, her Lady Godiva act and her Dying Swan fan dance. The other star attraction was the opening light of the Fair, set off with a beam of light from the star Arcturus. The next year John Dillinger was slain by federal agents and local police as he left a Chicago movie theatre. Hallie Flanagan noted a few years later that "the plains and river towns, the forests and farms of the mid-continent had a proud history, a friendly way of living, a robust point of view that might be vividly expressed in dramatic terms" (Flanagan, 1985, p. 131).

Despite such robust distractions provided by the Century of Progress and John Dillinger, the mood of Chicago in these deepening years of the Depression remained somber. On May 10, 1934 one of the terrible dust storms that marked the years of economic depression and drought swept in from the western plains and dumped twelve-million tons of topsoil on the city leaving all of Chicago inches deep in Dust Bowl detritus (Frazier, 1989). There was little construction or expansion activity in the city. The Federal Works Projects were the "prime instruments for whatever growth and building there was" (Kogan & Wendt, 1958, p.206).

These Federal Works Projects were an integral part of Chicago's relationship with the federal government. This particular relationship was enmeshed with powerful political friendships. Franklin D. Roosevelt had been nominated for the nation's highest office in Chicago in 1932 and Chicago's mayor, Anton Cermak, was with the new president in Miami the next year when shots that were meant for Roosevelt hit and mortally wounded Cermak instead. Edward J. Kelly ascended Chicago's throne and became a full partner in the Kelly-Nash machine that dominated Chicago political life for decades. County Democratic Chairman Patrick A. Nash, epitome of the old-style political boss, ruled under the credo: "Chicago is a big town made up of all types of people. You can't run it--like a Sunday school" (Kogan & Wendt, 1958, p.219).

The mayor's political friendship with FDR and Harry Hopkins, as well as the immense patronage power of the Kelly-Nash machine, was responsible for Chicago works projects receiving federal funds sufficient to keep some 200,000 people on WPA pay roles in Chicago throughout the New Deal years when other projects were cut. Only New York and Pennsylvania had more people on their roles (LCFTP. Jobe, 1986).

Steve Jobe (1986) in his paper "Chicago and the Federal Theatre Project: the Perplexing Dichotomy," cites the dominating influence of the powerful pro-Roosevelt, pro New Deal political machine and weighs it against the lividly anti-Roosevelt anti-New Deal Chicago press. The Chicago newspapers, led by the obstreperous

*Chicago Tribune*, regularly denounced the Roosevelt administration and severely criticized the WPA, its projects and policies. Front-page cartoons lambasted Roosevelt and the WPA almost daily. Scalding editorials vilified New Deal policies.

As early as March 1933, federal funds had been slated for relief for the arts. In 1934 Harry Hopkins declared that "unemployed actors get just as hungry as anybody else," and set up relief projects in New York, California and Chicago. The wheels were in motion. When he spoke with Hallie Flanagan, who would become Director of the Federal Theatre Project in August of 1935, Hopkins bemoaned the fact that although there was some attempt at theatrical work going on, "it's all relief, just relief nothing else. Does it have to be?" ( Flanagan, 1985, p. 9).

### The Chicago Unit: Origins

Chicago, according to Flanagan's original design for a Federal Theatre, was to become one of five great regional theatres that were to include besides Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Boston, and New Orleans (Flanagan, 1985, p. 21). As it was to turn out, Chicago was to star as the Chicago Unit in Region IV, the Midwestern Region. In September 1935 an assessment was made of "Drama Activities in Illinois Under Works Progress Administration" already in place. This study painted "an extremely sad picture. The vaudeville and bands are third rate, the amateur drama is poor, the professional drama non-existent." The five-page report noted that nearly 600 people were presently employed, among them 285 musicians and 275

vaudeville actors. There was no strength in numbers . "The arts are poor, the jokes often of doubtful merit. The singing voices are beyond recall. The orchestras sound noisy and out of tune...the audiences, however, are enthusiastic" (National Archives Records of the Federal Theatre Project. memorandum to Mr. Jacob Baker, Assistant Administrator, Works Progress Administration, 8/19/35).

In October that same year a nation-wide conference brought state and regional theatre directors to Washington to assess the problem of unemployed theatre people and formulate action. The Chicago contingent was headed by Thomas Wood Stevens, originator and director of Chicago's Globe Theatre. At this conference, Hallie Flanagan, the newly appointed Director of the Federal Theatre Project, set forth the aims of the Federal Theatre Project. "Was it not our function to extend the boundaries of theatre-going, to create a vigorous new audience, to make the theatre of value to more people?" (Flanagan 1985, p.41). The guiding vision and goal was a theatre national in scope, regional in emphasis and democratic in allowing each local unit freedom under the avowed principles of the FTP. The task was to bring to "people across America, hitherto unable to afford dramatic entertainment, a theatre which should reflect our country, its history, its present problems, its diverse regions and populations" (Flanagan, 1985, p. 45).

Addressing the gathered theatre professionals Flanagan sounded this call to arms:

"We live in a changing world: man is whispering through space, soaring to the stars in ships, flinging miles of steel and glass into the air. Shall the theatre continue to huddle in the confines of a painted box set? The movies in their kaleidoscopic speed and juxtaposition of objects and internal emotions are seeking to find visible and audible expression for the tempo and the psychology of our time. The stage too must experiment--with ideas, with psychological relationship of men and women, with speech and rhythm forms, with dance and movement, with color and light--or it must and should become a museum product. ( p.46)

If the nation's theatre was challenged to experiment with form and sound and color it was also to take on a new social responsibility as well, Flanagan believed. "In an age of terrific implications as to wealth and poverty, as to the function of government, as to peace and war, as to the relation of the artist to all these forces, the theatre must grow up. The theatre must become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, or the changing social order will ignore, and rightly, the implications of the theatre" ( p. 46).

Chicago's Federal theatre's *Spirochete* was to do more than merely become conscious of the implications of the changing social order, it was to become a proud standard bearer in the nation's fight against syphilis.

### Chicago Melodrama: Players and Politics

Hallie Flanagan (1985, p. 134) wrote in *Arena* (1940), after the final curtain had been rung down on the Federal Theatre project, that if "Federal theatre had ever wanted to produce a cycle of plays epitomizing its own project, New York's would have been staged as a living newspaper," Los Angeles' contribution as a musical comedy, that from the South as a folk play, and Chicago's gift would appear wrapped as a melodrama.

Chicago Federal Theatre started like a detective thriller with farcical elements, worked up through a series of what Mr. Webster's dictionary calls 'sensational incidents and startling situations' and reached magnificent heights of absurdity over the *Swing Mikado* (a jazzed-up version, concocted by Chicago's Negro ensemble, of the doughty good fun of Gilbert and Sullivan's hilarity). Flanagan thought that, "perhaps there is something in Chicago itself, in the strong male atmosphere, in the sweep and surge of the lake which affects the theatre...Something of this gusty spirit of *melos* + drama pervaded the Chicago unit" (Flanagan, 1985, p. 134).

The "detective thriller with farcical elements" characterized the Chicago troupe in the early days of the project. The Chicago players ran afoul of the powerful Chicago political machine. The mayor's office had already prevented the planned performance of *Tobacco Road* and had ordered rehearsals of *Model Tenement*, written by young Chicagoan Meyer Levin, to be discontinued. The mayor's office had the right of censorship. A year after the incident when

Hallie Flanagan met with the mayor, he praised the Federal Theatre Project. She asked him why he had objected to *Model Tenement*. Afterwards, in a memo dated May 4, 1936, Hallie Flanagan expressed her dismay concerning this conference with Mayor Ed Kelly. He denied, declared Flanagan, even knowing about *Model Tenement* The point that she finally considered "most outrageous", after a strange interlude of denial and intrigue including the police commissioner's office, was that "this play was evidently stopped by someone who never read the script at all and who has no idea of what the play is really about" (NA. Flanagan, memo, 5/4, 1936, p. 3).

- Local censorship was not to fade away. In 1937 Paul Green's *Hymn to the Rising Sun*, which spoke movingly of the conditions on a Georgia chain gang and was soon to be lauded and lauded on Broadway, was closed by the WPA state administrator on its opening night because it was of "such a moral character that I can't even discuss it with members of the press" (Flanagan, 1985, p. 136-37). Flanagan recalls that *New York Times* critic, Brooks Atkinson, later gave the play rave reviews calling it "a stunning play, a beautifully written case history of penal servitude" (p.136-37).

#### George Kondolf: Chicago Project Director

The Chicago melodrama, the battle on the home-front, continued beyond the actual and implied censorship from the mayor's office to include infighting and backbiting on the Project itself that was to become fodder for the anti- New Deal press. Early in 1936 Hallie Flanagan replaced the Chicago director of the project,

George Stevens, "who was busy getting his Globe company ready for the Dallas exposition," with a young New York producer, George Kondolf (Flanagan, 1985, p.137). He was sent in with the avowed intention of following a policy of doing new plays originating in Chicago.

Some of the staff, according to Arnold Sundgaard's recollections, had not been happy when the New York producer had been brought in to direct the Chicago Project. Adding fuel to the fire in the summer of 1936, "Kondolf called in a writer from New York--a play doctor at \$200 a month to rewrite...." (At the time other Project members were being paid a little over \$90 a month.) ( Sundgaard, 1976, p. 7).

Sundgaard recalls that "Susan Glaspell was rather indignant because she thought the play shouldn't have been done in the first place." As Sundgaard and Glaspell were leaving a run-through of this play, Glaspell remarked, says Sundgaard, "Hell, he's no play doctor. He's a play coroner." Sundgaard continues, "We never understood why Hallie Flanagan had appointed a very commercial Broadway producer" to direct the Chicago project (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 7).

The Chicago press was not happy with imported staff for the local WPA project either. In late March, before Kondolf's arrival to take over the Chicago Project, the press had bannered "WPA Radicals Fail to Produce Plays" (Jobe, 1986, p.5). The cancellation of *Model Tenement*, the Project's first scheduled play, was laid to perceived communistic themes and principles. After Kondolf's arrival, citizens

complained through their elected representatives about communistic themes, and the importation of directors, actors and crews rather than the employment of local theatrical folk. Jobe (1986) comments, "The Project had ceased to be a relief project and was now a federal subsidy theatre. The charges of 'failure to serve indigent thespians,' 'misuse of tax-payers' funds and subterfuge,' damaged the credibility of the Chicago FTP (p.5). Citizens groups attacked FTP productions calling the Project's production of *Faust* "lacking in moral quality." The Citizens Service League challenged the Project to "remove dirt from your plays" (p.5).

The Chicago Federation of Labor was unhappy with the imported workers on the Project's payrolls. Much was made in the press over the Northwestern University "college sorority girls" on the Project. These turned out to be unpaid volunteers (LCFTP. Jobe, 1986). During a summer that boasted a record heat wave, front-page cartoons took the national administration, and the WPA, to task almost daily and bemoaned the fact that in July of 1936 there were still twelve million still unemployed and skilled workers were sent to pick and shovel brigades. The Chicago press did not bother to report that the Illinois Federal Theatre Project alone employed 1,086 people at this time and only New York and California did better (Flanagan, 1985, p. 345). One such cartoon entitled "Relief Project" showed WPA workers merely leaning on their shovels, obviously "relieved" at the easy duty. Another showed a relaxed and broadly smiling FDR blowing bubbles in the air, labeled "TVA," "Bonnevillle," "Grand

Coulee," and the names of other WPA projects, out of a bowl marked "taxpayer's money" (*Chicago Tribune* , 3/15 /37).

Not long after his arrival in Chicago George Kondolf wrote, "I was totally unprepared for such a complete intrusion of an editorial and political policy into actual writing of local and national news. However, the review of FTP productions seems to be quite fair and unbiased" (LCFTP. Jobe,1986, p. 6). Perhaps the reviews helped restore public confidence and support. Audience figures were over 200,000 for 1937, apart from the widely successful vaudeville in the parks. As Jobe points out, not everyone in Chicago read the *Tribune* , or for that matter did everyone read any paper at all. Much of the audience for the inexpensive FTP productions was made up of the relief population, had WPA jobs, or lived in the "low rent districts where newspapers were regarded as an impractical unneeded luxury"( p.15).

The play that was to be doctored, and later mentioned by Susan Glaspell to Arnold Sundgaard, was *Chalk Dust* , playing at the Great Northern Theatre. Hallie Flanagan labeled it "a complete failure" in its Chicago production (NA Flanagan, 5/13/36). With the ministrations of H. Gordon Graham, the New York play doctor, *Chalk Dust* was "improved immeasurably" (NA. Kondolf, 6/23/36). The imported "doctor" had been "loaned" at the suggestion of Hallie Flanagan to direct the coming production of the Chicago Unit's first Living Newspaper, *Triple A-Plowed Under* , which opened July 9 at the Great Northern. Kondolf, noting the delay from its proposed

opening a few days earlier, cited the need for a "week of dress rehearsals, long enough to get the equipment, install it and routine the show...remember, the stage hands here are completely unfamiliar with the technique of Triple-A" (NA. Kondolf, 6/23/36, p. 2).

Nonetheless, this Living Newspaper, *Triple-A Plowed Under*, opened to a packed house, "and the enthusiasm and attendance did a great deal to add to a most successful performance," according to its director, H. Gordon Graham (NA. 7/13/36, pp.1,3). Graham noted that a prominent Chicago physician "personally came up to me and said that he had witnessed my production of Triple-A in New York...and he thoroughly enjoyed it, but the Chicago production was by far superior in every detail... The Chicago cast of Triple-A was enlarged by 42 actors which enabled me to create more intense action in our many mob scenes." This "embellishment was commented on most favorably," noted its director ( pp. 1, 3).

Kondolf had his doubts about Chicago native, and director, Harry Minturn, who was in charge of the Project's Blackstone Theatre productions. Kondolf (NA. 6/23/36) wrote to Flanagan that "We must remember that his acting company is almost wholly Relief, and contains actors whose experience has been limited largely to tent shows and provincial stocks. YELLOW JACK (Sidney Howard's story of the conquest of yellow fever) and TRIPLE-A are like foreign languages to these people" (p.1). Kondolf went on to explain that Minturn perhaps was not wholly at fault since he was only producing the plays that the former Project Director had instructed him to

produce with the company he had been given. Additionally, Kondolf suggested, "he needs a lot of better, more 'modern' actors before he could even attempt the kind of production I know we would both like to see." Nonetheless, Kondolf felt that Minturn should have "something he has an honest feeling for...we must get the right play, give him the right people and then see what he does" (p. 1). The right play and the right people were to come not quite two years later in *Spirochete*, after Kondolf himself had returned to New York.

### Vaudeville in the Parks

Kondolf had been in Chicago only about six weeks when he wrote of his plans for summer vaudeville on portable stages in Chicago's 135 parks. Flanagan observed later that Chicago's Federal Theatre started with vaudeville in the parks. Her report of a tour through a sultry Chicago summer's night with the Chicago's Parks Commissioner viewing the festivities at the parks' various shelter houses is a delight in its colorful description of the melange of old vaudevillians, older acts and appreciative audiences of all ages. She saw the scene "all in broad colors, a lithograph of Chicago" (Flanagan, 1985, p.134). FTP Vaudeville in the parks, although Kondolf said it was no better than winter vaudeville, was a crowd-pleaser. Through the hot summer evenings the audiences came. The summer of 1937 saw 717 such performances before 393,932 paying patrons. Tickets were priced from five to twenty-five cents (LCFTP. Jobe, 1986, p.15).

George Kondolf was a young Broadway producer, introduced into the Chicago Project to organize it, shape it up, improve its quality, to try to remedy the meagre box office and poor reviews. After the hot summer's box-office success of vaudeville in the parks, the Chicago Unit and George Kondolf had a chance to prove themselves artistically that fall. Chicago was selected as one of the 25 cities for simultaneous openings across the country October 27, 1937 of Sinclair Lewis' bold diatribe against fascism, *It Can't Happen Here*. Hallie Flanagan spent that evening in New York going from theatre to theatre to view the Manhattan openings, including one in Yiddish. Then later that same evening, she read excited, enthusiastic, telegraphed opening-night reports from Bridgeport and Birmingham, Miami and Cleveland, Detroit, Denver, and Tacoma. She saw Chicago's production late in its three-month run and said that she felt it stronger than the New York production, "especially in its use of aisles and flag-draped boxes to include the audience in the events on the stage" (Flanagan, 1985, p. 137-138).

In the early letter to the Assistant Administrative Officer of the FTP in Washington, George Kondolf had also revealed his plan for a revue, which Hallie Flanagan (1985, p.138) states was worked out coming on the train from New York to Chicago. She writes, "Mr. Kondolf wanted to write and stage a Chicago revue; by the time we got to Chicago Mr. Kondolf had a plan for *O Say Can You Sing*." This would be Chicago's first big original show and it was to make FTP

history. After opening in December of 1936, the show ran for seven months.

The revue, written during the few weeks since Kondolf's arrival in Chicago, by New York writers, was "purposely written on the spot ...with an eye to the best use of available talent," Kondolf said (NA. 6/17/36, p. 3). "It is satiric in point of view, and I think very modern and timely... It will employ about 200 people exclusive of the orchestra." A week later, although concerned about the sketches, he thought that "the score and lyrics are absolutely first-rate...we have already auditioned approximately a thousand people." Gordon Graham was to direct (6/23/36, p. 2).

"The best thing about O SAY CAN YOU SING (caps in original), Hallie Flanagan said, "was that it was as Chicago as Chicago" (1985, p.138). Flanagan thought that the unit was best when it was being itself and not trying to imitate other places or productions. O SAY CAN YOU SING, she reflected, was "Chicago distinctly itself, creating its own new patterns out of its own material and suited to its own city."

The Chicago Unit of the Federal Theatre Project had been made up of loosely patched together groups in a government-sponsored relief effort that was the continual target for a hostile press. This variegated patchwork mirrored the city itself with its many ethnic groups, powerful politicians and labor groups and an equally powerful anti-administration press. In the FTP the groups of out of work theatre folk were mostly old vaudevillians and musicians.

Other, smaller contingents were the Negro Unit, the experimental groups and the group headed by Chicagoan Harry Minturn at the Blackstone, who were to stage the old reliable standards as best they could with what they had. Harry Hopkins, FDR's top relief administrator had said to Hallie Flanagan about the theatre projects that he feared they were relief "just relief," and wondered, "but does it have to be?" The Chicago Unit under George Kondolf became much more.

The Chicago Unit's Director, George Kondolf, under the aegis of Hallie Flanagan and empowered by his own driving ideas, was thrust into the pot of Chicago politics, poverty, press and theatrical people. His goals emphasized the "creative, directorial, and producing ends" (NA. 6/23/36, p.10). He intended "to concentrate first of all on a very high standard of production...(in line with) the "ideals of the Federal Theatre."

The Chicago Project was made up of a patchwork of several diverse groups, mirroring the city itself with its loose amalgam of old vaudevillians, ethnic groups, powerful politicians, anti-administration press and active labor groups. In his short sojourn of little more than a year, George Kondolf turned on the lights in darkened prosceniums and public parks and opened them to busy activity. Hundreds of thousands of theatrical folk went back to work. Chicago Federal Theatre now offered low-cost, often exciting, sometimes enlightening entertainment to several hundred thousand Chicagoans numbed by dreary Depression days.

George Kondolf was recalled to New York to take the helm of the vast and troubled New York Project in the summer of 1937. The politics, the press and the people remained. Chicagoan Harry Minturn, the doubtful commodity, became the Director of the Chicago Federal Theatre Project.

Scene Two: Guiding Lights: Susan Glaspell and

Author. Arthur Sundgaard

Susan Glaspell

Susan Glaspell was the Director of the Midwestern Play Bureau for the Federal Theatre Project. In her mid-fifties during her work on the Chicago Federal Theatre Project, Susan Glaspell made an indelible impression on the 25-year-old Arthur Sundgaard. He remembers her as a beautiful, fragile woman. He recalls the windy city's blustery breezes so aggressive at the corner of Rush and Erie where the office was located that "she would practically get blown down from the wind coming off the lake that cold, cold winter." Despite her seeming fragility Sundgaard remembers her as a "towering figure" and apparently one of great influence and inspiration for the young Sundgaard (Sundgaard, 1976, p.3).

A "towering figure" she might well have been, indeed. Susan Glaspell, born in Iowa (sources dispute the date, sometime, however, near 1876), had had quite a career before coming to direct the Midwestern Play Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project. An accomplished and prodigious author of novels and plays in her own right, she and her then husband, George Cram Cook, wintered in the

bohemian atmosphere of revolt and experiment of Greenwich Village in the mid-Teens and Twenties. The Cooks summered in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where they founded the Provincetown Players. The aim of the Players was to produce only original plays by Americans. Susan Glaspell and Eugene O'Neill were the mainstays of the Players. Glaspell's own plays experimented in merging the American psychological and realism with European expressionism. She became a dramatist of ideas. Her play based on Emily Dickinson, *Alison's House* (1930), won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (Waterman, 1966).

One of her plays, written with Cook and produced by the Provincetown Players in 1915, was later to add fuel to the fatal fire of the Dies Committee which consumed the entire FTP almost twenty-five years later. Hallie Flanagan, writing in *Arena* (1940), remembers that *Suppressed Desires* was one of the plays attacked by the Committee on the basis of its title. "Could any more suggestive or salacious titles be found for plays to parade before the American public? Are the people of this country to be taxed to support such vulgar and villainous activities," read a press release from the Republican National Committee Publicity Division after one session of the Congressional hearing (Flanagan, 1985, p. 355). In actuality *Suppressed Desires* is "a delightful satire on the cult of self expression" in the rampant age of psychoanalysis and popular Freud in the 1920s (Waterman, 1950, p. 50; 1966, p. 209).

Susan Glaspell's plays, states biographer, Arthur E. Waterman, demonstrated distinctly American settings and experimented freely with form, ideas and techniques. They were unique in their qualities of interplay among the intellectual, experimental, and traditional elements in our society and amazingly modern for their times. "She created a panorama of the new age without losing the ability to evoke more traditional aspects of our culture especially that of the Midwest." Waterman goes on to note that her themes emphasized "liberalism versus conservatism, the need to escape imprisoning environments and gain individual freedom, and the power of idealism to enrich the individual and society" (Waterman, 1950, p. 50).

Perhaps it was this deep feeling for the experimental form and technique this penchant for the play of ideas, this ability to create a panorama of the new age while still encompassing the traditional, perhaps these exciting elements were among those which the young Arnold Sundgaard found so attractive in Susan Glaspell.

Whatever the exact reasons, it was Arnold Sundgaard's name that was suggested to Susan Glaspell by play-writing instructor, Walter Pritchard Eaton, George Pierce Baker's replacement at Yale, when she wrote to him in 1936 asking for suggestions for laborers in her current vineyard, the Midwest Play Bureau of the Federal Theatre Project. She wrote asking for writers interested in submitting plays to the Bureau which she had come to Chicago to organize for Hallie Flanagan's Federal Theatre. The letter from Susan

Glaspell to Arnold Sundgaard arrived in Madison, Wisconsin where Sundgaard had gone to live with his wife and two very young children after his recent post-graduate tenure at Yale. Sundgaard hitch-hiked to Chicago and arrived just before Thanksgiving, 1936 (Sundgaard, 1976).

### Arnold Sundgaard, Playwright

Susan Glaspell's letter inviting Sundgaard to be a play reader for the Midwest Play Bureau and, perhaps, to write as well, could not have come at a better time. The young and jobless Sundgaard had moved his family back to Madison, where he had received his undergraduate degree the year before, to live with his wife's parents.

Born October 31, 1909, in St. Paul, Minnesota, Sundgaard graduated from St. Paul High School in 1927, married in 1929, and after starting out to major in agriculture, graduated from the University of Wisconsin with a B. A. degree in English. He received a Rockefeller Foundation Playwriting Fellowship for Graduate Study at Yale. He finished his work at Yale in 1936, after working nights and Saturdays at the New Haven hospital washing dishes. Sundgaard then returned to Wisconsin with his wife and two small children.

The pay Susan Glaspell offered Sundgaard for his work in the Midwest Bureau was to be \$94.50 a month, a comedown from the \$200 a month he had enjoyed with the Rockefeller grant, but better than his current status: "broke in Madison with two kids." Late in November to reach the first meeting with Glaspell, he hitchhiked to

Chicago. With the fifty cents given to him by the man who gave him a ride, he booked two nights in the Delano Hotel. Glaspell told him that to be eligible for the project he would have to go on relief and then satisfy residency requirements. In order to apply for relief, Sundgaard had to go out to a local high school on a very cold, late November day . Sundgaard tells of standing in the cold in the relief line.

They had taken an abandoned school and set it up for applications. I got in line with all the other unemployed people. At that time the line was blocks long of people coming through. This was an unusual project to apply for, the theatre. Out of that long, long dreary line of ragged people...there were vaudevillians, and actors and people looking for jobs shoveling snow, and we were all sort of together. I finally got through to a table where I was interviewed and they asked me what my last job was. And I said, "Well, I hadn't had a job." They said, "When did you receive money last?" I said the last money I received was from the Rockefeller Foundation, which surprised them, and it was \$200 a month. Which was a lot of money in those days. (p.2)

And when asked his last employment, Sundgaard responded, "at Yale." He continues, "so from Yale to the line there in that dismal, cold (place) -- there was the smell of fumigation in there. They used to fumigate buildings like after smallpox or something. It was a really a terrible smell, the smell of poverty" ( p.2).

Sundgaard was told that he would be notified "in time." In his recollections, Sundgaard notes that "Susan speeded up the process." He spent Christmas in Madison and came back down to Chicago to begin work. He was to be paid \$23 a week, \$94.50 a month.

That January in Chicago the thermometer plunged to 17-below zero, so cold that schools were closed. A story on page nine of the *Chicago Tribune*, headlined "War on Syphilis to be Made Here This Week," informed readers that Illinois and Chicago health authorities would meet to coordinate the new fight against the disease (1/4/37). On January 20, in Washington D. C. a crowd of thousands stood in the pouring rain to hear the words of FDR's second inaugural and hear what was to become possibly the most quoted inaugural address ever delivered by a President: "I see one third of a nation...." (*New York Times*, 1/21/37, p. 1).

Chicago was a ferment at that time for any young person, Sundgaard recalls. This was an exciting period in Sundgaard's life. He, with four or five others, read plays for the FTP's Midwest Play Bureau that came in from authors all over the country, some handwritten, some by farmers' on scraps of paper some could hardly be called call plays (Sundgaard, 1976). Susan Glaspell, although small of stature, was a towering figure and influence in these days for Sundgaard. She encouraged him in his writing and he was able to finish *Everywhere I Roam*, a three-act play about Johnny Appleseed by the spring of 1937. Sundgaard recalls that there was a "flow of scripts" coming in from the Midwest, from farmers and

miners, from North Dakota. He remembers a publication that had started about this time *Midwest*, and on its cover was a panoramic view of the Middle West "a kind of perspective." Another catalyst for *Everywhere I Roam* came from the New York Times dance critic, John Martin, whose inspirational speech the year before at Yale, about dance as dramatic form, had impressed the young Sundgaard ( pp. 3-6).

Susan Glaspell gave the completed *Everywhere I Roam* to Project Director, George Kondolf. Kondolf turned it down. Sundgaard surmised that it was too far to challenge the commercially-minded New York director written as it was, "out of the whole populist tradition." Although turned down for production in Chicago, Sundgaard's effort had not been trashed entirely. The play made its way to the FTP's National Service Bureau's test production unit in New York where plays to be recommended to the field units were tried out. *Everywhere I Roam* was first tried out there and then later purchased by Marc Connelly, successful dramatist (*The Green Pastures*, 1930), and director, for Broadway. Ironically, *Everywhere I Roam* was produced on the commercial stage just the next year in late, December, 1938, and was "ruined," according to Sundgaard, by the famous dramatist. After Chicago's Kondolf had blue penciled the "Appleseed" project, Sundgaard spent the summer reading plays that came in to the Bureau and writing a novella which was published in *Story* magazine the next year. Kondolf was called back to New York to head up the faltering New York project, leaving Harry

Minturn to direct the Chicago Unit. Sundgaard hitch-hiked to Madison to see his wife and children.

Early in September Susan Glaspell wrote an anguished letter to Hallie Flanagan complaining about the "outrageously unfair" reviews of Chicago FTP productions in the Chicago press. "I do not know what to make of the Chicago critics, and I have a fear that they have a W.P. A. antagonism almost impossible to break down." The *Tribune's* critic even walked out on a Sean O'Casey presentation. Glaspell closes with the note that "I think the more we can make Chicago feel it is their theatre the better chance we have of breaking down some of this hostility" (NA. Glaspell, 9/7/37, pp.1-2).

Hallie Flanagan appears to have been concerned enough to answer immediately. Glaspell's next letter, dated September 17, thanks Flanagan for her good letter and states, "I quite agree that the critic who can make us most unhappy is ourself." Glaspell goes on to report that despite the bad reviews, the evening of short plays at the Princess Theatre is "doing excellent business." However, Glaspell's mood quickly becomes despondent.

It was a year ago now that you asked me to come out here, and at the beginning of my second year I am hesitating very seriously as to whether I should go on. I do not feel I can give another whole year at my present salary, which is \$200.00 a month". In addition she was uneasy about the Unit's new director: "Just a little while ago I was full of enthusiasm as to what we might do in Chicago this year. Now I have the feeling

of others here that we are being held up at the most important time of the season. Mr. Minturn is liked by the Project, and I share this feeling. But there is such a temporary character to the setup now that it is not very good for morale. (pp. 1-2)

She closes with a plea for a visit from Hallie Flanagan to the Chicago Unit "That would mean a great deal to us all" (NA. 9/17/37, pp. 1-2).

It was not to be a visit from Hallie Flanagan but a new project that was to pull the Chicago Unit together, that would turn the critics' catcalls to commendations and provide the cause that would make Chicago feel that the FTP was Chicago's theatre. "That fall, somehow or other the idea for writing *Spirochete* came from Susan," Arnold Sundgaard remembers (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 8).

Susan Glaspell would stay to see the birth of *Spirochete* but a letter Chicago curtain came down on Sundgaard's living history of syphilis, she was gone (NA. Minturn, 6/18 /38).

Two years later, again the fates must laugh at the irony, after the successful production of *Spirochete*, and it had been determined that Sundgaard wrote it on his own time and therefore owned the copyright, he thus became ineligible to work on the Federal Theatre Project. He made too much money in *Spirochete* royalties. In New York working with the Group Theatre he was asked, "When did you first get interested in epic theatre?" Sundgaard recalls that he replied, "Epic Theatre--what is epic theatre?" And Thornton Wilder replied, "Well you wrote it. You wrote *Everywhere I Roam* and

*Spirochete* ." "But", states Sundgaard, "I had never read Brecht and whatever epic theatre I had done, I had created pretty much out of what I knew about Living Newspapers. (And) I (had) never (seen) a Living Newspaper when I wrote *Spirochete* " (Sundgaard, 1976, p.8).

Sundgaard wrote *Spirochete* late in 1937 and the early weeks of 1938 originally calling it "Dark Harvest," (as evidenced in the first two Chicago Unit typescripts where "Dark Harvest" is penciled out). Sundgaard wrote *Spirochete* in response to the national "war on syphilis," spearheaded by the nation's Surgeon General, enthusiastically selected by Chicago as its own *cause celebre*, and in which the *Chicago Tribune* proudly hoisted the flag. And at the suggestion of Susan Glaspell. In the fall of 1937, Sundgaard recalls that "somehow or other the idea for writing *Spirochete* came from Susan. They were thinking of doing, I think, Brieux's play... Red Robe(sic) ...that dealt with syphilis" (Sundgaard, 1976, p.9). (In actuality, Brieux' play, *The Red Robe* , [*La Robe Rouge*, 1900] concerns the miscarriage of justice in the French courts system. It is his play *Les Avarés* , known as *Dirty Dishes*, that sounded the call for the dissemination of syphilis information in 1902, that Sundgaard is thinking of in this instance.)

Sundgaard remembers that "They were having a program in Chicago - a mass blood testing program run by...the U. S. Health Service...and Paul de Kruif, who had written *Microbe Hunters* (for FTP) was part of that. I didn't know those people at all but I decided

to do some research on it and decided to write a Living Newspaper" (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 8).

### Scene Three: The War on Syphilis:

#### The Syphilis Scene and Public Health Education, 1936-38

Compared with the eight entries under "syphilis" in the *New York Times Index* of 1936, the topic fairly bloomed with 52 entries in 1937. Among them, one urged free clinic service to all economic levels and attacked the leaders of organized medicine for fighting the free clinics. The death rate and public attitudes were chronicled. The nation's very much First Lady, never one to mince words on sore subjects, spoke out: "Mrs. F. D. Roosevelt establishes the value of syphilis education - urges war against" (2/4/37, p. 23). In April, the National Council of Jewish Women urged the certificates of health be required for marriage licenses. "Doctor sees solution in universal education and immediate care," said another story. Further observations of the need for education were cited in appeals to nurses, with the Denmark and Scandinavian Systems cited as examples.

In July of 1937, the New York Senate was to offer a bill for premarital testing. Three years before, the Illinois legislature had defeated such a bill, and in 1937, the amendment was again before the legislature for consideration. Still, all is not well in Illinois. "Doctor gets death threats after quarantining brothel in Chicago dive," declared a headline in the *Chicago Tribune*, October 16. The *Tribune* went on to report that the threatened "doctor" was the president of

Chicago's Board of Health himself who had taken the action, the first of its kind in the city's campaign against syphilis. Only a few months later, Illinois would take further action with the passage of legislation requiring premarital testing for syphilis before marriage licenses could be issued. Illinois became one of only ten states in the nation to have such requirements. Four other states required only males to be tested. Fourteen states forbid marriages of those found to be infected (CT, 4/29/38).

To popularize the great campaign, the great hero of another battle, World War I, General Pershing, became the honorary chairman of the anti-syphilis drive. In November the League of Women Voters came out in support of the New York Senate bill for premarital syphilis testing, as did the National Council of Women (*New York Times Index*, 1937). The popular press from *The Ladies Home Journal* to *The Reader's Digest* carried brave articles about the War on Syphilis.

What had changed since the Surgeon General, Thomas J. Parran, Jr.'s planned radio talk on a New York program had been canceled when he refused to change the word "syphilis" to "social disease?" What had happened since "The World's Greatest Newspaper" could brag that it was the first newspaper to print "the word" in 1936? What had happened was the newly appointed, outspoken, unabashed, unafraid Surgeon General had taken it upon himself to acquaint the public with the facts and daunting statistics in a valiant effort to decrease the dreadful toll syphilis was taking on the nation.

The nation's chief health officer was no tenderfoot in this war.

Thomas Parran had been associated with public health work for state and Federal governments since 1917, and for the past ten years had been Chief of the Division of Venereal Disease for the U. S. Public Health Service. Dire figures declared in no uncertain terms the terrible and heretofore unspoken damages that syphilis was inflicting upon a nation already bruised and battered by a disastrous economic depression, abetted by record drought and years of devastating Dust Bowl conditions. An editorial in the April 18, 1935, *Journal of the American Medical Association* declared that cases of syphilis in 1934 affected more Americans than scarlet fever, tuberculosis, auto accidents with permanent disabilities, and diphtheria put together.

Surgeon General Parran sounded the public call to battle in his nine- page article, "The Next Great Plague to Go," in the July, 1936, *Survey Graphic*. This same treatise, condensed and retitled, "Why Don't We Stamp Out Syphilis?" appeared the same month in *Reader's Digest*. In this seminal article, shocking syphilis statistics were not only stated, but illustrated with pictorial bar-charts. "Syphilis strikes one out of every ten adults." By far the largest percentage of those stricken, more than half, were the nation's youth, the 16 to 30-year old males. A million new cases developed each year. Syphilis was responsible for the 60,000 infants born dead each year, those that died within a few days of birth, and the many born diseased and deformed that required life-time care. Many such infants if not

born blind would become blind. The tragedy of course was that it did not have to be. Syphilis, if diagnosed before the fifth month of pregnancy, could be prevented. Parran wrote, "Syphilis is a contagious disease. It is caused by an organism known as the spirochete, which may attack and destroy any organ or tissue in the body. One adult in ten is infected by syphilis at some time during his or her lifetime. Unless treated, it is permanently disabling and frequently fatal. There is reason to believe that if all conditions due to syphilis were reported as such, it would be found the leading cause of death in the United States" (Parran, 1936, p.405).

The Surgeon General wrote lucidly and eloquently about the great plague of ignorance that was costing the nation millions in dollars and lives. He decried the ignorance of the general population and the false morality and dangerous moral attitudes that kept accurate information from the public, information that could stop the spread of the dread disease. Syphilis, in 1936, could be avoided, and it could be cured, although it was not until, 1943, during the exigencies of World War II, that the advent of penicillin made it easy to do so. In the 1930s, a long regimen of arsenic based treatments were effective against syphilis, but only if started in the early stage of the disease and continued for the duration of treatment necessary. Salvarsan, the magic bullet formulated by Paul Erlich in 1909-10, was the end product of a search that had taken 400 years.

But before treatment could be started, diagnosis had to be made. The definitive test for syphilis, the Wasserman blood test, perfected in 1907, and the search for the causative factor of the disease, had challenged the minds of the scientific world for centuries. The villain, the bacterial spirochete, *treponema pallidum*, the pale terror, was isolated at last, in 1905. Salvarsan's chemotherapeutic treatment's shortcomings were discovered only in 1931. As many as 30 bi-monthly treatments were required and these were found to be more effective when used in conjunction with 40 injections of bismuth. Paul de Kruif (1941), described the treatment as a regimen that was as painful as it was powerful. Many patients died because they did not want to complete the grim regimen. Clinic reports indicated only 16 out of 100 of those diagnosed continued treatments until they were no longer dangerous to others. Syphilis carriers could be rendered non-infectious with one or two doses. Although the treatments were fairly available from private physicians, once a diagnosis was made, there was little or no provision made for the poor among whom the disease was especially rampant. Parran accused the nation of ostrich-like attitudes. "First and foremost among American handicaps to progress against syphilis," Parran wrote, "is the widespread belief that nice people don't talk about syphilis, nice people don't have syphilis, and nice people shouldn't do anything about those who have syphilis" (Brown, 1986; Parran, 1936, p. 407).

Parran promoted five points as "Today's Job" in combatting the syphilis plague. They were: (a) Find syphilis. A Wasserman "dragnet" could identify even obscure cases in time for effective treatment. (b) Treat syphilis promptly- even a few days delay could mean failure of treatment. (c) Examine the family and all other contacts of the syphilis patient for the disease. (d) Prevent the birth of syphilitic babies by requiring blood tests before marriage and early in each pregnancy. (e) Teach syphilis. The facts must be known to all the people (Parran, 1936, p. 410).

In order to spread the word, the facts that would save the people, the Surgeon General continued to write and speak out, and call for action on the subject. The action that was to launch the full-scale battle against syphilis came at the end of December, 1936, when Parran called 300 experts to Washington for a three-day conference on Venereal Control Work to "fight the inroads" of the disease on America's citizens. President Roosevelt sent a message of support, stating that the conference's objectives "would do much to conserve our human resources" (*New York Times*, 12/29/36, p.8).

Those objectives, as put forward in two conference sessions, stressed the necessity of educating the public against the dangers of syphilis, and equally, the need of tearing away the veil of secrecy that shrouded discussion of the disease. Paul de Kruif, popular author of *The Microbe Hunters*, and *Men Against Death*, depictions of medical discoveries through the ages and the men who made them, spoke on "Public Cooperation in the Control of Syphilis." He

advocated "shocking and brutal" publicity methods to break down the taboos about discussing venereal disease and the necessity of teaching that "innocent, as well as immoral persons were victims" (*NYT*, 12/29/36, p.8). He predicted that before long the sinister word would be common in in parlour games and crossword puzzles (p.8). These last eventful days of 1936 saw Arnold Sundgaard settling in Chicago, to read plays, and perhaps, write for the Federal Theatre Project.

At the conclusion of the Washington conference, Surgeon General Parran called for funds to mount the "War on Social Disease," as headlined by the *New York Times*. The Conference resolution, unanimously passed by the 814 delegates from 45 states, called for an allocation of \$25 million dollars, an increase more than doubling the current funds allotted by the Federal Government for disease control (12/31/36, p. 10). *Newsweek*, the next week, noted that each year newspapers added new words to their vocabularies. The year 1936, claimed the magazine, would be remembered for the addition of "a word that came from clinical--and poolroom--discussions..sole credit for this belongs to the United States Department of Health's new Surgeon General...leading a one-man crusade against moral 'ostrachism'" ( 1/9/37, p. 40). The opening salvos had been fired in the War on Syphilis.

It was to be a war of many words once the floodgates had been opened by the Surgeon General who made it all right to talk about syphilis, at least in the newspapers and journals. Many of the words

came from Thomas Parran himself who contributed many articles to popular magazines and medical and scientific journals to fight the War on Syphilis. He wrote a book explaining the need for the great campaign. *Shadow on the Land: Syphilis*, appeared the next summer. In it Parran stressed that "syphilis could be virtually wiped out in a generation in the United States with the proper cooperation among the government, physicians and alert laymen." *Shadow on the Land* was a platform for action against the disease. Parran stated that in 1935 an estimated 518,000 cases came to light but that an equal number probably were unrecognized, untreated, or mistreated. Costs of the War on Syphilis "need not be feared by the taxpayer," he said. "If we use more for prevention, the present cost for institutional and other relief of uncured late syphilis can be enormously reduced (7/26/37/, p. 26). In Chicago that fall, Arnold Sundgaard began work on *Dark Harvest*.

### Summary

The scenes in this chapter present a view of the unique, intricate and complex social, political and economic setting in Chicago, during the years 1935 to 1938. The Chicago Unit of the Federal Theatre Project, which first produced *Spirochete*, its rocky and beleaguered background, and some of its significant figures were examined. Major figures sketched in this chapter were Chicago Federal Theatre Project Director George Kondolf, *Spirochete's* author, Arnold Sundgaard, and his mentor, noted author and playwright,

Susan Glaspell. The War on Syphilis, instituted by the nation's Surgeon General, Thomas J. Parran, was introduced.

Chapter Four, *Spirochete* , Act One, Part Two, Chicago Action continues with the origins and foundations of *Spirochete* . Chicago's own precedent setting War on Syphilis, a discussion of the writing of *Dark Harvest* , Sundgaard's first title for *Spirochete* , and a survey of the plot outline of Sundgaard's finished script are incorporated.

CHAPTER FOUR  
*SPIROCHETE*, ACT ONE, PART TWO  
CHICAGO ACTION

The three scenes in this chapter present Chicago's own War on Syphilis, a discussion of the writing of *Spirochete*, and a brief synopsis of the plot. Scene One, "Chicago Makes the War its Own," highlights Chicago's "social hygiene" battle on the home front and is of particular interest because of the contributions made there to the nation's fight against syphilis. Chicago's efforts provided a model for other cities in the nation-wide anti-syphilis campaign and also furnished the impetus for *Spirochete*. Scene Two, "The Seeds of *Dark Harvest*," the first title of *Spirochete*, explores the aims, objectives, and goals of *Spirochete*, addressing the issue of theatre as education; that is, viewing *Spirochete* as a deliberate intention to transmit knowledge, develop sensitivities and promote attitudes in the campaign against syphilis. Scene Three, "Threshing Floor," presents a discussion and plot outline of the script that went into rehearsal in Chicago and opened at the Blackstone Theatre as *Spirochete*, April 29, 1938.

Scene One: Chicago Makes The War its Own

Chicago was the first American city to heed the Surgeon General's call to arms, sounded in Washington the December before. Chicago became the first American city to wage war on syphilis. Early in January while the young Arnold Sundgaard read plays that came in to Chicago's Federal Theatre Midwest Bureau, Chicago health

authorities met to coordinate the city's battle plan. The *Chicago Tribune* hoisted the flag: "War on Syphilis to be Made Here This Week" (January 4, 1937). A leading philanthropist came forward with an offer of \$13,000 for clinics. Officials hoped that the generous offer would inspire others. By the first of February plans had been drawn for Chicago's observance of the first National Social Hygiene day. Leading local authorities, marshalled by a leading Chicago urologist, an assistant to the Surgeon General, Dr. O. C. Wenger of the U. S. Public Health Service, and Chicago's Health Commissioner, Dr. Herman Binder led the assault. Dr. Wenger, in announcing strategy for Chicago's war, stated, "We want to make Chicago a model for all the cities of the United States." Recognizing that the city's public health services, already pressed by the still-remaining shadows of the depression and their meagre resources further strained by sending help to flood victims in Kentucky and southern Indiana, Wenger, nevertheless, was adamant in his assurances that "Chicago is awake to the problem." The *Tribune* trumpeted: "The *Tribune* has induced the public to face the problem realistically." Margaret Sanger, the pioneering advocate of family planning, announced: "I'm 100% in favor of Chicago" (*Chicago Tribune*, 2/2/37, p. 9).

The nation's Surgeon General, Dr. Thomas Parran lauded the efforts of the Chicago Hygiene Association. "Its work is particularly needed just now to arouse community interest, to explain measures and to secure and adapt them to local needs and conditions" (*CT*, 2/1/37, p.20).

Those were the marching orders. On February 4, 1937, Chicago's, and the nation's, first National Social Hygiene day sounded the call to the "War on Syphilis." In Chicago community interest was drawn to the cause as doctors, nurses, laboratory technicians, social workers and "civic-minded laymen" gathered to confer and participate in discussions of measures to identify and control syphilis. Techniques to adapt the measures to the needs and conditions of Chicago were evidenced in discussions of sex education presented by the Social Hygiene League for teachers, social workers, and nurses. From such presentations and discussions came complaints about lack of training in professional schools as well as concerns about sex education in schools. Some feared it. The task was not trusted to the teachers. Parents were better fitted for the task. Other voices countered this argument. "Youngsters will learn and if they do not get the facts in a wholesome manner from their teachers it is likely they will get (misinformation) elsewhere" (CT, 2/4/37, p.4).

Chicago's opening salvo in the "War on Syphilis" came in the Seven Point program announced as the centerpiece of the city's Social Hygiene Day. In it, the State Department of Public Health offered free medicine and aid for clinical facilities. The seventh point emphasized the intention to conduct a public education campaign throughout the state noting that if the 650,000 syphilis patients presently treated every day were to parade down Chicago's Michigan Avenue it would take six days and six nights plus an additional nine

hours if the sufferers passed in groups of ten, ten abreast every two seconds (*CT* , 2/4/37, p. 4).

Chicago's more circumspect *Daily News* , perhaps acknowledging that the brash *Tribune* "got the story" -- and would fight to keep it the *Tribune's* own -- devoted few column inches to the issue but noted that "Two Meetings Spur Fight on Social Disease;" and that pleas for "more effective instruction in the problem of venereal disease and control opened Chicago's observance of a national campaign against social disease." The word syphilis was not mentioned (*Daily News* , 2/ 3, 37, p. 4). Of equal interest and perhaps more importance, the *Chicago Defender*, the city's black newspaper, had no mention at all of Chicago's efforts or the national campaign. The *Defender*, a weekly, seemed to concern itself for the most part with the black community's social events and "race" news but did not show concern for the tragic story told by available statistics: positive blood tests identified syphilis in 18.9 per cent of blacks tested in comparison with 3. 2 per cent in Chicago's white population (de Kruif, 1941, p.24-25). It is important to remember that medical authorities felt that an equal number of cases went unidentified at this time and thus contributed mightily to the fearsome spread of the disease, particularly in the 18-31 year age groups.

In March of that year, while Arnold Sundgaard wrote his regional drama of Johnny Appleseed for Chicago's Federal Theatre Project, the *Tribune* kept the "War" before its readers in a dramatic

announcement that the 2,700 employees of the *Tribune* staff were slated to take syphilis tests. All new employees would be required to take the test and all others were strongly encouraged. The *Tribune* thus became the first business organization in Chicago to take this step and told its readers about it. The President of the Chicago Board of Health lauded the *Tribune's* action as the "forerunner in the movement toward syphilis control which I hope to see materialize in Chicago business and industry." Physicians were on hand in the Tribune Tower to draw "about a teaspoon of blood" from employees (CT, 3/15/37, p.5).

This forward step set the pace and soon other Chicago businesses, including Sears, Roebuck; Montgomery Ward; Carson, Pirie, Scott; and other local establishments "extended the battle front" to the Chicago Association of Commerce and other organizations. In June, Dr. Wenger, the Surgeon General's man in Chicago, proposed a daring frontal assault: a poll to survey the entire Chicago population to see if the citizens would be willing to undergo confidential testing for syphilis, from their own private physicians or free clinics.

On the legislative front the Illinois Legislature passed a law requiring all applicants for marriage licenses to present a physician's certificate showing them free of syphilis. Illinois thus joined the nine other states with such legislation in their statutes. The law was to go into effect July 1, 1937. June 30 found the Chicago's Cook County marriage bureau jammed with applicants trying to beat the test deadline. All previous records of the county marriage license

bureaus were broken by the 1,407 licenses issued in office's record eleven-hour day. The "Saltiel Hygienic Marriage" law went into effect, three years after having been defeated in the same Illinois legislature (*CT*, 7/1/37, p.1). After the Illinois law went into effect the Chicago press tried to discourage prospective couples from skipping across the state line to Crown Point, Indiana, where no such law was in effect, by printing the names of those obtaining such boot-leg licenses in the newspapers (*Reader's Digest*, 11/37, pp.129-30).

Chicago's hot summer of syphilis skirmishes heated up further as Dr. Wenger's poll produced the first 250,000 ballots out of a total of one million to be mailed to Chicago's citizens. The ballots asked Chicago's 3,500,00 residents to vote on the syphilis test question. The Federal Government furnished two million franked envelopes including self-addressed folders for return votes. Dr. Wenger said that the proposed tests would ultimately produce for the first time "an actual census of syphilis and it will be out in the open where we can combat it with medical methods." Dr. Louis Schmidt, head of Mayor Kelly's Committee for Control of Venereal Disease, declared that the problem in Chicago had been divorced from superstitions, ignorance and false modesty and hence Chicago was "the logical city for the first popular referendum and actual abatement of syphilis" (*New York Times*, 7/26/37, p. 10). For all the brave words there were grave doubts about the success of such a far-reaching community-wide campaign. The enemy was not only the crippling

plague of syphilis, but ignorance, fear, and false moral superiority. Would Chicagoans enlist in the battle or be insulted at the invitation to enlist?

Thousands of physicians were asked to donate their services and consented to cooperate. Medical students were mustered. From their pulpits, the clergy urged their congregations to cooperate with "the public health service in the interests of community welfare." The services of 300 WPA employees were contributed to the effort (*NYT*, July 26, 1937, p.21).

Paul de Kruif, renowned bacteriologist and noted author of popular medical biographies that dramatically told of medical heroes and moments of great discoveries in medicine, chronicled the Chicago campaign's first, late summer siege. He described the blistering hot Chicago afternoon and the "syphilis parade" (1941, p.24). "Several thousand National Youth Administration youngsters carried a huge banner: "Friday the 13 is an Unlucky Day for Syphilis." The parade wound through Chicago's downtown "Loop." Pictures and placards depicted the virulent spirochete and its grim consequences. Newspapers, radio broadcasters and "sandwich men" urged Chicago's citizens to vote "yes!" Of the million ballots mailed more than 10,000 were returned. "Yes" votes won the day 99 to 1. The blood bath had begun, said Dr. Wenger. "The city became syphilis conscious with a vengeance." Chicago, the first city to act, became the first American city to attack the syphilis problem in a realistic way, with bold and wholesale methods, commended the denizens back at the Public

Health Service war room in Washington (*NYT*, 7/26/37, p.21). Combining science and ballyhoo in a spectacular campaign Chicago tested the blood of one out of every five of its inhabitants.

If the collective consciousness of Chicago's citizens had been caught by the fusillade of brash bombardment and brazen hoopla for blood testing in the "War on Syphilis," the front-lines dramatics may well have given Susan Glaspell an idea for a play, "something that dealt with syphilis." As noted previously, we know that Arnold Sundgaard remembers: "They were having a program in Chicago - a mass blood testing program---I decided to do some research on it and decided to write a Living Newspaper" (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 8).

### Scene Two: The Seeds of *Dark Harvest*

*Dark Harvest*, or *Spirochete* as it was to be called in production, was an anomaly for a Federal Theatre Living Newspaper. Other Living Newspapers were written by teams of reporters and researchers from reams of news clippings of current events and finally put together for the stage by a "managing editor," a director, often Arthur Arent. *Spirochete* was researched and written by one man, Arnold Sundgaard. Further, Sundgaard maintained that he had never seen a Living Newspaper when he wrote *Spirochete* and had perhaps read or seen the script for only one, *Power*, which had opened in New York the previous February but had not yet been produced yet by the Chicago Unit (Sundgaard, 1976, p.19). And *Triple A-Plowed Under* had been produced by the Chicago Unit before Sundgaard's arrival. Other Living Newspapers of the FTP not

only were heavily researched and documented, with references often appearing as footnotes in productions' playbills, but their characters often spoke in direct quotations from verified accounts of the contemporary occurrences they dramatized. *Spirochete*, however, was to span four hundred years and be woven not only of facts but from its author's creative imagination and his interpretation of historical facts, as well.

Sundgaard wrote *Spirochete*, originally calling it *Dark Harvest* (as evidenced in the first two Chicago Unit typescripts where "Dark Harvest" is penciled out), in late 1937 and the early weeks of 1938 in response to the national "War on Syphilis" headed by the U. S. Surgeon General, and at the suggestion of Susan Glaspell. Glaspell, Director of the FTP's Midwestern Play Bureau, much wanted to do something with regional interest. This remained her strong desire, although the recent Project Director, George Kondolf had been against such efforts, Sundgaard recalls, perhaps still smarting from Kondolf's rejection of *Everywhere I Roam* the previous spring. Certainly no plays with regional themes had yet appeared in the Chicago Theatre Project. The current head of the Project, Harry Minturn, was, as remembered by Sundgaard, "an old stock company manager; he represented the kind of theatre that we...didn't stand for really. We represented something else...experimental and more in keeping with - younger people" (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 34, p. 8).

Although Sundgaard was still reading plays for the Bureau as his "real job", he went to work on *Dark Harvest*, at Chicago's Parrar

and Newberry Libraries. The title was drawn from Surgeon General Thomas Parran's book *Shadow on the Land*, published in the summer of 1937. Sundgaard remembers working "very, very hard...on my own pretty much," doing his own research and writing notes on the back of street-car transfers. He also remembers that he realized the proscenium arch was disintegrating "in our minds," thanks to European influences. And Sundgaard recalls the power of Sidney Howard's Province Town Playhouse-influenced *Yellow Jack*, the story of the conquest of yellow fever, successfully produced a decade before. Sundgaard states that *Yellow Jack* was the model for *Spirochete* (Sundgaard, 1976, p.8, p.34).

Reading plays in the mornings for the Chicago unit, Sundgaard did library research in the afternoons and evenings. And he wrote fast, figuring later that he produced the *Dark Harvest* script in about six weeks. "I knew that if I got it done in time that they would do it. The facilities were there and there was interest in it, and Susan wanted me to finish it" (Sundgaard, 1976, p.20).

Objectives, Aims and Goal: Public Education, Public Action for Change

"The facilities were there," said Sundgaard, and Susan Glaspell urged him to write and finish the syphilis play. "There was interest in it." But there were more reasons, more cause, a greater consideration that propelled the writing, guided, mobilized and spurred the writing of *Dark Harvest* in those late winter Chicago weeks. Author Arnold Sundgaard and *Dark Harvest* made a deliberate attempt to transmit knowledge and develop sensitivities

and to create new attitudes about syphilis in an effort to eradicate the dread disease. Sundgaard's dramatized history of syphilis, based on facts and factual case histories, sought to educate the public through drama and to move the audience in such a way as to "feel the relationship of the problem to their own lives" (NA. Sundgaard, c. 3/1/38, note by author). In so doing, Sundgaard felt the collective implications would kindle new currents or intensify and support those actions already begun for social change. In this case, change that would defeat the syphilis plague. This was his goal for *Dark Harvest*.

Federal Theatre Project Associate Director, John O'Connor, interviewed Sundgaard in 1976, and observed that Sundgaard began his play in hopes of undermining the silence and lingering prejudices about the disease. At that time, "Respectable people discussed it with condescension, if at all. It was the disease of sinners, the poor and Negroes" (O'Connor, 1977, p. 94). Sundgaard stated in his notes about the play, included in a letter to Hallie Flanagan, justifying certain scenes, that "of all problems confronting us today, syphilis is most bound up with sexual prudery and emotional restraint" (NA. Sundgaard, 1938, notes). As he remarked in his preliminary outline, "People would rather not talk about the disease at all" (NA. preliminary outline, p.5).

Despite Chicago's own ballyhooed and much publicized forays against syphilis and in spite of the Surgeon General's heroic efforts to spread the word across the land in national publications, there

appears to have been a reluctance on the part of the general public, that is other than a smattering of media and health professionals, to actually speak out loud about the subject. It was not a subject of casual discussion. It remained taboo. Sundgaard remembers that when he worked on the play "conversation about syphilis in those days was just about...unthinkable" (Sundgaard, 1976, p.23).

The prudery that held the discussion of sexual conduct in general, and venereal disease in particular, out of bounds dates back centuries and was not easily eliminated, intertwined as it was, and to a great extent as it remains to this day, with ideas of good and evil, religious morality, racial identity, financial stature, and social standing.

For centuries illness, particularly venereal disease and cancer, have been viewed by society as moral punishment. Susan Sontag explores these punishing attitudes, focusing on cancer, in her 1978 essay *Illness as Metaphor*. Her current *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (1989), is a continuation and refinement of the *Illness* essay. She states, "Feared diseases are almost always considered to be diseases of the poor, the dirty and the delinquent. Those who have brought it on themselves." Blaming the victim is not new (Specter, *The Sontag Metaphor*, 3/23/89, D1, D11). Author Arnold Sundgaard and *Dark Harvest* made a deliberate attempt through theatre to change these punishing attitudes.

If the deliberate transmission of knowledge and attitudes for social change was the ultimate goal of *Dark Harvest*, it was to be

attained though some fortuitous, some consciously, carefully calculated objectives and aims. Specific aims reached by successful achievement of basic objectives would promote the attainment of *Dark Harvest's* goal of informing and educating the public and fomenting concerted action against syphilis. The aims of medical professionals, such as Paul de Kruif and the Chicago task force sought public action to eradicate the disease. The desired action was the mass testing, through Wasserman blood tests, of whole populations in an effort to identify and treat carriers of the disease to prevent them from spreading the scourge, as well as to cure the afflicted. De Kruif, in an approving, helpful and excited, almost visionary letter to Sundgaard recognized the *Dark Harvest's* power to move the audience to demand a mass fight against syphilis, to take the fight into their own hands (de Kruif, 3/10/38).

At least three groups had their own vested interests, aims, and their agendas for *Dark Harvest*. Besides the medical professionals, the theatre professionals, those in the local FTP Chicago Unit, and those that represented the National Federal Theatre Project, had their own aims, as well. The short-term, immediate objectives that were to promote these aims materialized from the conjunction of several perceived needs and certain occurrences in Chicago during the autumn and last winter weeks of 1936 and the early months of 1937. Chicago was the standard bearer of the nationally proclaimed "War on Syphilis" with its much bannered advocacy of blood-testing programs. The local press brandished the colors of the fight almost

daily, rallying the city, as legions of business and citizens groups joined the fight. The powerful political machine headed by Mayor Kelly gave the battle full support. The Salties Hygienic Marriage Act had just been passed by the Illinois Legislature and would go into effect in July of 1937.

In Chicago's Federal Theatre Project Susan Glaspell very much wanted a regional piece, one with local interest, and moreover, and understandably, desired something to show for her difficult and unrewarding time on the project. It is probable that her own plays of ideas and experimentation remained in her thoughts and may well have influenced the direction of *Dark Harvest*. Arnold Sundgaard wanted to write a drama that would be produced. He wanted to write a Living Newspaper. The formula for the Living Newspapers that had seen the stage included, for the most part, clear editorial viewpoints, support for programs already begun or proposed, and called for social or political action. Recognition of this progressive rather than radical bias of the Living Newspapers, O'Connor says, does not, however diminish their political force. "The truth-telling quality of these productions exploded popular myths about the topic. They thus forced the public to see a problem and its causes clearly, often despite the public's preference to keep them hidden...The Living Newspapers presented "facts in a fresh, vivid and credible way," and in so doing "compelled the audience to respond to real social ills" (O'Connor, 1977, p. 92).

The beleaguered Chicago Unit needed something that would be a hit with the theatre critics to garner much needed community support for the Chicago Federal Theatre project. The Unit's Director, Harry Minturn, who represented the older actors, the older, commercial style and ways of doing things, according to Sundgaard, saw *Dark Harvest* as a treatment of a timely subject. The germinating, budding *Dark Harvest*, Chicago's own Living Newspaper, seemed portentous provender not only to bolster the Chicago Unit's box office, thus earning favorable recognition from the National Office, but as a way to buoy the National FTP's image as well. Florence Kerr (NA. 3/12/38), one of the Chicago Unit's Regional Directors, reported to Hallie Flanagan that Paul de Kruif "fairly bounced in his chair with enthusiasm," at a meeting early in March that included Dr. O.C. Wenger. De Kruif was convinced, Kerr related, that "week by week syphilis was getting to be hotter box-office, that the Federal Government should have complete control of this play, and that furthermore, it should make plans to produce the picture which will certainly grow out of the play."

Harry Minturn (NA. 3/1/38, p. 1) also noted that the current Chicago syphilis project had attracted the powerful political attention and full support of Mayor Kelly and the Chicago Health Commissioner, "all of which," he believed, "lends strength to our belief that a Living Newspaper on syphilis within the near future, in Chicago, would tend to promote local good feeling toward, and support for, the Federal Theatre here." He also stated a more

immediate objective: "We are right at the present in need of a production with a large cast." The large Chicago Unit had many actor currently "between shows." The Chicago debut and world premiere of *Spirochete* would encompass forty scenes and boast a cast of 100 players (LCFTP. *Spirochete* . Chicago. Production Bulletin, 1938).

So it was in Chicago during the early weeks of 1938, that Arnold Sundgaard, Susan Glaspell, Harry Minturn, the medical, political and media professionals, and the very city itself, the scene of the first salvos, the first engagements against the deadly enemy, syphilis, came together to produce a *Dark Harvest*. The goal was to inform and educate the public, moving the extended audience to take collective action in order to bring about social change, specifically, the control and eradication of the syphilis epidemic. *Dark Harvest* enlisted in the battle, commissioned to bring its own heavy artillery to the fight to break the ice of social silence, to smash the taboos of ignorance, false complacency and prejudice. The resounding battle cry was "silence is death."

#### The Cultivation of *Dark Harvest*

Perhaps foremost of *Dark Harvest's* aims was the approval of the Federal Theatre Project's National Director, Hallie Flanagan. Without her imprimatur no project would see the stage. During the month of December when Sundgaard was doing his library research, he was still reading plays for the Midwest Bureau. In his own words he worked very, very hard and wrote *Dark Harvest* in about six

weeks. His efforts quickly began to draw the notice and interest of those on the Chicago Unit, those at the Federal level, and soldiers in the Chicago syphilis battalion as well. The first draft of *Dark Harvest* was sent to Hallie Flanagan before the end of February.

Although news of the play's preliminary developments had caught Flanagan's interest and approval a few weeks before, Flanagan was far from enthusiastic after reading the script for the first act and had "grave doubts" about it. She voiced several major objections about this new project from the Chicago Unit in a letter to the Project Director dated February 24, 1938. She saw no place for sentimental concerns such as human relationships in a production of this sort which should focus on the scientific events and progress of the subject, which would, she noted later, lend themselves admirably to charts and graphs. A second point of concern centered on the advisability of turning a character suffering the various symptoms of syphilis into a "comic little man" which was "to say the least debatable." Moreover, Flanagan had found documentation that should "underlie every part of content" to be entirely missing in *Dark Harvest*. She pointed out the careful footnotes of the latest Living Newspaper *One Third of a Nation*, for example. Such careful documentation was vital, she was well aware, to counter the "searching criticism, line by line, of every Living Newspaper, that we have to answer" (NA. Flanagan, 2/24/38).

The pace of the unfolding melodrama quickened as memos, letters and telegrams, and written and rewritten portions of *Dark*

*Harvest* flew among members of the Chicago Unit and between Chicago and Washington. Susan Glaspell wrote on February 26 to Minturn regarding Flanagan's concerns. She expressed her utmost confidence in Sundgaard and his material as well as a reasoned plea for the "human material" which had been after all, based on factual case histories. Glaspell felt that these stories, "which he uses as little Plays," would arouse audience interest and move an audience much more than data in statistical form. She understood that Flanagan had not read the entire script when she wrote and would perhaps feel differently having seen the whole. She also adds that, of course, Sundgaard would continue to work with the script in rehearsals (NA. Glaspell, 2/26/38).

Minturn enclosed Sundgaard's author's note, bibliography, and footnotes for *Dark Harvest* in his letter to Flanagan. This letter incorporated Glaspell's points, included her memo, and expressed his own strong interest in the project, which he considered a very timely subject. He also pointed out to Mrs. Flanagan the interest the politicians and press had taken in the fight against syphilis. Minturn's "P. S." states that he is, "mailing you Act II of Dark Harvest," under separate cover (Minturn, 3/1/38, pp.1-3).

Looking at Sundgaard's list of references for *Dark Harvest*, drawn up at the request of Hallie Flanagan, one may consider that there was perhaps another pattern besides Sundgaard's avowed model of Howard's *Yellow Jack*. Of particular interest is this list's article titled "The Drama of Syphilis," by C. E. A. Winslow, Professor of

Public Health, Yale School of Medicine, that appeared in the February 1937 issue of the *Journal of Social Hygiene*. The opening line of Winslow's article reads, "The story of syphilis lends itself unusually well to analysis along the line of conventional melodrama." The author goes on to recount in dramatic form the history of the villain, syphilis. Three acts and many scenes illustrate the personalities and medical discoveries through the ages and trace the villain from its sudden and dramatic appearance in the 1500s, right down to a final scene set in present day 1937 wherein, Winslow suggests, "official bodies and committees digest and coordinate the facts and plan policies. Finally, sometimes after distressing delays, there is organized that most important of committees - a Committee To Do Something About it...Experience has shown that the heroes of Scene 1 have not given us a sure cure for syphilis and that the clinic alone cannot win the battle. It is to prevention rather than cure that we must look for ultimate victory." The medical heroes of the preceding scenes, Winslow asserts, "have placed this victory within our grasp...." Winslow identifies Dr. Thomas J. Parran as the "leading man in the present-day North American drama," and enlists support for the Surgeon General, urging that with such assistance, "the final curtain may soon be rung down on the drama of syphilis in the United States" ( p.57, p. 72). The melodrama of syphilis, its heroes and their setbacks would be traced again in dramatic form, this time by Arnold Sundgaard in the forty scenes of *Dark Harvest*. Soon the

drama of syphilis would be played out on the stages of the Federal Theatre Project as *Spirochete* .

The other titles in Sundgaard's bibliography for *Dark Harvest* provide an impressive breadth and depth of coverage of the syphilis scene. His list reflects historical, medical, social and popular titles, along with recent articles, several from the Chicago press, speeches and pamphlets. The Surgeon General's *Shadow on the Land* is listed, as are several of Parran's articles dealing with the current plague along with chapters from Paul de Kruif's books. Sundgaard was careful to document sources for each scene in each act, but the total number of scenes at this point had not yet reached the count of the 40 that would unfold the syphilis story at Chicago's Blackstone Theatre April 29, scarcely eight weeks from the date of Minturn's letter.

### The Harvest Grows

Even when the "dramatised history of syphilis" project had received tentative approval to go into rehearsals, Sundgaard continued to research, write and rewrite. Sundgaard interviewed the legislator responsible for Illinois' new marriage law, Edward P. Saltiel. Dr. O. C. Wenger volunteered his services, read the script, worked closely with Sundgaard on revisions, asked if he could come to rehearsals, and became the show's technical advisor. Other local medical authorities attended rehearsals and offered their considered approval of the play's documentation and methods. Sundgaard toured Chicago's clinics to see syphilis first hand. He interviewed

doctors and attended medical lectures (NA. Glaspell, 4/18/38; Sundgaard, n.d., c.3/18/38, author's notes).

The script was sent to Paul de Kruif whose ensuing enthusiasm and adulation not only helped to influence other opinions but offered the author significant suggestions for stagecraft and emphasis as well. (It had been de Kruif's yellow fever research upon which Sidney Howard had based his *Yellow Jack*.) John Gassner (1961) identifies *Yellow Jack* as one of America's "Best Plays."

De Kruif (LCFTP. *Spirochete* production file, letter 3/10/38) thought that Sundgaard had caught the poetry of the fight against death but urged Sundgaard to consider, as he would soon see in his travels with Wenger through the clinics, that it was to be "a mass fight or or it is nothing." De Kruif, unlike Hallie Flanagan, also liked the little fellow, "the perpetual patient, the doleful individual who searches for life." De Kruif foresaw the individual merging into the mass who will fight and conquer the disease, "and not only syphilis but other communicable preventable ills" by "demanding that they be given the life science now can give them. The people, once they know, and they are beginning to know, will override the reactionary private physicians, the budget-balancing legislators and take the fight into their own hand..I have a hazy vision of people singing, marching...."

Hallie Flanagan finally got to read the *Dark Harvest's* second act and pronounced it much better than Act One in a short letter to a staff member dated March 7. She also requested that she be sent

original copies since she had "almost put my eyes out trying to read" the carbon copies that had been sent to her (NA. Flanagan, 3/7/38). Not only had she had to read a barely legible copy, but she read it on a moving train en route to New Orleans (NA. McFarland, memo, 3/7/38). She was soon to receive yet another vote of confidence for Sundgaard's *Dark Harvest* in a letter from Florence Kerr, one of her Regional Directors based in Chicago. In this letter dated March 12, Kerr not only recounts Paul de Kruif's enthusiasms for the script, but speaks of the "powerful backing already evidenced" for *Dark Harvest*: "More interest has been marshalled on this particular effort of the Illinois Federal Theatre Project than ever before. Lined up so far are Howard Hunter, Paul De Kruif, Dr. Oscar Wenger, Dr. Bundesen, and by implication -- Mayor Kelly. I am sure that (with such support) the Chicago Production of this LIVING NEWSPAPER ( caps in original) should go over" ( NA. Kerr, 3/12/38).

### The Rocky Road to Harvest

The mail continued to travel, often to fly by wing and by wire between Chicago and Washington as Sundgaard worked to revise the script. A telegram from Hallie Flanagan to the Chicago Project's Director, Harry Minturn, approving provisional performance rehearsals, subject to necessary changes and requesting projected performance dates was followed minutes before midnight of that same day by Minturn's wire to her. He named April 19-26 as provisional performance dates for *Dark Harvest* and also alerted Flanagan to the fact that he had sent the revised second act of the

Living Newspaper to her by airmail (NA. Flanagan, 3/18/38, wire; Minturn 3/18/38, wire).

However, Flanagan's wire signalled a very conditional "go ahead" for *Dark Harvest*. The wire was initiated by a telephone call from the anxious tenants of the Chicago Project wanting immediate clearance for *Dark Harvest*. In her follow-up letter to Minturn, also dated March 18, she offers explication of her wire of the same date. Flanagan reiterates her still remaining extreme disquiet about *Dark Harvest*. (She had not yet read the revised second act but planned to do so that weekend.) However, on the basis of the first act, "even in the face of the glowing praise" of Paul De Kruif and others, "I should absolutely not be willing to risk the production." This opinion, she says, is confirmed by others in the Washington office. Therefore provisional rehearsals might begin but only with the caveat of revisions and modifications, and subject to the "understanding that necessary changes will have to be made" (NA. Flanagan 3/18/38 letter).

Melodrama, indeed. Before receiving Flanagan's wire of March 18, Minturn had written a letter to Hallie Flanagan requesting production dates for *Dark Harvest* somewhere between April 19 and 26, feeling that because it was getting late in the season "we should get this play on before we have warm weather to contend with." The letter also included more author's notes and approving comments from several local syphilis authorities who had read the play and attended rehearsals (NA. Minturn, 3/18/38).

These author's notes are especially interesting for two points. It is at this time that Sundgaard wonders if this play ought really to be identified as a Living Newspaper. Having originally desired and set out to write a Living Newspaper, he was now not sure that he had. He feels that although some scenes reflect Living Newspaper techniques, the form comes largely from that of Sidney Howard's drama, *Yellow Jack*, and Paul de Kruif's popular literary style. Sundgaard has relied more on case histories, rather than cold scientific facts, as have those authors he mentions, and uses such dramatic sequences to deal with human material. Because of this departure from Living Newspaper form, he wonders if it might not be advisable to call the play a drama or "dramatised history" (NA. Sundgaard, n.d, p. 2, in Minturn, 3/18/38).

Only three days later, Emmet Lavery (NA. 3/21/38, p.2), writing for the Business Manager of the National Service Bureau, Irwin Rubenstein, responded to Sundgaard's quandary by stating that although he thought Sundgaard had a "sound suggestion as to not naming the script a Living Newspaper," he reminded Harry Minturn that "Mr. McGee (the associate Director of the Service Bureau) and I have been saying for a long time that the Format of Living Newspaper would change and should change and DARK HARVEST (caps in original) seems to be an excellent illustration of that point. Consequently it might convince many groups of the true flexibility of the modern stage if you chose to indicate that DARK

HARVEST had used some of the devices of Living Newspaper and had discarded others."

The second point of special interest in author Arnold Sundgaard's notes enclosed with Minturn's letter of March 18 to Hallie Flanagan is at the bottom of the last page. Here the first traces of *Spirochete* come to light. Apparently Paul de Kruif had written to Dr. O. C. Wenger stating that he thought the name of the syphilis play should be changed to *Spirochete*. Sundgaard identifies this suggestion as originating with Minturn. Sundgaard quotes part of de Kruif's letter: "SPIROCHETE (caps in original) is absolutely the title for the play. Please urge Sundgaard, for Christ's sake, not to change it. His play is in no sense a dramatization of Parran's book" (*Shadow on the Land*). "While SPIROCHETE does not mean much to the majority of people now, that play, successful, will make it a living word to millions. SPIROCHETE is a great title, which you will all see after the play has become the wow it is going to be." In closing, Sundgaard remarks, "In the light of Mr. de Kruif's enthusiasm for the title we are seriously considering changing it" (NA. Sundgaard, notes, n. d., [c. p.3], in Minturn, 3/18/38). On the other hand, both Emmet Lavery and Mr. McGee, "both happen to like the title DARK HARVEST better than SPIROCHETE ...."(Lavery, 3/21/38, p.2).

By March 21, the revised Act Two arrived in Washington and was read by staff members of the National Project, as well as by Hallie Flanagan. Emmet Lavery, as Director of the Play Department, noted in his memo of March 22 to Flanagan, that Sundgaard, in this

revision, had taken de Kruif's advice about the end of the play "so that the problem becomes the community's problem instead of merely the individual's." Lavery observes in closing that, "I still think that the script will be a great triumph for Federal theatre" (Lavery, 3/22/38 memo).

Hallie Flanagan's letter to Chicago Project Director Harry Minturn the following day expressed her pleasure in finding *Dark Harvest's* Act Two so much better than Act One and the revision of Act Two a "decided improvement over anything that precedes it." Further, she notes that Mr. Sundgaard successfully overcame her objections to the earlier script's lack of documentation and the "overemphasis on the personal problem and under-emphasis on the greater human aspect of the problem." She was now sure the play would be a great success (NA. Flanagan, 3/22/1938). Scarcely a month until curtain time. The *Dark Harvest* was ripening quickly now. Revisions and cuts continued to be made in the scripts used for rehearsals as late as a few days before the opening, April 29, 1938. One script, still titled "Dark Harvest," with a penciled-line drawn through it but with no other title evident, is marked "corrected as of 4/25/38." An examination of some these scripts is found in the following chapter.

Only eleven days before the curtain at Chicago's Blackstone theatre opened on Sundgaard's "dramatised history" of syphilis, Susan Glaspell wrote an impassioned letter to Hallie Flanagan regarding Arnold Sundgaard's rights to *Spirochete*. Apparently

Minturn was to have presented the case for Sundgaards' sole right to ownership of the play's copyright at a meeting in Washington weeks previously. Having heard nothing, and with the opening performance slated for the next week, Glaspell reiterates her position, her support for Sundgaard, and outlines the facts regarding Sundgaard's work on his own time that produced *Spirochete*. "In view of the situation...it would be most unfair for him not to have the rights to his play. He did a wonderful piece of work, and it may go far. He is just beginning his career and I am convinced he is going to become one of our leading playwrights. Surely we do not want to treat him unfairly." She closes with a reminder of what she personally has sacrificed to stay with the Chicago Project, and no matter how strong her feeling for Federal Theatre may be, if justice for Mr. Sundgaard cannot be arranged, she will "feel compelled to take it to the immediate attention of the Dramatists' Guild" (NA. Glaspell, 4/18/38, p. 2).

### Harvest Home

Mr. Sundgaard did receive the copyright for *Spirochete* and, because of the royalties he received for this Living Newspaper's subsequent performances in Chicago and across the country, he became ineligible to stay on the Federal Theatre roles. Further, *Spirochete*, because it was written by one individual and completed for the most part outside of his delineated duties on the Federal Theatre Project, became the only copyrighted Federal Theatre Living Newspaper. The playbill for the Blackstone Theatre Friday, April 29,

1938, read "The Federal Theatre presents a Living Newspaper 'Spirochete' Written by Arnold Sundgaard, produced by Harry Minturn, directed by Addison Pitt with setting by Clive Rickabaugh, Music by David Sheinfeld and lighting by Duncan Whiteside and Nat Crawford" (NA. Vassar Collection, Playbill, 4/29/38).

The country's battle against the spirochete *Treponema pallidum*, the pale horror, launched some 18 months before by the nation's valiant Surgeon General had, by necessity, become not just the "War on Syphilis" but an attack on ignorance, prejudice and misplaced morality. Despite the informative broadsides in the popular press, the vocal support of local political, business and media groups, the old taboos of social silence still proved difficult to topple. In Chicago, results of "the most extensive syphilis survey ever made" showed that three-quarters of newly infected syphilis patients failed to complete the required treatments with private physicians. Half of clinic patients, whose costs were considerably reduced from the average of \$300 charged by private physicians, stopped their treatments before they could become harmless to others. The survey established the "potential prevalence" of 45,000 cases in Chicago; the statistics indicated that one out of every 75 Chicagoans was afflicted with syphilis. The black population suffered disproportionately. Syphilis was found eight-and-a-half times more frequently therein than in the white population. Over 15,000 persons sought treatment each year but only a scant proportion, some 2,500 were found to

have the disease in its early, infectious, and more easily curable stages (*NYT*, 1/30/38, p.3; Parran, 2/18/38, p. 252).

The bright spot in the still-grim statistics was the increasing numbers of syphilitic patients coming for treatment during the three months of the much-publicized survey. It seemed the campaign was beginning to have some results. However, the dark spot in the figures was to be seen in the sobering statistics, that revealed the results were not happening soon enough. Half of the pregnant women identified with syphilis were beyond their fifth month. Any treatment given then would not protect their unborn children. In those women identified before their fifth month, only one-fifth completed sufficient treatment to insure the birth of a living, non-syphilitic baby ("Survey of Syphilis in Chicago," *Science Supplement*, 12/17/37). The "War on Syphilis" was far from over. The President of the Board of Health, Dr. Herman N. Bundesen (*NYT*, 1/31/38, p. 3) stated, "I am convinced that it costs far less money to fight syphilis than to tolerate it." The city, nation and state pledged to contribute \$400,000 to the battle in the coming year, an increase of almost \$100,000 over 1937 funds allocated to the anti-syphilis campaign.

Promotion pieces for the world premiere production of *Spirochete* are red and black on white folding cut-outs in the form of a composite head. This figure is part shrouded, grinning, red death's head, part prudishly pursed face with red eyelashes and lips, eyes closed, brows askance, and a forefinger primly over the mouth in a silencing gesture. The letters below spell out in script,

"Something to be whispered about out loud" ( NA. herald, Chicago, 1938, Vassar Collection). *Spirochete* made its debut in the "War on Syphilis," and added a new voice to the battle to break the silence that was death.

Scene 3: Threshing Floor: Spirochete:

An outline of its themes and action

Prologue

*Spirochete* differed from other Living Newspapers with its historical story-line that covered hundreds of years and its use of dramatized case-histories instead of the more familiar presentation of meticulously documented facts. Emmet Lavery declared to Arnold Sundgaard, when the latter expressed his doubts about *Dark Harvest* as a Living Newspaper, that he felt that the form of the Living Newspapers would, and should, change. The true flexibility of the modern stage would be proved as it used some, and discarded, other Living Newspaper devices. And as Hallie Flanagan, pointed out in her introduction to a volume of Federal Theatre Plays (De Rohan, 1938, p. ix.), each Living Newspaper was a product of a different history and different techniques. As a result, the theatrical productions of this genre were exciting to produce. She remarks that when *Triple A-Plowed Under* first went into rehearsals that the cast "rebelled" against this concoction with "no plot, no story, no chance to build up a character," and with "no public interest" in the subject.

In contrast to *Triple A's* "no plot, no story," *Spirochete* plots the age-old villain syphilis against the efforts of mankind through

history to deal with, identify, and finally cure the dread disease. The disease is not the only antagonist. Societal attitudes presented in a panoply of fear, shame, disgust, and false righteousness portray another powerful enemy that must be defeated before the villain can be conquered. This enemy is ignorance. Sundgaard makes his historical recitation of facts and events meaningful by making his story the parable of an individual's search for life in the face of the certain devastation and death that was the disease's usual reward. It is true that most of Sundgaard's myriad character's are not present on the stage long enough to be "built up" or clearly defined and three-dimensional. *Spirochete* was not different from other Living Newspapers in this regard. In *Spirochete's* course through history we are introduced to Columbus and his crew, soldiers, physicians, and scientists through the ages who seek the cause and cure for syphilis, as well as industrialists, politicians and Sundgaard's fictive men, women and families affected by and afflicted with the disease. And it would certainly appear that there was plenty of public interest in this subject. However, it also seems probable that despite the clarion call of the Chicago press, the hoopla of parades and corporate blood-letting, the frequent admonitions of the Surgeon General and his colleagues in arms in the "War on Syphilis" and Illinois' new law requiring the results of a Wasserman test before the granting of a marriage license, in the spring of 1938 the average citizen's interest remained *sotto voce*.

## Synopsis

*Spirochete* took reticence about the "pale horror" to the theatre and helped make syphilis "something to be whispered about out loud." Sundgaard's out-loud whisper ushered its audience right into *Spirochete's* prologue which is set in the marriage license bureau where two young, very "nice" people, Peter and Freida, apply for a marriage license. A reporter for a "man on the street" radio show is on hand, complete with commercials, to talk to the happy pair. When the couple is asked for their doctors' certificates that certify that they have both been examined, they are taken aback, shocked, affronted, and very much embarrassed to learn that the law now demands proof that they are free from venereal disease before they marry. "Why?" they wonder. The scene is set for the glib radio interviewer to begin the explanation of the scourge that is syphilis, how it began, and the fight through hundreds of years to identify its cause, to control and at last to cure it.

*Spirochete's* Act One, the beginning of syphilis in the Old World, starts at the end of a voyage. Christopher Columbus and his crew return to Spain in 1493 and bring with them the unwelcome guest. The suffering crew members are told by a physician to return to their homes, he can do nothing for them. Thus the seeds are sown for the spread of syphilis across the globe. In a scene set in 1496 in a Neapolitan Inn, where "appetites of the flesh and palate are provided for," mercenaries from all over Europe fighting for the French king's ambitions in Naples go back to their cities, "as far

away as Poland" with booty they had not bargained for. It is at this point that surely one of *Spirochete's* most graphic and eloquent techniques is produced by a map of Europe, dropped from the ceiling above the stage, behind which is projected the image of an apparently nude, dancing female figure. As the the image dances behind the illuminated map, scarlet neon tubes light up, tracing the paths of syphilis as it races across the continent.

Now the audience is introduced to a meek little figure, the "Patient." He is doomed to have the disease for four hundred years as he travels through time, the object of physicians' and scientists' attempts, failures, and sometime success to identify his disease and treat his symptoms. In short scenes, separated by quick black outs and the off-stage voice of the reporter projected by a loudspeaker, doctors and scientists come and go discussing the patient's disease, the symptoms, their theories of its cause, and their discoveries. Public apathy, antagonism and aversion are frequent adversaries. Representatives of society comment on the patient and his ills.

The patient's journey is interrupted by scenes of pathos, melodrama and dramatic moments in which the human costs of the disease and the public's ignorance are counted. In one such scene in France in the 1860s, based on an actual case, Jean Louis, a young man infected with syphilis, refuses to call off his wedding to Collette because of the social consequences of the marriage. Dr. Fournier, after identifying Jean Louis' disease, points out that he is not making a lecture on sin but observes that "laxity of any kind makes

its own eloquent lectures. Yours is making a rather bitter one" (LCFTP. *Spirochete* . script S1877[3] 1-4-3) .

On the day of the wedding, faced with the young man's avowed intention to follow through with the marriage, Dr. Fournier, is forced to tell Collette about her fiance's condition and its inherent dangers. Physicians and scientists know all too well, the audience is told, what the disease can do, but, even after almost 400 years, they still search for its cause and effective treatment. After her initial horror and dismay, Collette agrees to the cancellation of the marriage but also says that she will not abandon Jean Louis as the rest of family and friends are sure to do. When she and the doctor reach the young man's home, she still in her wedding dress, her fiance has degenerated to the point where he does not at first remember the doctor or that it is his wedding day. Emerging momentarily from the disease's clouding of his mind Jean Louis understands at last the terrible implications of his disease, pulls out a gun, aims it on the doctor, then as the doctor tries to take it away, turns it on himself

This scene's lachrymose pathos is followed by a quick blackout, and the audience is transported to 1905 to a clinical laboratory setting where a procession of lab assistants, bearing a parade of glass slides from known syphilis patients, passes in review before the scientist Schaudinn and his microscope. *Spirochete's* first act comes to a dramatic climax with Schaudinn's discovery of the pale corkscrew, *treponema pallidum*, the spirochete that is the cause of syphilis. The audience shares the moment's excitement and triumph,

as what Schaudinn sees in his microscope, the pale, bacterial corkscrew in a drop of blood, is magnified and projected for all to see.

In addition to the medical and scientific discoveries included in Act Two, this act clearly illustrates the prevailing social attitudes "the great barriers of silence and social pressure" that not only hinder the search for answers but actually aid and abet the spread of syphilis. "Science is gagged by prudery and scorn." But now in the twentieth century, "the death fighters have new weapons and the "cries of the people become louder, louder and more clear" (LCFTP. S1877, 2-1-1).

"You must be the one with syphilis," says Dr. Metchnikoff at the Pasteur Institute, addressing the perpetual patient.

The Patient replies in alarm, "Shhh, please! We don't discuss those things so loudly nowadays. People don't like to think about it. I can't get anybody to discuss it with me...." The Patient tells Metchnikoff that "Even in death certificates they won't mention it. If a man dies of --you-know what--they call it heart trouble or hardening of the arteries or brain softening. If they can think of another name for it they'll never call it -- well, you-know -what" (S1877[3] 2-1-3).

Metchnikoff: "You mean syphilis?"

The Patient: (quite pained by this indiscretion) "Please, after all..., "

Metchnikoff: "Well, isn't it syphilis? "

"Yes" says the Patient, "but..."

"Then let's call it by its real name," states the doctor with finality (S1877[3[ 2-1-3).

It is Metchnikoff who thinks he and Dr. Roux have found a substance that prevents the disease if it is applied at the time of the infection. His experiments with apes have been positive, but how to prove its effect on humans? In another melodramatic scene a young medical student argues that it must be done and insists that Metchnikoff use him to prove this latest step in the fight against death. After much argument and misgiving the doctor is persuaded. The student, Paul, is infected. The ointment is applied. Eighty-six days later, as announced by a blackout and the striking clock, Paul returns, healthy and whole with certificates from two examining physicians testifying not only to his health but to the effectiveness of Metchnikoff's calomel ointment against the first strike of syphilis.

Immediately, a representative from the "Citizen's Moral Welfare League" enters and forbids the doctor to make his discovery known. After all, syphilis is the penalty for sin. "You are about to remove that penalty and plunge the world into an orgy of sinful living. Man will be free to pursue his lustful impulses with no thought of any physical wrath being inflicted on him..."

Metchnikoff questions, "and you say syphilis is the penalty for sin? Indeed it is. "And its a horrible, ghastly penalty, you'll admit. A more horrible one could never be devised could it?" The Reformer

again agrees. Metchnikoff: "Then why in God's name hasn't it put an end to sin?" (S1877[3] 2-1-14, 15 ).

The Reformer counters that if people just would not "sin," they would not be sick. Metchnikoff points out that telling people their behavior is sinful has not changed the fact that the disease strikes one out of ten persons met on the street. The real sin would be to withhold a cure when one was available. Although Metchnikoff's calomel won't help the ones who don't know they have it, and it won't prevent innocent children from being born with it, and it won't cure a man once he's gotten it, it may prevent "a small amount of misery in the world;" and he insists he will not stop in his efforts to make the gift (S1877[3] 2-1-15).

*Spirochete's* action proceeds in scenes that depict the search for an accurate test that will identify syphilis in the blood stream after the initial phase when the spirochete itself can no longer be found. The eternal Patient is called upon to have his blood drawn for Dr. Bordet's first efforts. These prove inaccurate. The Patient's blood is drawn again. Dr. Wasserman proves that Bordet's theory was essentially correct. With success at last, and with the striking of the clock that introduces the year 1907, Dr. Wasserman holds the test tube aloft, triumphant! At last there is a way to find the hidden spirochete. "We must tell the world!" (S1877[3] 2-1-9).

The task, now that there is a way to accurately identify the disease, is to find a cure. This time the laboratory scene, introduced by the off-stage voice of the radio reporter, portrays the excitement

of Paul Erlich's dramatic discovery of Salvarsan in 1909-10. This breakthrough is the culmination of twenty years of work and the testing of 605 previous compounds. As Erlich and his assistant, S. Hata, test the 606th compound, they are taunted by three figures who ridicule their numerous failures in the search for the "magic bullet." They call Erlich a mad fool. As soon as the 606th compound is found to be effective, these hypocritical "Taunters" call him a genius; they knew he could do it all along (S1877[3] 2-1-29). Erlich's ground-breaking efforts, shattering centuries of ignorance, produced a subtle compound of arsenic which, when injected into the blood, would kill the spirochete but would not harm the patient.

Science and society continue to do battle. *Spirochete's* scene shifts to 1933 and the Illinois state legislature. The amendment to require the Wasserman blood test before issuing marriage licenses is noisily and resoundingly ignored. Syphilis is "One of those vague subjects one hears about but never discusses--to do so here in the legislature is beneath the legislators' dignity; it would besmirch their honor; they are fathers of children; it is a subject of bar-room talk." The legislators "would be alarmed, too, if we did not know that this disease confines itself to those of loose morals and criminal instincts, the rif-raff of society. Insult has no place in a bill dealing with anything as honorable and sacred as marriage" (S1877[3] 2-2-22, 23). The enemy is not only disease; it is ignorance.

The cost of such ignorance is made plain in hard dollars and cents, but the pain is painted with maudlin sentimentality. The

following scenes depict contemporary Depression-era life. The "industrialist" fires John for "slowing down." John goes to his doctor and is told that he has syphilis. Now he has to tell his pregnant wife that not only has he lost his job, but that his disease is responsible for the previous deaths of two of their children as infants, the blindness of their surviving child, and it now threatens their unborn child. His wife understands. She must not have the baby; they could not bear another like the blind son Tony -- like Tony, he would never have a chance. The scene ends with the father's anguished cry: "None of us had a chance, Martha, none of us had a chance" (S1877[3] 2-3b-10).

In the scene that follows immediately, the doctor confronts the industrialist with the costs of firing and rehiring and training workers. Here is the lecture: disease does not confine itself to types, the doctor says. Anybody can get it. Because ignorance of symptoms, the employee never knew he had it.

The industrialist is glad the employee is gone. "We don't want any people with disease here," he declares. The doctor points out that John's firing was unnecessary, as well as costly. The corporation could have helped by giving all its employees blood tests at regular intervals; after all the managers do other things to avoid inefficiency. But of course the industrialist complains that blood tests are "too personal." The doctor informs him that such tests will "save you money" by identifying potential inefficiency. The employer thinks that's great; he will lay off the men who look like bad risks.

Obviously the employer is missing the point. The doctor urges that job security is the essential component in promoting testing and treatment programs. And treatment is effective. At this point John enters, strong and healthy, ready to return to work. The doctor tells the employer that even the unborn are not beyond reach, if testing is done earlier enough. The baby will be all right. The main thing is to test for the disease. "If he had been tested at the time of first employment, he would have known. If he had been tested at the time of marriage, tragedies could have been prevented." Industry must do its part. The people and the state must do theirs" (S1877[3] 2-3c-14).

The concluding scene of *Spirochete* presents the culmination of the individual's search through history, as it has been merged with the efforts of science into a cause, a fight of, and for the people. This fight must be taken to the people and the state. Now, once awakened and informed, the people demand, and take, action to change and improve their lives. It is now 1937 and the scene is again the Illinois State Legislature. The legislator who attempts to reintroduce the bill for syphilis testing before marriage is confronted with the legislative body, whose "feelings have not changed." But this time, "the feeling of the people has changed." The galleries are packed with spectators. They demand change. They want to know why other countries have been successful in wiping out the syphilis plague. We are told that these countries faced facts; they didn't try to hide. Facts and figures illustrate Sweden and Denmark's successes in

fighting the battle. In America there are 796 new cases each year for every 100,000 persons. In Sweden only seven new cases were found in the same number of persons. In Denmark only five babies were born with syphilis. In America, 60,000 babies are born with the disease each year and untold thousands die before birth. "Let's be truthful with ourselves. Nice people do get syphilis. The syphilis carrier is a potential murderer and must be stopped whether he likes it or not."

The politician is enraged, and shouts "No!"

The People roar "Yes!" The amendment is put to a vote. There is a great chorus of "ayes," which is taken up by the people. The amendment stands and the curtain falls on *Spirochete*. (S1877 [2] 2-4b-18).

In the final version of the script, a spotlight points out the Speaker of the House as he delivers *Spirochete's* ultimate challenge: the battle is not over but just begun. Votes mean nothing unless translated into action by the people. Syphilis can be banished "if you and you and you wish it so. The time has come to stop whispering about it and begin talking about it. . . and talking out loud!" (SP1877(3)2-5-4).

### Epilogue

*Spirochete*, like other Living Newspapers of the Federal Theatre Project, Hallie Flanagan (in De Rohan, 1938, pp. viii-xi) said, is the story of the "consumer," the average citizen, trying to "understand the natural, social and economic forces by which he is

surrounded and through an understanding of these forces to achieve a better life for more people." It is a dramatic struggle.

"Melodrama?, she asked. "Of course it it is...like all new forms the Living Newspaper borrowed from many sources." Because the form of the Living Newspapers was a flexible technique, disparate elements could and were combined in their production to convey their meaning. Factual and formal, musical and acrobatic, abstract and concrete, visual and audible, psychological, economic and social components appeared together on the Living Newspaper stage.

In its 32 Chicago performances in 1938, *Spirochete* became the first to dramatically portray the four-hundred year history of syphilis for its audiences, the disease that still affected about 12,000,000 persons, or one out of ten persons in the United States. In short scenes and vignettes, *Spirochete* vividly illustrated science's search for the cause of syphilis, the quest for a conclusive test for syphilis, and the exciting moments of discovery of an effective treatment. Throughout the clinical scenes and the presentation of facts about the disease, *Spirochete* wove the human element, that is, syphilis' effect on individuals and attitudes into the factual fabric of the play.

*Spirochete* presented information about the disease. The meaning of that information to the average person was evocatively illustrated. Barriers to the transmission of that knowledge and, by extension, the very elements that assisted the spread of syphilis, were identified as societal attitudes that associated syphilis with sin

and the taboos which prevented discussion of the subject. Following the heroic charge of the Surgeon General in the "War on Syphilis," *Spirochete* offered and examined knowledge about the social, economic and public health problem of syphilis. *Spirochete* called for collective action to identify carriers of the disease so that the general welfare of America's people and its legions yet unborn might be improved and insured.

### Summary

This chapter details Chicago's own bench-mark battle against the syphilis. The process of writing *Spirochete*, first titled "Dark Harvest," was described, as were the author's goals in creating it. Also discussed were the aims and objectives of others involved with this Living Newspaper. This chapter concludes that the script for this theatrical presentation, the Living Newspaper *Spirochete*, was a deliberate and intentional effort to transmit knowledge and attitudes in the "War on Syphilis." As such, *Spirochete* is an example of theatre as an avenue of public health education. The concluding scene of the chapter presents an outline of *Spirochete's* themes and dramatic action. *Spirochete* traces the history of syphilis and humankind's fight against it. The play presents the enemies of ignorance and punitive attitudes, from the days of Columbus through 400 years to 1937, when the Illinois State Legislature passes the amendment for compulsory premarital syphilis testing in yet another effort to stem the epidemic.

Chapter Five: "Act Two, The Drama Unfolds," surveys the Chicago production of *Spirochete* and examines such elements as this Living Newspaper's dominant themes and concepts, and elements of form and format. The chapter follows *Spirochete's* evolution from its author's preliminary outline to the script produced on the stage of Chicago's Blackstone Theatre April 29, 1938.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *SPIROCHETE*, ACT TWO: THE DRAMA UNFOLDS

*Spirochete* opened to an audience of over 1,000 persons at Chicago's Blackstone Theatre on the evening of Friday, April 29, 1938, and continued to play nightly, except Mondays, for 32 performances into the month of June. The production was a final complex of ideas, form, and techniques that had evolved in a few months into a theatrical production. This chapter traces the metamorphosis of *Spirochete* from Arnold Sundgaard's preliminary outline, through various versions of the script, to the copyrighted edition, the basis for the Chicago opening. This version was to appear in the collection of three Federal Theatre Plays (De Rohan, 1938) that was published later that year. It would provide the basis for the four productions of *Spirochete* that opened within two weeks of each other in February the next year in Seattle, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Portland, Oregon.

#### Prologue

#### Theme

As previously discussed, *Spirochete* was a unique product of the amalgamation of several distinct elements: a particular time, a particular political climate, the result of both national and city/county level politics; a particular theatrical climate, that is, the Federal Theatre Project and its dramatic and artistic innovation the Living Newspaper; and a trail-blazing public health effort to wage

war on syphilis. Arnold Sundgaard, inspired by the colorful and vivid local efforts of Chicago health authorities that turned the city into the shock troops of the nation's War on Syphilis, researched and wrote what would become *Spirochete*.

The main message or concept of this "dramatised history," or Living Newspaper of syphilis, was the need for and advocacy of premarital testing for the disease. Underlying this primary idea was Sundgaard's theme, echoing the Surgeon General's rallying cries, that attacked the silence and public censorship which aided and abetted the enemy.

Sundgaard worked out of his main concept and underlying theme, following, albeit unintentionally, the form of other Living Newspapers. In these, as in *Spirochete*, a social problem was presented. The audience was informed about the history of the problem, how it came to be, and what its effect was on the average person or family. Then the search for a solution to the problem was illustrated, culminating in a call for action that would result in social change for the benefit of the people. In *Spirochete*, the solution to the problem of the disease itself was found in the laboratory after a search of hundreds of years. The action for social change came only with the mandate from the people who, after being informed, had changed their attitudes from censure and scorn to enlightened acceptance and desire for action. From this social attitudinal shift evolved the legislative change that would protect society from the rampant dangers of the dread disease and lead to its eradication.

### And Variations

In Sundgaard's notes he mentions that he feels *Spirochete* to be more like Sidney Howard's *Yellow Jack* (1934) than a Living Newspaper. Several reviews of the Chicago production do compare the two plays and *Spirochete* does not fare well by comparison. The acerbic George Jean Nathan, writing in *Newsweek* in 1938, states that *Spirochete* does not have "one fiftieth the dramatic power" of *Yellow Jack* (Nathan, 1938, p.26). Chicago theatre critic, Claudia Cassidy, whose sharp-tongued reviews kept the Chicago theatre in thrall for the next thirty years, referred to "*Yellow Jack* , that topnotch example of what, in proper readjustment, *Spirochete* might hope to approximate" (*Journal of Commerce* , 4/30 1938). The critics did not understand what the Living Newspaper, as a dramatic form, was attempting to accomplish.

In fact, Sidney Howard's *Yellow Jack* , with sets by the famed scenic designer Jo Millzeiner, produced in 1934 at New York's Martin Beck theatre, may perhaps offer a noble ancestral link to Sundgaard's *Spirochete* in its subject matter -- Walter Reed and the efforts to find the cause of yellow fever. *Yellow Jack's* dramatic treatment of that subject includes flashbacks from a contemporary scene (1929) and the introduction of laboratory scenes, clinical action and accoutrements. Sidney Howard called *Yellow Jack* " a history." In it he dramatized Reed's efforts to duplicate and validate work that had been done years before. He presents the controversy among scientists themselves, as well as negative public opinion. Howard

dramatically depicts the scientific accident that proves the case. In *Yellow Jack*, as in *Spirochete*, the story is presented on two scenic levels with laboratory scenes complete with inoculations and drawing of blood. Here, as well, is the breakthrough discovery through a microscope. And music is used as a theme and linkage from scene to scene in both plays.

The apparent differences between the two scripts, aside from Howard's evident skill honed from years of theatrical writing, may well be the results of the sponsoring medium for which each was written. Howard wrote a medical drama with some recent historical interest that headed for the Broadway stage. *Yellow Jack*, first produced at the celebrated Provincetown Playhouse in 1929, was based on the research on yellow fever done by Paul de Kruif. Howard drew the characters of Walter Reed and his colleagues in depth and in very human terms. Facts are given, but they are not the main point. Here the play's the thing. Walter Reed is the main theme. The search for the cause of yellow fever, although the main point of fact of the play, is secondary. Death occurs but is not sentimentalized; science must carry on (Howard, 1934).

Sundgaard, on the other hand, was writing "in the trenches." He did his own research. Syphilis was the hot topic "right now." Sundgaard was not writing for the Broadway stage, but for the Federal Theatre. On this stage, Living Newspapers that depicted "hot topics" of social problems, presented the facts, and urged action for social change had a successful record. Little effort or attention was

given to character development or plot. With these characteristics of topical social issues and change-oriented action, *Spirochete* built on its medical history heritage and became a living history. *Spirochete* found its own voice. It was to become the Federal Theatre's second most-produced Living Newspaper, with 111 performances in five cities across the country. Only *One-Third of a Nation* could boast of more.

### Scene One: Form

#### Form: Method of Arrangement of Details

*Spirochete's* Chicago director, Addison Pitt, did not think it was a Living Newspaper, calling it "really a "living History" of syphilis. And of course, as noted earlier, even its author had doubts about calling it a Living Newspaper. Nevertheless the Federal Theatre's flexible stage had a new star. Addison Pitt's director's notes indicate that he saw *Spirochete's* form as rather conventional. The first act presented the "birth" and growth of the disease. The medical confusion and limited knowledge of 400 years led the way to the climax and end of of Act One where the spirochete, the causative factor is finally found. Act Two is "a direct fight" against the disease, followed by the "slow general awakening of the public to the awful devastation and the necessity of Legislative laws for the eradication and future protection of the coming generations " (LCFTP. Production Bulletin. *Spirochete* . Chicago, 1938, director's note, p. 4).

What Pitt's remarks do not indicate but what undoubtedly became very clear even upon first reading was that the form of

*Spirochete* was much like that of other Living Newspapers. It was made of up of many short scenes and thematic juxtapositions. In *Spirochete* the first scene takes place in the present and serves as a springboard to flash back to the beginning of the known history of the disease. In this manner the present is juxtaposed with the past and, as the narrative proceeds, the present is interwoven with the voice of the inquiring reporter which fills in and links many of the historical scenes. Another such instance of opposing themes are the scenes of scientific endeavors side by side with the human interest scenes which illustrate the effect of syphilis on individuals. The legislature scenes, positioned around human interest scenes that depict not only the effects of syphilis on individuals and their families, but on business as well, provide another example.

Facts about the disease are interspersed with the dramatic illustrations of its effects in scenes in which early doctors and medicine men describe the patient's symptoms. In another example, Dr. Fournier discusses the disease with Jean Louis and Collette, while the audience is a witness to its relentless destruction. In the second act, the scene in which the doctor presents facts and statistics to John, the worker, is followed by the melodramatic scene where the devastation of the disease upon his job and family in human terms is clearly illustrated. After a quick Black Out, the scene becomes the industrial plant's executive office. The doctor confronts John's employer with the facts about testing and treatment and then calls in a strong and healthy John, his testimony's living proof.

Other major elements of *Spirochete's* form include the frequent appearances of the eternal "Patient," the "Everyman" character; the use of spectacle to dramatize significant events, and, as O'Connor (1977) points out, the dramatic persistence of the disease itself. These elements and others of *Spirochete's* form will be discussed in following sections which examine *Spirochete's* dramatic mechanisms of character and production techniques.

### Other Voices

Other researchers have examined the elements of form in Federal Theatre Plays and Living Newspapers, including Douglas McDermott, in his doctoral dissertation, *The Living Newspaper as a Dramatic Form* (1963), and Cheryl Swiss in *Hallie Flanagan and the Federal Theatre Project : an Experiment in Form* (1982). Swiss, in a general statement about the form of the Living Newspapers, makes the point that the subjects of the Living Newspapers concerned subjects of importance for large segments of the population. Inherent in these subjects were basic goals voiced by Hallie Flanagan and manifested in their productions. According to Swiss, these three goals were (a) the distribution of information, objectively, clearly and in a nonpartisan manner, and (b) the development in the public of a greater awareness of the problems of the entire society. The third, (c) was that with an analysis of the problem in the theatre through the dramatic vehicle of the Living Newspapers, the quality of life in American Depression-era society could perhaps be improved.

Restated, the Living Newspapers were to be a theatre of news events. Further, Flanagan felt strongly that the specific problems of a small group affect the well-being of the whole. *Spirochete's* form thus may easily be seen as a dramatic avenue for the distribution of information and increased public awareness about syphilis, a very topical and timely social problem. *Spirochete*, indeed, was written and produced with the stated aim of actively participating in preventing the disease, halting its spread, and assisting in its eradication, to the benefit of the American people.

The form of the Living Newspapers changed. The later Newspapers, *Power* (1937), *One-Third of a Nation* (1938), and *Spirochete* (1938), rather than being written by committee, as were *Ethiopia* and *Triple-A Plowed Under*, became the work of a single individual. This was the case when Arthur Arent took over the collation and writing of the materials gathered by many "reporters" for the New York Living Newspapers, and again when Arnold Sundgaard worked on his own to create *Spirochete*. This single authorship, says Swiss, gave the Newspapers a single perspective and sense of continuity. She identifies *Power* (1937), the history of the Tennessee Valley Administration, as written from such a single perspective, and calls it the "most mature" of the Living Newspapers (Swiss, 1982, p. 101-103). *Spirochete's* form, then, certainly may be recognized for Sundgaards' sole authorship, single perspective, and sense of continuity.

McDermott directs specific attention to *Spirochete* in his discussions of dramatic form. Both Swiss and McDermott address production elements such as staging, sound, and spectacle. These findings will be noted in the sections to follow. However, McDermott presents a study of *Spirochete's* content and conceptual elements that may be appropriately explored at this point.

### Form from Concept

McDermott asserts that *Spirochete*, like other Living Newspapers, is organized around a search but, unlike the other newspapers, *Spirochete's* search is on two levels. On one level, *Spirochete* provides a fictional basis for the search, that is the prologue which presents the young couple at the marriage bureau questioning why they need a certificate from their doctor stating that they have been tested and found free of syphilis. On the second level is the historical search for the cure and the contemporary attempt to legislate a cure. McDermott refers to these two levels of form as a consistent interrelated duality. This duality of form extends to two different types of characters found in *Spirochete*. The first, the historical type, which manifests *Spirochete's* more abstract search for overall solutions to the manifold problems which syphilis imposes on society, is contrasted with the second type, the average person who seeks social solutions. Private attitudes are contrasted to historical and scientific attitudes (McDermott, 1963, p.202).

Another duality noted by McDermott exists in the attitude present in *Spirochete*. The two conceptual lines are the existence of

syphilis and the search for a cure. A duality also exists in the attitudes of the public. Loathing and revulsion contrast with the rational consideration of the scientists. *Spirochete*, in consequence presents a shift in attitude through access to information and explanation. This may be illustrated by citing the following examples which portray changes in attitude: Jean Louis's bride-to-be, John's employer, and the legislators and gallery audience in the first legislature scene as contrasted with the attitude of the assemblage in the legislature's final scene, when the amendment is passed.

McDermott also points out that unlike other Living Newspapers, each scene of *Spirochete's* approximately forty scenes has a beginning, middle, and end, each with its own climax and resolution. In other Living Newspapers, several scenes are used to build a point.

#### Error in Fact and Assumption

McDermott's evaluation is most valuable in its accurate and interesting perception of *Spirochete's* duality of form. In another of his major points it would seem that he errs most gravely. In discussing technique he states, "Unlike its immediate predecessors, Spirochete is entirely fictionalized. Not only is all the language invented rather than quoted, but all of the situations are also imagined. Spirochete accords with history in general rather than with the specific history of a single source or news report. No scene is based on a news report; no source for any information is ever given" (McDermott, 1963, pp. 207-208).

As previously discussed in Chapter Four, Sundgaard's notes and documents and correspondence among Hallie Flanagan, Harry Minturn and Susan Glaspell state unequivocally that each scene in *Spirochete* is documented and each scene is based on an actual fact or case history ( NA. Glaspell, 2/25/38; Minturn, 3/1/1938).

Sundgaard's three-page bibliography (1938) cites statistics and articles from the current local press and medical journals as well as medical texts. Scene after scene cites as many as eight and never less than two sources of documentation. The opening prologue itself is based on Section 6A of the Illinois marriage code, effective July 1, 1937. Further, the next year when *Spirochete* was to be produced in Philadelphia and the question of Christopher Columbus' culpability in bringing syphilis to Europe was strongly questioned by the Philadelphia Knights of Columbus, Arnold Sundgaard, in a letter to Emmet Lavery at the National Service Bureau, furnished quotations from several standard works dealing with the history and epidemiology of syphilis that were used as authority for the Columbus scene (NA. Sundgaard, 2/15/39, pp.1-2). No mention of any such correspondence or archival sources is made in McDermott's bibliography. It may be that McDermott only consulted the published version of *Spirochete* (De Rohan, 1938) as his source and thus had no knowledge of Sundgaard's extensive documentation or of the professional and contemporary basis for the statistics which are quoted by the doctor and again by the legislator in *Spirochete's* Act Two (S1877[3] 2-4-14, 2-5-17 ). It would seem that McDermott

had little or no knowledge of the history or the topicality of the disease.

Because McDermott has built his argument on a false premise, his conclusions suffer and become suspect when he states, "Because it is not dependent upon current fact or specific sources, *Spirochete* lacks the objective tone of the New York plays. Use of specific history causes them to emphasize that history; events are more important than characters. Use of general history, however, causes *Spirochete* to emphasize the characters and their emotions, rather than the events" (p. 209).

After comparing *One Third of a Nation* to *Spirochete*, McDermott states, in another questionable conclusion, "So long as the play (*One Third of A Nation*) remained tied to current news reports and specific historical sources, fictionalization could only occur in the convention within which this material was presented. To fictionalize a Living Newspaper further it would be necessary to change the basic approach--to dramatize general rather than specific history. Sundgaard took this step. Consequently, his linguistic technique, scene construction, scene linkage, and overall tone change" (McDermott, 1963, p. 210). It must be clearly evident at this point that *Spirochete* was equally "tied to current news reports and specific historical sources" as other Living Newspapers. It dramatized very specific history, facts and events. The conclusion cannot be reasonably drawn that *Spirochete's* "linguistic technique,

construction, linkage and tone" changed, because *Spirochete* was a work of fiction. It was not.

As noted earlier, *Spirochete's* scenes were unique in that each had a beginning, middle, and end. It is perhaps ironic that this scene construction, as mentioned by McDermott, may be seen to have come about precisely because each scene, contrary to McDermott's assertions to the contrary, was indeed based on a documented incident that, itself, had a beginning middle, and end; a climax and resolution.

#### Scene Two: Format:

##### The Overall Makeup - Shape. Size. Style. Language

Language in *Spirochete* is another element of form that McDermott explores. He generally takes Sundgaard to task for clumsiness and stiff construction, but in chastising Sundgaard for the scene between the young student Paul and Metchnikoff, in which Paul is trying to persuade the doctor to use him for the first human subject, he takes Sundgaard to task for allowing the doctor to "acquiesce in the fact of a mere student's determination." In actual fact, the lines of the script demonstrate that Metchnikoff does not give in easily. At first he refuses adamantly. Six pages of dialogue, a discussion with the other doctor present, the insistence that Paul be given time to change his mind, and even the Patient's plea of "No, no. You mustn't," all argue for a less than easy acquiescence before Metchnikoff finally infects Paul with syphilis and immediately treats

the new infection with calomel to test the effectiveness of this new weapon against the disease (S1877[3] 2-1-5 - 2-1-II).

Despite McDermott's assessment of this scene's "linguistic ineptitude," (he finds the lines "stiffly constructed," the "emotions...unconvincing," and the lines "falling clumsily from (the) tongue"), contemporary reviewers of the production pointed to this scene as one of the "most thrilling" and one of those most popular with the audiences (NA. VC . Gilbert, 5/3/38, Collins, 4/30/38).

#### Format: Character

Cheryl Swiss (1982) outlines the evolution of form in Federal Theatre Productions and speaks of the dramatic mechanism of character. McDermott (1963) devotes little attention to this element of form in *Spirochete*, except to identify the characters in *Spirochete* as historical or fictional, and stereotyped and traditional. McDermott writes that although most of the historical characters are individualized and often distinct personality types are contrasted with each other, the fictional characters, such as the young couple, and Lenny, the "man on the street," are examples of individualization that is neither subtle or nor sophisticated. It should be recognized that the young couple appear only in the prologue. Their brief appearance is the device that asks the play's fundamental question, "Why is premarital testing important?" This device sets the scene for *Spirochete's* history of syphilis, the actions for change, and the attempts to eradicate it through the search for a cure, the search for a definitive test for the disease, and the quests for legislation that

offers some protection. The characters are far more important as a dramatic device than as characters. And after his initial appearance as the "man on the street radio interviewer," it is only Lenny's voice that reappears, as a dramatic device, throughout the play to link scenes and provide background for the action on stage.

Although not directly addressing the "Patient" in *Spirochete*, Cheryl Swiss (1982) comments on the "Everyman" character that appears in the Living Newspapers. This character provides a personalization of social issues. This character allows each member of the audience to feel included. This character, Swiss observes, is a mechanism for "relating public events to individual experiences, who spoke or asked questions or expressed confusion on behalf of the average citizen." This "Everyman" figure, declares Swiss, became the principal character in the Living Newspapers. "The development of this fictional character made events more effective than did historical figures," Swiss postulates. "The effect on audiences was personal, she concludes, " he was a character with whom audiences could identify as he attempted to cope with problems shared by all citizens" (p. 120).

It is to be hoped that the specific problems which beset *Spirochete's* Patient did not affect all of the individuals in the play's audiences, but, as Flanagan emphasized, what may appear to affect only a small portion of the population affects the whole. And surely even the healthiest members of *Spirochete's* audiences could identify with the Patient's questions and eternal quest for a cure

while beset with the ill winds of societal quackery, ignorance, blame, and a blanket refusal by society to even talk about the cause of his troubles.

*Spirochete's* Patient enters the scene in 1510 and in the next 400 years is an emotional backboard, reflecting emotional content for the medical and scientific events that swirl about him. His comments provide grounding in reality for the scientific events. His part is not essentially a major one, but rather the human thread that ties the many scenes of science together. In the Patient the audience shares the emotional search for cause, alleviation and cure. The Patient is frustrated, he is tired, he hurts; he is timid and nervous, and would rather not talk about it. The Patient is also one of the few vehicles for humor in *Spirochete*. The Patient can talk back to the doctors. When told by the erring Dr. Hunter that "all" he has is gonorrhoea, "it's nothing." The Patient responds, "Think of that. And I thought I was sick" (S1877[3] 1-3-9). He is an "accidental" tourist through time and disease. The doctor retorts: "they all say that."

Perhaps the Patient's most important function in *Spirochete* is to have his blood tested for syphilis, not once, but twice. There, on stage, the audience sees the Patient willingly acquiesce to the drawing of his blood. On stage it is in an effort to prove the efficacy of Bordet/Wasserman testing procedures. But as an educational method, the Patient provides a model for desirable public action.

The Patient apparently survives only until 1907 when Wasserman confirms Bordet's hypothesis for a definitive test for

syphilis. He does not participate in Paul Erlich's eventual (albeit limited, from today's standpoint) victory over the disease with the discovery of Salvarsan. *Spirochete's* Patient exits quietly, with a "Bravo" to Dr. Wasserman and a quiet, "God Bless You," to Dr. Bordet (S1877[3[ 2-1-24).

*Spirochete's* author did not feature the Patient in the people's triumph and legislative victory that ends the play. However, *Spirochete's* director in the Philadelphia production commanded all the characters that had gone before, including the Patient, to reappear and witness this scene. In Philadelphia, at least, the Patient played his part to the end.

But perhaps the Patient has not really vanished from the drama. In the fourth scene of the second act, the role of the Patient may be seen to be taken up by the innocent victim, John, the worker, fired for his diminished productivity. He lost his job, he is horrified to discover, because of syphilis, which he has carried, unknowingly, for years. Syphilis is responsible, he is told, for the deaths of two of his children, the blindness of a third, and the incipient doom of a child yet unborn. In the scene which follows, the "patient," John, learns from his doctor the causes, the effects, and the possibility and actuality of the cure for syphilis, even for the unborn. And the audience learns as well.

At the end of the play in the legislature scene, although the "Patient" may have disappeared from the stage as a distinct character, and even though his metamorphosed being, John, is not in

attendance (except in Philadelphia), *Spirochete's* Patient, Everyman, has truly become every person as the onlookers, the crowd, the people, proclaim their desire and support for the amendment that will make their lives a little better.

Other *Spirochete* characters, in addition to the "Patient," serve as dramatic mechanisms. That is, they serve a function in the play outside of, beyond themselves as individuals. Throughout the drama the scientists and medical men, even though portraying actual historical personages who contributed hard-won knowledge to the long battle against syphilis, are shown, with the unfortunate exception of Dr. Hunter, to be men of considered reason and rational thought and actions. They are unafraid to face facts and their own mistakes. They are undaunted in their search for "an improved quality of life" for their time and the ages to come. They are sympathetic to the sufferers and impatient with, and unbowed by, the ignorance and prudish hostility of public attitudes. The dramatic function of these characters is not only to make and present the medical and scientific discoveries that lead to the laboratory defeat of the dread disease, but to disseminate knowledge and information, and demonstrate understandings about the disease, not only to the other characters on stage, but to the audience, clearly and objectively, without favoritism, in this theatre of historical news events.

Other dramatic mechanisms of character can be found in the "Reformer" figure, who claims to be concerned about the public

morals and berates Metchnikoff for his attempts to alleviate the suffering of those afflicted with syphilis. Another example can be found in the "Taunters," who jeer and deride Paul Erlich's efforts through 605 different compounds before the discovery of "the magic bullet", Salvarsan. The "Taunters" are dramatic mirrors that reflect societal attitudes. The doctor's scientific reason and the heightened awareness that comes with Erlich's success banish ignorance. The taunts turn to bravos and applause for courage and genius (S1877[3] 2-1-13-15, 2-1-25-27).

In much the same manner, the corporate executive, Mr. Thomas, who fires John, the syphilitic worker; and members of the Legislature in the final scenes, are "before and after" models of society when faced with the problem of syphilis. The executive unfeelingly refuses John's pleas to retain his job. He is concerned only with productivity until the Doctor expands his understanding of the the greater problem, and points to the effectiveness -- and greater efficiency for the plant -- of the solution. The solution is regular testing and effective treatment .

In the legislature scenes, the first illustrates the refusal of the Illinois congressmen to even consider the proposed amendment that would require premarital testing. They boast in their ignorance that "We...know that this disease confines itself to those of loose morals and criminal instincts," and therefore has no place in a bill dealing with anything as honorable and sacred as marriage (S1877[3] 2-3-2).

The second and triumphant scene that concludes *Spirochete* , presents a Paul-on-the-road-to-Damascus conversion, not through a blinding heavenly light, but by the illuminating gift of knowledge and scientific facts. The Second Legislator: "I admit it. I admit my own former blindness to facts which ought to have been obvious to all of us. But since that time I have learned that a country like Sweden wiped out this disease because years ago it faced the facts and didn't try to hide them" (S1877[3] 2-5-16).

A bit later the Congressman recounts, "During the past four years I have learned many things. My eyes have been opened to the flagrant weakness of any system that allows its people to suffer year after year. Let's be truthful with our selves...Nice people do get syphilis. And I say the difference between those who do and those who don't is misfortune and nothing else" (S1877[3] 2-5-16, 17). In *Spirochete* , the Legislator speaks for the people. In fact, the legislature action portrayed in *Spirochete's* 1938 Chicago debut recounted the circumstances of only the year before when Illinois' passage of premarital syphilis testing legislation made it among the first ten states to have such measures.

In the theatre of *Spirochete* , the social problem has been analyzed, information and knowledge dispensed, understanding increased, and attitudes changed. Now action is taken to improve the quality of life in American society. The call for action does not end with the passage of the Illinois amendment on *Spirochete's* stage, but with a direct charge given to American society through,

it is interesting to note, the voice of the Speaker of the House. "Votes mean nothing unless translated into action by the people....Victory for this amendment is a battle just begun. This fight must go on until syphilis has been banished from the face of the earth. It can be done and will be done if you and you and you wish it so. The time has come to stop whispering about it and begin talking about it...and talking out loud! " (S1877[3]2-5-4 ).

### Scene Three: *Dark Harvest* to *Spirochete* Scripts

#### Three Endings

This rousing conclusion to *Spirochete* does not appear in a copy of the script dated 4/25/38, four days before opening night. This vital change to the play's final form and effect is probably the most important change crafted by Sundgaard in the creation of *Spirochete*. It is not only interesting archeologically, from a theatrical viewpoint, but also instructive when we consider *Spirochete* as a theatrical vehicle for public health education, to trace a few of these steps in the evolution of the finished Chicago *treponema pallidum* . The changes reflect not only the young playwright's steps in the refinement of his material, but delineate the sharpening and pointing of *Spirochete's* unique and distinctive banner and battle lance for the War on Syphilis.

The rousing conclusion of the final version was a vibrant, living echo of Paul de Kruif's vision, transmitted in his letter (NA. 3/10/38) to Sundgaard just six weeks before *Spirochete's* opening. "The people, once they know, and they are beginning to know, will

override the reactionary private physicians, the budget-balancing legislators and take the fight into their own hands."

This impassioned call to action on the part of the people, it was hoped, would promulgate the spread of accurate health-giving, life saving information. Such action would encourage attitudes to shift from ignorant prejudice to positions more open and understanding. De Kruif's revelation demanded action that would create social change to benefit American society. The translation of de Kruif's vision appears to have been a last-minute addition to *Spirochete's* script. The electric, exciting, exhilarating, and provocative, and newly emphatic, ending, delivered by the Speaker of the House, does not appear in a copy of the play, with the title "Dark Harvest" lined out in pencil, with no replacement title, and hand-dated in pencil "4/25/38." The second act of this script still declares itself "Dark Harvest" and a typewritten notation reads "Corrected as of 4/25/38."

The ending of this 4/25/38 script presents de Kruif's vision of declarative action by the people in an embryonic version of what the finished *Spirochete* presents full-blown. This conclusion comes after the First Legislator has asked for a vote. The Speaker calls for all those in favor to signify by saying "aye." The stage direction states "everyone shouts aye in a great chorus which is taken up by the people". The Speaker bangs for attention and his request for "nay votes is drowned out." The Speaker has the last line: "The amendment stands adopted!" The curtain falls (S1877[2] 2-4b-18). There is no inspiring charge to the people to take direct action

themselves. The invitation to participation in the fight, to start talking out loud so that the legislative victory can be translated into a victory over the syphilis plague was perhaps the finishing touch that finally made *Spirochete* battle-ready.

Yet another ending seems to have preceded the "Aye" ending of the 4/25/38 script just quoted. Susan Glaspell had assured Hallie Flanagan through her memo to Harry Minturn back in February that Sundgaard would continue working on the script through rehearsals and it is very evident, from this earlier ending, that he did. In it, although taking place on the legislature floor, with the passage of the amendment, it is a doctor, the script calls for, "a death-fighter like Dr. O. C. Wenger," dressed in a lab gown, in a laboratory on the upper stage, who pronounces the last words. The doctor rouses the "The People" to action with the challenge "our fight has just begun! We have here the weapons to end this war...We fought typhoid and that is gone. The fight we now wage is with syphilis! Will that go, too?" The People respond in a great chorus "Yes." The Doctor concludes: "Then come and take it away," as the people surge forward and the curtain falls" (S1877 [1] 2-4-4).

Here are three vital and significantly different endings for what was to become *Spirochete*, and, it seems probable, all within a matter of a few weeks. Sundgaard was busy writing and rewriting. On the same day that the wire from Hallie Flanagan granted provisional rehearsals for his project, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on a University of Chicago eight-year survey of 100 Chicago families

and their reactions to the Depression years (CT, 3/18/38). On that same date a *Daily News* report, date-lined Albany, related that the New York Governor signed a health bill requiring expectant mothers to take blood tests to protect the unborn from syphilis, the first such law in the United States. The law was predicted to save the lives of 123,000 infants annually. Another story warned Chicago parents of the still dangerous diphtheria peril. They were warned not to ignore children's sore throats. There had already been three deaths in March and twelve since the first of the year. *Spirochete's* environment was still haunted by the Depression and other specters of disease had not left the stage (CDN, 3/18/38, p.5, p. 14).

#### Preliminary Outline

As crucial as the existence and evolution of the play's conclusion was to the final form and effect of *Spirochete*, a far more important and telling metamorphosis occurred from Sundgaard's "preliminary outline for a living newspaper tracing the story of and fight against syphilis" (NA. *Spirochete* file, n. d.). In this preliminary outline, there is no "Prologue" and there is no dialogue yet written. The outline is composed of descriptions of 17 scenes in the first act and eight scenes in the second.

An introductory note states that the first three or four scenes will be brief blackouts showing a few dramatic victories made by science over various diseases. These diseases were to include diabetes, pernicious anemia, and something that required an Alaskan dog team to transport the saving serum.

There is no anchoring event or springboard incident, such as the final version's young couple at the marriage bureau in the present, to provide impetus for the following historical scenes. There is no "Patient" character to tie events, and the play, together.

In this preliminary outline, Sundgaard specifically identifies and uses the Voice of the Living Newspaper to set up and introduce scenes and to explain and call attention to occurrences and attitudes. The Voice was also to be used to offer statistics as evidence. Even so, this early outline for a "living newspaper tracing the story of and fight against syphilis" appears as a series of unconnected historical vignettes. The first act, however does close with Schaudinn's discovery of the spirochete, the pale horror that is the cause of syphilis, as do the later scripted versions.

The second act depicts the scientists at work. It is interesting to note that Sundgaard, who later declares his purpose to be the conquering of the prudishness that prevents the discussion of the disease and halts the spread of knowledge about the disease, notes that he does not want to use the word syphilis. "I imagine if the word 'spirochete' is used instead of 'syphilis' it will be easier on the audience" (p. 7). As we may deduce, Sundgaard must have been rapidly persuaded to overcome his delicate feelings. Even in the earliest scripts syphilis is called by its rightful name, often and without hesitation except in cases when the word is avoided to make the point.

A few illustrations serve to indicate what dramatic transformation in form and content took place from outline to performance. This is not done by any means to unfairly criticize the playwright's first efforts, but rather to trace with interest and appreciation the growth process of a theatrical production. One of what may have been one of the more effective scenes in the final versions, occurs after the startling and dramatically effective scene in which the spread of the disease is traced on a huge, projected map of Europe behind which a sinuous female figure danced evocatively. To personify the spread of the disease across Europe, symbolized by the dancing figure and map, numerous representatives of various nations are lined up across the stage. One states he has the "French disease;" he turns and points accusingly to the Frenchman, who declares that he suffers from the "Spanish disease," and, turning, points to the Spaniard, who states he has the "Italian disease." Of course the Italian is ill from the "German disease," and so on, until at last, almost all races, nationalities and creeds have been included in the spirochete's deadly game. In the preliminary outline, this vivid depiction of the disease's pandemic spread, was to be accomplished simply by posting notices.

As previously identified, the Voice of the Living Newspaper was to be used to give statistics. The preliminary outline then called for a following scene to underscore the statistics and recommended charts and figures for this task. Then the "fine record of Sweden could be shown" ( NA. Sundgaard, p. 8 ). Apparently this Swedish

scene was dramatized with little success in an early script. Glaspell's memo to Minturn of February 28, after Hallie Flanagan's initial critical remarks about *Dark Harvest*, states, "We should perhaps change the scene in Sweden and give that material in a less personal way" (NA. Glaspell, 2/28/38). In the 4/25/38 scripts, the statistics appear in the second legislature scene, recited by the representatives. The information about Swedish and Norwegian successes in eradicating syphilis provides fuel for the ultimate victory of the Illinois amendment.

The scientists and early physicians of the later scripts, Frascatoro, Riccorde, Hunter, Fournier, Schaudinn, Bordet, Wasserman and Erlich, and Metchnikoff make their appearance in the preliminary outline. But so do others as well. Of particular note are the additions in the outline of post Salvarsan developments such as the addition of bismuth to Salvarsan (NA. Sundgaard, p. 8). It seems likely, since these developments and their discoverers did not make it to the stage, that somewhere in the process before the first extant script their dramatic value was questioned. And this was probably wise. These incidents could not surpass the excitement and drama of Erlich's discovery, on his 606th attempt, of the magic bullet, Salvarsan, that will indeed cure syphilis, the devastating plague of the ages.

Again it is the ending of the outline of the syphilis history, that differs drastically from any of the other endings that surface in later versions. In this element alone it is easily evident how much change

and dramatic growth in substance, concept, form, unity, and style took place from Sundgaard's first conceptions of the idea in the preliminary outline to the copyrighted version that debuted at the Blackstone Theatre. The preliminary outline of Scene 7, the next to last scene, proposed, a dizzying kaleidoscope of diverse segments that ranged from "a WPA sewing room where workers make mercury belts for colored sharecroppers," through the portrayal of an industrialist touting increased efficiency if workers can take treatment without danger of losing jobs, the head of a pre-natal clinic, a happy worker who took treatments, an executive who tells how he and all his fellows are going to take voluntary Wasserman tests along with employees, a philanthropist, a minister, a newspaper editor. (pp. 8,9)

Finally, "a senator or official would speak for the compulsory physical exam for marriage applicants." The following and concluding scene proposed to illustrate a laboratory where "doctors are busy at work searching for new cure" (pp. 8,9).

#### Script Archaeology: Tracing Changes

The version of *Dark Harvest* with the "doctor ending," the first of the three *Dark Harvest-Spirochete* endings, is identified in handwritten script as "old version." The type-written "Dark Harvest" is lined through and "Spirochete" handwritten above. In addition to the significantly different conclusion, this script does not have the statistics on Sweden and Denmark that present such a convincing argument in the last legislature scene in the 4/25/38 scripts. What

this script does have that the later scripts do not is an unfortunate, *de trop* little scene tacked on at the end of the already shocking and melodramatic Dr. Fournier-Collette-Jean Louis suicide scene. This little bit of very questionable taste has the good doctor listening, as the seemingly ever-present, already forlorn and miserable Patient catalogues the symptom's he is experiencing, and those which he shall soon experience, ranging through Hutchinsons teeth, locomotor ataxia, arteriosclerosis, tabes and softening of the brain, or paresis, and bone trouble. The doctor remarks that that list is only part of it, and adds "congenital syphilis, blindness, deafness and it does a lot of other things" (S21877(1), S1877 [5] 1-4-17,18). Wiser heads prevailed. This scene was cut and does not appear in later versions. This cut may be due to the direct intervention of Hallie Flanagan. It appears that she thought the scene "Entirely unscientific in its terminology...(and it ) would antagonize and terrify the audience as written (S1877 [5] 1-3-11, index-card note).

It is probable that this script, catalogued S1877 (5) and marked, "Act I only," is the script that Flanagan mentioned in her early correspondence about *Dark Harvest* with Minturn (NA. Flanagan 2/24/38). In a letter to her staff a few days later, after trying to read the second act of "Spirochete" (sic) on the train to New Orleans, she remarks that she has made notes in the margin, directs her staff to type them up and communicate them to Minturn.

This reference to "Spirochete" in this letter is curious because, in a letter dated March 11, Minturn still refers to the play as "Dark

Harvest." Flanagan refers to "Dark Harvest" in her March 18 telegram approving provisional rehearsals, and again in her letter of March 22, telling Minturn that the revised Act Two of "Dark Harvest" "is a decided improvement over anything that precedes it." This script has penciled notes in shorthand and hand writing. These notes then appear typed on index cards, attached to individual script pages, in the separate Act One (S1877 [5] ).

The comments on the cards echo the phrases in Flanagan's letter of February 28. She is clear and direct in her opinions. "Impossible to make the person like the consumer man in Power." Despite Flanagan's note, the Patient survived and became a definite character in *Spirochete*. Flanagan thought, according to a note on an index card, the Fournier, Collette Jean-Louis scene "entirely unconvincing;" yet this scene remained to humanize the evidence gleaned from the scientific scenes. Flanagan thought the "Beginning with boy and girl - questionable." Nevertheless, the scene stayed to provide a fulcrum, rooted in the reality of the common person, for the historical sequences. Flanagan wondered if the Columbus material was authentic. "If not, many people will be seriously offended to have Columbus mixed up in the situation." She was prophetic. But it was not until the next year that the Philadelphia Knights of Columbus were to prove her right (S1877 [5] ).

A typed note concludes: " Play very much worse than first script. This subject, if treated at all, must be treated scientifically." The next week, having read Act Two, Flanagan requested her staff

to pass on word to Minturn that "I think the second act better than the first" (NA. Flanagan 3/7/38).

A penciled note in this script indicates that Flanagan thought the opening prologue before the man-on-the street radio interview takes place was "very long for Loud Speaker." In the 4/25/38 *Dark Harvest* script, the prologue has been cut and changed significantly. The result seems much stronger, more direct, and not so melodramatic. It is interesting to note that even in this late script, there are hand-marked cuts in the prologue, and a word addition, that do not appear in what seems to be the subsequent script, the copyrighted "Spirochete" script, stamped with the Midwest Play Bureau mark. It is possible, of course, that this *Dark Harvest* script was one used in actual rehearsals where the cuts were made for performance (there are other cuts), while the "Spirochete" script was an extra copy, not actually used in rehearsals; therefore the cuts were not picked up.

#### Additional Modifications

The major changes to *Spirochete's* ending, the change to the prologue, Sundgaard's notes, his extensive bibliography and documentation, plus the enthusiasm of the health professionals and that of the Chicago Project and National staff members seem to have assuaged Hallie Flanagan's doubts about the project. Other modifications appear to be minor and for the most part cosmetic. The decision is made that after the initial opening scene Lenny, the announcer, will be heard over the loudspeaker instead of appearing

on stage ( S1877[2] 1-3-11). Lines are cut to trim what seem to be overlong sections and to strengthen the drama of a scene; for example when, after Jean Louis' suicide, a Blackout ends the scene and the script calls for Dr. Fournier to deliver a gratuitous appeal concerning Jean Louis' unnecessary death. The doctor's speech implies that Jean Louis died because of false fears and lack of knowledge. The speech concludes with a plea for more intensive study to find the cause of the disease (S1877 [2] 1-4-17). This speech is boxed out neatly, as a director or stage manager would do it in this, the "Dark Harvest," 4/15/38 version, and does not appear at all in the 4/25/38, "Spirochete," Midwest Play Bureau, "copyright" version (S1877 [3] ). It may well have been ill-advisedly added in haste in the last few weeks before opening since it does not appear at all in the "old version" (S1877 [1]).

In another instance of the same sort of cut, a really maudlin scene appears after the already melodramatic climax and conclusion of the scene in which the discharged employee has revealed to his wife the awful truth that syphilis is responsible for the previous loss of their two infants, the blindness of the surviving son, the loss of his job, and threatens the unborn child, as well. This scene ends with John's anguished cry: "None of us had a chance, Martha, none of us had a chance!", followed by a Black Out. In the "old version," this intense and effective scene is followed by a scene set in the doctor's office. The doctor talks with the husband and wife and indicates that the unborn child may yet be saved, but adds that

their son could have had his sight if only they had been examined before they got married; "that was the time when the disease should have been discovered." And the scene ends (S11877[1] 2-3-12).

Later versions preserve the dramatic impetus of the earlier scene with the deletion of this insensitive and unneeded fillip. The information about the advantages of early diagnosis and saving the unborn is much better handled in later versions which have the doctor relating this as an accomplished fact to John's employer (S1877 [3] 2-4-15).

In other instances a few words are changed and lines cut, but little of consequence to content or action. The aforementioned examples of changes found in the later scripts, including changes to the beginning prologue, the patient's recitation of gruesome symptoms, two extraneous and embarrassing scenes, and the ending account for the major differences in these scripts from Sundgaard's first versions sent to Hallie Flanagan for approval. The Columbus and tavern scenes appear to be unchanged even though Flanagan's note regarding them read, "Incredible!" The tavern scene may well be the source of her later remark, mentioned by Lavery in a memo (NA. 3/22/38), that one or two lines still seemed to be of questionable taste.

#### Authenticity and Documentation

It is probable that little was changed in *Spirochete's* laboratory scenes, not only because of Sundgaard's thorough, and, apparently, accurate research, but perhaps primarily because, as discussed

previously, health and medical authorities were early-on invited to read the script and attend rehearsals to offer any suggestions that they might have. In Sundgaard's notes enclosed with Minturn's letter of April 18 to Hallie Flanagan, he states that Dr. O. C. Wenger, Assistant Surgeon General and Chicago's liaison in the city's War on Syphilis, was acting as technical advisor for the project. Minturn, in an earlier letter (NA. 3/11/38), identified Dr. Wenger as "Nationally in charge of the Committee Against Syphilis, stationed in Chicago." Minturn observes that the Surgeon General, himself, termed Dr. Wenger "The greatest authority on syphilis. "

Dr. Reuben Khan, developer of the Kahn test, an alternate form of the Wasserman test used with the Wasserman test in Chicago's mass testing program, read the script and attended rehearsals, as did a representative of the Chicago Board of health, Dr. Louis Schmidt, who had been associated with Dr. Wasserman in Germany.

According to Sundgaard's notes all expressed complete approval of the documentation and method of approach (NA. Sundgaard, in Minturn, 3/18/38).

#### The Trail of the Copyright Question.

Other evolutions of background interest rather than content or stylistic value concern the trail of the rights to what would become *Spirochete*. The "old version" has this severe notice on its third page: "Warning all rights are reserved with a notice to Federal Theatre Projects that they have no rights to perform the play unless they obtain permission from the National Service Bureau and further

no copies are to be made without written permission." The "Dark Harvest" 4/25/38 script has no such cautionary notice at all. The "Spirochete," 4/25/38, Midwest Play Bureau script exhibits "Copyright 1938 by the author" on the script's first page under the title and the author's name.

This first copyrighted script of *Spirochete* reflects the successful efforts of Susan Glaspell's entreaties to Hallie Flanagan only the week before, in her letter dated April 18, urging that Sundgaard be allowed to obtain the copy right for *Spirochete*. It is this script, too, that marks the first appearance of *Spirochete's* dedication, which reads, simply, "To Dr. O. C. Wenger and Charlotte Reamy (sic)." Curiously, the spelling "ey" is superimposed in hand-printed pencil and the complete, corrected name (Reamey) is hand-printed in parenthesis next to it. The matter is perhaps of little import, but is of passing interest because another script with the typed date of 4/25/38, and marked "author's copy (revised), carries the same misspelling and correction, as does yet another script, stamped "Library Play Bureau," in a National Service Bureau cover. The dedication survives, with the correct spelling, in the collection of the three Federal Theatre Plays (De Rohan, 1938) published the following fall.

It is worthwhile to remember that each script, each version and revision had to be typed manually, often times by different typists doing separate sections of the same script on different machines. Only a few carbon copies could be made at one time. It is

no wonder typographical errors occurred from script to script or that page identifications were frequently inconsistent. It is easy to understand why Arnold Sundgaard recalls with dismay his trip to New York to correct the galley proofs of *Spirochete* for the collected plays. He found many mistakes and many corrections were necessary. He was appalled to learn that since the galleys had been set he would have to pay out of his own pocket for any corrections he desired. The charges for the changes were deducted from his royalties, and so, says Sundgaard, "I never made any money on the royalties on the thing" (Sundgaard, 1976 pp.12-13 ).

#### Finale: Other Scripts

The publishing of *Spirochete* in the collection of Federal Theatre Plays did not end the typing of scripts. The Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection contains scripts dated November 16, and November 30, second typing second revision. There are scripts identified as "Revised 11/27/38," "typed 12/22," "revised 11/27," and, even "copy 14, 4th typing." These are further labeled with National Service Bureau markings. It appears that a few weeks later, the final version was published in January, 1939, by the National Service Bureau and mimeographed copies were produced for Federal Theatre projects across the country. Copies of this script were used in the Cincinnati's Playbox Theatre Production of *Spirochete* in February of 1939. A script identified as belonging to the stage manager of this production is in the LCFTP collection. Another such mimeographed script, without markings of any kind,

exists in the Los Angeles Project file of "planned productions" at the National Archives.

### Summary

This chapter identified and explored *Spirochete's* guiding themes and concepts. Sundgaard sought, through dramatic form, to inform and educate audiences, to inspire and illustrate action for social change. *Spirochete's* content displayed the history of syphilis and explained the need for the recent legislative action dictating premarital and other syphilis testing. The underlying theme of the play urged and demonstrated the breaking of taboos which still surrounded the subject of syphilis in the late 1930s.

This chapter included a discussion of *Spirochete's* elements of form and format, including juxtaposition of scenes, dramatic use of character and language. An examination of *Spirochete's* evolution, from the author's preliminary outline to the finished script produced in Chicago, demonstrates increasing strength, growth, and dramatic effect in content and style.

Chapter Six, "*Spirochete*, Act Two, Part Two - Dramatic Action On Stage and Off," surveys *Spirochete's* production techniques, the dramatic elements of stagecraft, lighting and sound, promotion strategies. How these elements were used, and the relationship of these elements to the presentation of *Spirochete's* message, forms the chapter's basis. Commentary about the Chicago *Spirochete* from theatre critics, and medical and theatre professionals, as well,

presents contemporary opinion and assessments of the theatrical production.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *SPIROCHETE*, ACT TWO, PART TWO

#### DRAMATIC ACTION ON STAGE AND OFF

##### Production, Promotion, Expenses, Audiences, and Reviews

The evolution of words on a page to a theatrical performance, encompasses the production elements of staging, scene design, lighting, sound, properties, and costumes. A discussion of these elements, how and why they were used, and how they were used to present and underscore *Spirochete's* themes and concepts is presented in this chapter, as are the techniques used for promoting this production. Scene One explores *Spirochete's* production techniques. Scene Two highlights *Spirochete's* creative and innovative promotion strategies. Scene Three presents a discussion of *Spirochete's* audiences and production costs. Scene Four reviews contemporary critical and collegial comment and opinion after *Spirochete's* opening night.

##### Scene One: Production Techniques

*Spirochete* production elements of form, language and character have been discussed in preceding sections. Other dramatic elements that create a theatrical production are the elements of staging including sets and scenery; lighting; sound, including music; properties, costumes, and special effects, or spectacle. Each element has a purpose and serves to forward the dramatic action on stage. In the discussion of these elements in the Chicago production of *Spirochete*, how and why these techniques were used, and with what

effect, will be examined. A comparison with other Living Newspaper productions will be noted as applicable.

### Sources

Production techniques, such as the use of staging, light, and sound, served particular purposes in the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers. These elements of stage production were often specific to the goals and characteristics of the Living Newspapers in which they were used. Swiss (1986) identifies distinguishing characteristics of the Living Newspapers that dictated stage technique. Among them, audience participation was considered one of the most important characteristics, since Living Newspaper audiences cut across the age, race, religious, political, and economic spectrums. Living Newspaper productions were designed to encourage each member of the audience to think about the need for social change and to identify with the ways such changes would affect him or her. In this way, the Living Newspapers personalized social issues. The Everyman character was the vehicle for this personalizing action.

Another distinguishing characteristic of the Living Newspapers that influenced production technique, Swiss (1986) observes, is the concept of action beyond time and space. The Living Newspaper accomplished this with flash backs from the present day to various points in history and back again. These impacting concepts had their sources in the Epic theatre of the ancient Greek tradition of narrative development, but were modified through Bertolt Brecht's

modern epic theatre which jolted spectators out of a passive, reflective role into a participatory, and critical involvement.

Hallie Flanagan, after her European tour to study European theatres, saw that the staid, conventional theatrical techniques were limiting and could be harmful. Her theatre, influenced by the excitement of the German and Russian theatre experiments, was to break away from such limitations. "We have tried to set up a new reality on stage" (Flanagan, 1943, p. 24). It was to include sensory stimulation: the sounds and the sights, the shock of surprise, the release of laughter. Her theatre would explore the impossible. There was to be no one way. Her mentors were Piscator and Meyerhold. She was drawn to the combination of film and stage for theatrical effectiveness. Film images with live actors heightened dramatic effects. Actors rose from the audience to speak to the audience. These were experiments in form and theatrical concepts that Hallie Flanagan was to encourage and see take root and flower in the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers .

The Newspapers' goals of informing the public, inculcating an awareness of the need for social change , and then motivating the spectators toward initiating action that would forward the change, echoed those of Brecht's modern epic drama. But the Living Newspapers' form necessitated new methods of exposition. These new methods were incorporated in innovative production techniques such as the loudspeaker Voice of the Living Newspaper, projections, and symbolic action.

### Budgetary and Production Crew Allotments

One of the defining characteristics of the Living Newspapers, indeed of all the productions of the Federal Theatre, was the lack of extensive financial and material resources, a result of WPA restrictions with regard to the amount of money that could be spent for materials and supplies. This was especially true in 1938 when the entire Federal Theatre Project had endured several budget cuts from its less than grandiose beginning three years before. This was particularly true of the Chicago Project which suffered a 17 percent reduction in funds in March of 1938, and a reduction in staff because of reduced project quotas from 814 persons to 779 (NA. Minturn, weekly performance reports, 2/24, 3/21/38; Woodward to Kerr, 3/3/38). In an earlier letter, Minturn noted that wage reductions had forced Katherine Dunham to drop out of the project (Minturn 2/28/38). Dunham, who provided a dancer from her group for the silhouette in the spectacle map scene, was to go on to professional success and fame with her own troupe of dancers.

*Spirochete's* cast of 100 came from the 219 acting professionals and 78 minor actors available in the Chicago project. Costumes were designed by some of the three senior and twelve junior designers and stitched by some of the dozen seamstresses and four tailors listed on the project. In addition, the Chicago FTP professional staff listed 75 musicians, nine stage managers, and plenty (197) of stagehands. It should, however, be remembered that *Spirochete* had to share these professionals with other Federal

Theatre productions that were running on, and preparing for Chicago, FTP stages during this time (NA. Minturn, 6/3/38).

### Stage and Set

The stage itself was adapted to convey the special characteristics and purposes of the Living Newspaper. Although Arnold Sundgaard remarked that he had never seen a Living Newspaper, he knew "the proscenium arch was dissolving in our minds" (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 34). Another characteristic of the Federal Theatre, manifested in its stage settings, was Hallie Flanagan's expressed desire to move away from the traditional realism of the 19th century, away from the box set of the conventional theatre of the 1920s and '30s, and to experiment with flexible stage forms.

Swiss (1982, pp.115-116) observes that each Living Newspaper production used a unit set which could include several different and defined playing spaces, depending on the needs of the script and number of actors involved. Playing spaces for these productions included ramps, runways platforms, stairs, and rolling platforms. Frequently, aprons, curved additions to the front of the stage, extended the playing areas out from the normal stage area and thus brought the audience closer to the action. Scrim, transparent materials, opaque if lighted from the front, served as painted scenery. When illuminated from behind the scrim became invisible, revealing the action taking place in back of it as through a slight haze. This effect was capable of giving the action, or whatever was

seen, a surreal quality. Scrimms were frequently used with light or projections to indicate different spaces, locale or times

*Spirochete's* Chicago production incorporated many of these staging elements. Sundgaard gave credit to Harry Minturn for his "suggested effective plans for staging." *Spirochete's* staging, it was hoped, combined with the already incorporated suggestions from Paul de Kruif, would enable "the message of the play [to] reach a wide audience," according to the playwright (NA. Sundgaard, in Minturn, 3/18/38).

*Spirochete* was divided into two acts, with only an eight-minute intermission between the acts, and ran well over two hours. A traditional curtain was pulled only at the beginning and end of each act. Often quick Black Outs to dramatize the idea just presented separated the many short scenes. Flanagan's Vassar Experimental Theatre had pioneered the use of Blackouts in the United States (Flanagan, 1943). At other times, the light faded on one playing area and came up on another, to shift the drama's focus.

For the Chicago *Spirochete*, the stage's lower playing area was itself divided by a balcony-like upper stage ten feet above the stage floor. The front of the stage was extended with an apron, and further, wedge-shaped platforms at either side provided additional, separate, playing areas. These were used, for example, in the legislature scene in which the main action takes place in the center of the stage, but "spectators" stand in these side "boxes." Witnesses to this scene lined the upper platform as well. The upper balcony

platform was also used as the perch of the "Taunters" in the Salvarsan discovery scene (LCFTP. *Spirochete* . Chicago. Photographs, 1938).

The lower playing area itself was a large platform raised two steps from the stage floor and accessible, not only from the wings off stage but from steps in front from either side of the orchestra pit. There was a conventional door at the back under the balcony, but rather than having conventional sets on either side of the door, "travelers," dark curtains that could be pulled, closed off, defined and provided a backdrop for yet other individual playing areas. For the most part, the various doctors, scientists, and laboratory and scenes were played in front of these curtains (LCFTP. SC Production Bulletin. set design, Photos, 1938).

Stage furnishings, such as laboratory tables and paraphernalia, were frequently carried in by the actors. Reviewers noted that in many scenes the stage was a veritable bacteriological laboratory. The Chicago production's property list included not only test tubes, basins and beakers, distilling flasks, retorts and Bunsen burners, bottles, jars and syringes, but even two guinea pigs in cages. Much of the laboratory equipment was supplied by Chicago medical authorities (LCFTP. PBSC. sd, Collins, review, 4/30/38, p. 17).

*Spirochete's* production contained 12 individual sets that could be placed on the permanent unit to indicate, for example, the marriage clerk's scene or Dr. Fournier's office. A dressing table, an elaborately framed, painted representation of a mirror above, and

an ornate painted wall decoration suggested Collette's boudoir . Stencilled "wallpaper" and authentic gas lamps represented Jean Louis' rooms. These set dressings served a narrative function and provided a means for the audience to learn more about the characters. Such visual elements heightened the emotional impact of the scene (LCFTP. PBSC. sd, Photos,1938).

### Lighting

The lighting in *Spirochete*, as in other Living Newspapers, functioned as far more than simply a source of illumination for the stage. Lighting in *Spirochete* had various purposes and effects. As indicated earlier, light was used to change scenes, to shift the focus of the drama, to dramatize the action. Lighting served as transition. It divided areas into playing spaces. Lighting effects denoted the passage of time, dimming and rising as the clock struck. Spotlights focused attention, isolated characters, served to underscore questions, and to comment on the action. The lighting plot for Chicago's *Spirochete* denotes two control panels, "boards," in use for the Blackstone production. Each scene had its own individual plan for lighting, identifying particular lights, set with different colored "gels," (sheets of colored, solidified gelatin through which light diffused). The individual colored lights, such as amber, straw, pink, blue and, for *Spirochete* , a "syphilis green," used in combination, or separately, created varying tones of warmth and mood for each scene. The "syphilis green" was used to illuminate the "Patient" each time he appeared, adding to his already "ghostly" makeup. Lighting

created a cloud effect in the Columbus scene. Light simulated candles and lanterns. Collette's boudoir scene was bathed in pink and amber light, creating a quality of softness and warmth. Stage-lighting effects the slanting rays of the sun. The microscope spotlighted in the doctors' conference scene points up the dramatic discovery of the spirochete that closes Act One (LCFTP. PBSC. Lighting plot, 1938).

### Special Effects and Spectacle

The Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers created and used unique special effects through a combination of lighting and set design. Spectacle was often created through innovative stage action to present, dramatize, and illustrate a dramatic point of action. Spectacle was an element to enlighten. The illuminated globe, the map of Europe, which appears at the end of the tavern scene, graphically and symbolically paints the spread of syphilis across Europe. The effect is created by a "Blue Map Light thrown from the back wall on a 'Shadow graph' at the front of the top platform," according to the lighting plot. The effect, judging from a photograph of this scene, is startling. The surrounding scene is in darkness. The shadow of a sinuous female figure with flowing hair is superimposed upon the illuminated globe-map of Europe and soldier figures in shadow appear to be marching past in front. Sundgaard's script called for glowing red neon tubing tracing the route of the disease across the continent. However, no mention is made of this in the light plot or reviews. However, Sundgaard recalls that "we had...neon

tubes that ran through the map of Europe, and ... as her nude shadow and those tubes spread out across Europe, it was a very, very dramatic device" (Sundgaard, 1976, p.22). One reviewer described the scene as a "vivid tableau," in which "a nude siren was silhouetted against an illuminated map of Europe" (LCFTP. PBSC. review, Gilbert, 1938).

McDermott (1963) comments that in this scene, the special effect, the projection, becomes the action, symbolically illustrating the spread of the disease and the approximate cause. McDermott also notes that *Spirochete* did not use spectacle as frequently as other Living Newspapers. He identifies only one other major special effects in *Spirochete*. This second special effect was also identified by reviewers. It is the closing, climactic moment of the first act when Schaudinn triumphantly identifies the spirochete, the *treponema pallidum*, the pale horror. The spectacular effect is created by the great round projection on a screen at the back of the stage of what Schaudinn sees in the microscope, the projected image of the corkscrew bacillus in a drop of blood. (In the Philadelphia production, Sundgaard states, the effect was made more spectacular by the image of a wriggling spirochete). Chicago's perhaps most acerbic critic, Claudia Cassidy (4/30/38), called this "one of the production's finest bits of staging, which flashes on a circular screen in the rear of the stage the microscopic plates the scientists below are examining" ( LCFTP. PBSC, review).

Swiss (1982) notes that special effects were often a catalyst for action. In *Spirochete*, the illuminated globe graphically presenting the spread of syphilis set the stage for search for the causative organism which would be played out in the following scenes. The illuminated projection of the spirochete heralded the second act's search for a definitive test and effective cure for the disease.

If *Spirochete* did not have the number or frequency of special effects found in other Living Newspaper, as remarked by McDermott (1963), it also, he states, does not match the New York newspapers in their use of dramatic and symbolic stage business to condense time or to abstract ideas. Such symbols and abstractions came to be characteristic elements of the Living Newspaper form. Further, McDermott states unequivocally that *Spirochete's* stage business was at no time used to visualize complex situations or abstract ideas (p.206). He does identify, however, Sundgaard's theatrical devices in two scenes that fast forward the dramatic action. In the first act, a passing parade of doctors illustrates the varied and changing attitudes toward the patient, and the disease, over a period of several hundred years. In the second example, time is collapsed by a seemingly unending parade of lab assistants carrying specimen slides to Schaudinn, symbolically portraying the long search for the spirochete that ends Act One. These compressions emphasize progress and make it visible.

In much the same way, although unrecognized by McDermott, is the dramatic device following the map scene which first

introduces the spread of syphilis. This device, described previously, serves to underscore the symbolic action just seen and to personalize it. In this scene a long line of appropriately costumed representatives of the many different countries to which the disease has spread murmur sadly how they have the Frenchman's disease, the Spanish disease, the Italian disease, and so on, *in ad finitum*, punctuating the map's malevolent message. Not only has the disease spread across Europe in just a few years, but it is always the fault of someone else. The disease's dissemination and the attitudes it engenders are made obvious and meaningful to the audience.

Yet another example of *Spirochete's* creative, symbolic action that portrays the compression of time is the scene which depicts the search for an effective test for syphilis. Here Sundgaard has the physician, Bordet, tell the eternal "Patient" that, "we'll take our tubes and put them in the incubator here till we count ten. That would be equal to two hours of ordinary time." And so the "Patient" counts, out loud, to ten. Sundgaard has this light and human little sequence repeated not just once, but twice, the last with the finally successful Dr. Wasserman. The result is not only an audible compression of time, but also provides a *leitmotif* for what are otherwise serious, dramatic moments as the patient learns, then repeats the counting procedure, and then, in the last bit, does it on his own. The "Patient" then informs the doctor when the time is up (S1877[3] 2-1-20-23).

### Sound and Sound Effects

Sound in *Spirochete*, as did lighting and special effects, served many purposes. It was heard in varied forms. Sound served to set the scene, as with the original orchestral score, sound effects, and the loudspeaker.

Music. The orchestral score for *Spirochete* was written by David Sheinfeld, who previously had ballet scores to his credit. *Spirochete* was scored for trumpets, trombone, tenor saxophone; violins, viola, cello, and bass; piano, clarinet, flute, harp, timpani, cymbals, and flute. The orchestra provided music for the overture, the prologue, the Neapolitan Inn scene, complete with an Innkeeper's song; and the music for the sensuous dance that accentuated the symbolic spread of syphilis across the globe (LCFTP. SC. music file, Sheinfeld, 1938).

A present-day musician, pianist and teacher, Jerry Allen, read copies of the original score and, from them, made piano-reduction audio cassette tape recordings of the overture and "Innkeeper's" song. Allen believes that the score's coloristic instrumentation can be compared to some movie music of the period. The overture, Allen states, is a dramatic piece of dark forboding with expressive use of the instrumental resources. Drama is provided by string tremolos, timpani rolls, and cymbal crashes (Allen, personal communication, 6/21/89).

In the overture, in a minor key, the sound is dark, almost threatening, and very suspenseful. However, the "Innkeeper's

Song," although, again in a minor key, is a lyrical, wistful, almost sad, little waltz with a repeated refrain, somewhat reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Tit-Willow" song from *The Mikado* (*Spirochete* audio tape, 1989).

Throughout the play passages of orchestral music introduced or underscored the drama of scenes. Music was used to comment on the action as when a "grotesque commentary on the wedding march" was played in the Collette-Jean Louis scene.

Sound effects. Sound set the scenes with effects such as the sound of sea waves, or a man walking along the dock. Swiss (1982) comments on the expository function of sound in the Living Newspapers with an obvious anachronism that does not damage the meaning of her observation. She states that "The staff mixed live effects and taped reproductions of many kinds of sound...Taped sounds (were)...often complemented...by a live orchestra" (p. 116).

It is common knowledge that there was no "tape" in the Thirties. Even reel to reel wire recording was not easily available until the 1950s and magnetic tape recording only became accessible for public use in the late 1950s. Sound-effects recordings, however, widely in use in radio productions, were often used for stage productions during the Thirties and frequently in combination with "live" sound effects, such as "thunder sheets," door-bells, and so forth. These sound effects recordings were shellac records and transcriptions (Rigsbee, personal communication, 5/15/ 89).

*Spirochete's Voice*. Perhaps most importantly, in *Spirochete*, and in other Living Newspapers, sound provided a dramatic device for transitions between scenes, through time and space, and to comment on the action. This dramatic device was the loudspeaker. Hallie Flanagan had used the loudspeaker device in her Vassar Experimental Theatre production of *Can You Hear Their Voices?* (1931) (Flanagan, 1943). In the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers the loudspeaker was identified, almost as a character, as the Voice of the Living Newspaper. In *Spirochete* it was merely called "Voice." And here, McDermott (1963) is in error when he state unequivocally, "There is no Voice in *Spirochete* ." This error casts doubt on the basis for his conclusion: "Consequently, the scenes in *Spirochete* are not linked, but juxtaposed" (p. 209).

It is curious that McDermott (1963) presents these observations because even the 1938 published version of *Spirochete* contained in De Rohan's *Federal Theatre Plays*, which apparently was McDermott's source for his examination of *Spirochete*, contains *Spirochete's* "Voice." Granted, in many places, Lenny, the radio interviewer, takes on the usual duties of the Living Newspapers' characteristic "Voice of the Living Newspaper," with his introductory and summary comments before and after scenes, but, even so, *Spirochete's* "Voice" is heard on a regular basis precisely in order to provide transitions, to announce the place and time. At times a clock strikes, or bells ring, or a cock crows, but each time

the Voice announces the year: "The year of our Lord 17..18..19..." (S1877[3])1-2-1, 1-3-1, 1-3-7, 1-3-11, passim).

In addition, the "Voice" appears to have been responsible, according to Flanagan's earlier referenced letter, for delivering dramatic, thought-provoking introductory statements to begin the prologue, and to repeat the same duty at the beginning of the second act. Statements such as these announced what was to come:

"Through the years the battle has been much too furious between the eager forces of life and the quick forces of death....Today we are asking: must this continue? Today we are wondering...." This preamble indeed sets the scene for the next two hours. The audience is enlisted in a quest, a questioning search for cause and effect. The audience is introduced to the concepts that will form the basis for the play including those of "battle" and "struggle," "tyrants," and "army;" and to those that contrast the ideas of "plague," with "truce," "danger," with "attacks," and "new sciences," with "challenge" (S1877[3] Prologue).

The "Voice" introduces the second act: "With the discovery of the spirochete the search for cures goes forward." Here new concepts are presented, including the ideas of progress, barriers, and science. Among these concepts, one of the most important, that of social pressure "gagged by prudery and scorn," asks new questions. New answers are found. The "Voice" declares that "the battle becomes more intensive, the field of fighting, more widespread;" new weapons appear, as do the "death-fighters;" and

then, "the cries of the people become louder...louder and more clear" (S1877 Act 2, scene one). These are marching orders.

*Spirochete's* introductory segments identify the problem, evoke its costs, and involve the audience right from the beginning, engaging the theatre-goers in the struggle to find and implement the solution, the identification and eradication of syphilis. As a result, the battle is made meaningful for the audience. Its members have a part in the unfolding drama of the centuries-old, yet very contemporary, war on syphilis .

The Human Voice. More subtle than the "Loudspeaker Voice," less intrusive than Lenny, another use of sound advances *Spirochete's* message. The play's occasional use of human voices creates a mood and underscores the action, as Swiss (1982, p.116) indicates was the custom in other Living Newspapers. Choral speech, sometimes syncopated, sometimes as crowd noises, and the use of rhythmic speech was characteristic of Living Newspapers. Speech patterns were used to punctuate, to sharpen emotional impact .

Arnold Sundgaard recalls that in his earlier work, *Everywhere I Roam*, he intentionally tried to create a rhythm, through rhythmic speech and informally poetic diction and style (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 36). In fact one reviewer of the finished *Spirochete* accusingly takes note of the "almost archaic" style spoken with a "halting suggestion of blank verse" (LCFTP. PBSC. Cassidy, review 4/30/38).

The citation of a few instances in *Spirochete* , serve to illustrate how the sound of voices was used to make a point. " The

crash of wine tempered laughter," introduces and heightens the dramatic intensity and atmosphere of the Neapolitan Inn scene, perhaps foreshadowing the dreadful troubles to come (S1877[3] I-2-1). The short, clipped, repetitive, rhythmic, staccato lines in the Schaudinn-Hoffmann scene accentuate the action and build to the scene's, and the act's, dramatic discovery and climax. Here the sound of the lines conveys the excitement, the steadily increasing progress of science as a seemingly unending parade of lab assistants bring specimen after specimen for Schaudinn to examine. The exhilaration of the search for the cause of syphilis as it nears the summit of success is echoed in the sound of the actors' lines. The rhythmic, compelling sound of the language draws the audience into the action, making them part of the ultimate discovery, not only sharing in the facts but participating in the action (S1877[3] 1-5-4-6).

Another instance in which the choral effect of speech is used to underline and punctuate the action is the speech of the "Taunters," who at first deride Erlich's many attempts to find a cure for syphilis, then eagerly hop on the bandwagon of his successful discovery of Compound 606, Salvarsan. The lines are short, staccato, and repetitive; almost a litany with the sing-song cadence of children's taunts. The effect underscores and offers dramatic contrast to Erlich's dogged, dedicated, serious pursuit of the "magic bullet." Symbolically, the dramatic mechanism of speech is used as a sort of

short-hand to present science's quest to save the people carried on in the face of society's scorn and ridicule (S1877 [3]) 2-1-25).

Yet another example of sounds as a dramatic element is evident in *Spirochete's* legislature scenes. In the first scene, the sounds are not even spoken or voiced. Rather, "thunderous applause" brings an end to the scene where the amendment requiring premarital testing for syphilis has been refused consideration. The loud applause is a sharp exclamation point. It is a resounding "NO". Society has spoken. Syphilis, in 1933, is a shameful subject, not even to be talked about, and certainly of no concern to "nice people" (S1877[3] 2-3-3).

The second legislature scene, set four years later in 1937, brings the drama to its resounding close. The legislature, as one voice, a great chorus, shouts "aye." This monosyllabic refrain is taken up by the people. The amendment stands adopted and this time the applause heralds the "Victory for this amendment," and sounds the call to "A battle just begun...This fight must go on." Again the applause of the people is a great exclamation point to the dramatic action. This time the people have enrolled in the army that is to fight and conquer syphilis. "The time has come to stop whispering about it and begin talking about it... and talking out loud!" (S1877[3] 2-5-4). Sound in *Spirochete* sets the scene, it accents the action, it intensifies the drama, and it is literally the voice of the people.

### Costumes

It may be said that there was little remarkable or particularly notable or of especial dramatic impact in the costumes for the Chicago *Spirochete*. There is perhaps more to be said concerning differences when costumes in other cities' productions are compared. This will be noted in the section concerning other productions. The lack of incipient drama in costuming may be understood if one remembers that the main characters in *Spirochete* were the disease itself, a patient who exists for four hundred years relatively unchanged, and doctors and scientists who are easily identified by their standard-issue short, or long white coats. The production's most remarkable effects are wrought by a dancer silhouetted across the map of Europe, and she, it seems, has little or no costume, and an illuminated spirochete that does not have much of a costume either.

Nonetheless, it should be recognized that the dramatic action of *Spirochete* is enhanced with period costumes. This is particular apparent in the Neapolitan tavern scene, as the sketches for these costumes vividly illustrate. The Chicago production bulletin indicates that the women's costumes for this scene, the serving maids, the women in the tavern were all done in scarlet velveteen, two colors of red and many shades of pinks and reds. The soldier-victims were camouflaged in tans, browns, greys, and soft yellow. The symbolism of the women's costumes is unmistakable. Their ripe

and fleshy colors and styles present a very visible metaphor for the disease (LCFTP. PBSC. costume sketches, 11-13).

The eternal "Patient" is costumed simply in a long cloak, long cassock or soutane, the better able to drift in and out of the years without attracting much attention. It may be worth conjecture to consider that the "Patient's" garb is described in the notes as a "soutane," a long gown worn by the Roman Catholic clergy. By extension, one might conjecture that the "Patient," garbed in cleric's clothing was a dramatic symbol of the innocent teacher and sacrificial victim through whom the world obtains redemption.

The bride Collette's gown suggests that, in this case, costume effects linked with symbolism are perhaps more defensible. The costume sketches for the bride's dress depict a traditional, white "romantic revival ... satin, net, white ostrich tips" gown. Photographs of the Chicago production indicate that the ostriches were spared. Collette's tight bodiced, hoop-skirted gown and puffed sleeves are trimmed, caught up with white tulle. This is a traditional bride's gown and the effect is one of freshness, beauty, and innocence. (LCFTP. PBSC. photos).

Generally speaking, *Spirochete's* costumes make few statements of their own. With exceptions noted above, the costumes generally serve to accommodate *Spirochete's* rapidly shifting periods, scenes and action. They do not intrude. They do not speak for themselves but serve, for the most part, in minor supporting roles. Even the "Restoration Fop" character's garb of elaborately be-

ribboned knee-pants, cloak, and plumed hat, completed with lace handkerchief, could have been pulled from any costume shop. It does not have particular meaning for *Spirochete*. The costume merely identifies the scene's period, although it might be said to reflect the overblown, effete and prissy aversions characteristic of certain social attitudes in this time. The black, nondescript hooded robes of the "Taunters" in the Chicago *Spirochete* production make no statement themselves but rather allow the ghostly/ghastly white makeup of their wearers to make mute testimony to this scene's tone which imparts science's centuries-long struggle against the forces of ignorance and social interdictions. The robes accent the "Taunters" words without competing with their effect (LCFTP. SC photos, 1938).

### Clinical Sequences

Clinical scenes made *Spirochete's* major statements. The dramatic mechanism of the laboratory and medical vignettes identified this Living Newspaper unequivocally as *Spirochete*. The drama's testimony was found not only in the parade of physicians and scientists over hundreds of years presented on stage, but in the visualizations of these "death-fighters" in their element. Costumes and properties suggested the medical environment, but it was the action that brought the audience into the doctors' rooms and laboratories. Surely the squeamish in the audience turned their heads when the errant Dr. Hunter insists upon having himself infected with syphilis right on stage, certain that it is "only"

gonorrhoea. "Scarify my arm, Johnson, rub it in" (S1877[3] 1-3-9). Surely for many, except the medical professionals in the audiences, it must have been the first time they had been brought face to face with such uncompromising clinical realities, no matter how symbolically or lightly represented here.

Surely there were audible and many mental astonished gasps from the audience when Schaudinn, in his persistent search for the spirochete, demands microscope slides of specimen after specimen, and he cries, "Slides! From fresh chancres. New infections. Old infections. All infections. Bring me syphilis!" "Infection two days. Infection five days....This from a woman... from another man...from a young woman...Infection one day" (S1877[3] 1-5-4-6). The audience is right there in the laboratory. They see what Schaudinn sees through his microscope as the spirochete appears in giant projection.

In another example, the clinically detailed scene in which Metchnikoff, albeit reluctantly, infects the student Paul, then immediately treats the site with the new calomel ointment, illustrates for the audience not only the bravery of men of science and risks that must be taken in the interests of medicine, but informs the audience as well. Here again, clinically realistic laboratory procedures are depicted. And this time Metchnikoff narrates the process as well (S1877[3] 1-5-4-6).

These scenes, surrounded with microscope slides and scarifiers, trays and syringes, may have served to inoculate the audience, to

build them up little by little for the scene in which the "Patient," who is Everyman, willingly has his blood drawn, not once but twice, right on stage. In this manner, the audience has been prepared for the sight of "blood" in test tubes that is treated without hysteria. And Dr. Wasserman assures the "Patient," "We won't need much. And it won't hurt" (S1877[3] 2-1-23). After all the audience has been exposed to in the clinical scenes, having one's blood tested does not seem so bad after all. With this exposition, the clinical scenes in *Spirochete* can be seen to reinforce the seriousness of the scientific pursuit of answers to syphilis; to demonstrate the necessity of "speaking out loud" about the disease; and to clearly define the actions that must be taken by "every man" if the enemy is to be defeated. This was *Spirochete's* message. This Living Newspaper's dramatic elements, particularly the clinical scenes, were media, as well as message.

#### Recapitulation: *Spirochete's* Production Techniques

Production techniques characteristic of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers, such as the Loudspeaker, quick Black Outs, and many short scenes, found in *Spirochete*, dramatized the production's goals. *Spirochete* spoke out loud against the silence that promotes suffering and disease. *Spirochete* presented the history of a social problem, syphilis. *Spirochete* made the search for answers to the problem meaningful to its audiences and enlisted the people's assistance in the fight to conquer syphilis.

Sets and lighting provided and defined many different levels and playing areas for the numerous scenes. *Spirochete* used the lighting techniques of rear projections and the Shadowgraph to unique and sensational ends presenting an immediacy, making the action of the script dramatically visible, and allowing the audience to participate in the events transpiring on stage. *Spirochete's* clinical scenes, with their realistic, although stylized depiction of clinical events, presented factual material to the audiences. Through these scenes the audience shared with doctors and scientists the gathering and dissemination of information about matters of vital health importance to America in the late 1930s.

*Spirochete's* characteristic technique, making the audience members participants in the action, shared with other Living Newspapers, was one element that differentiated these productions from conventional theatre productions. In *Spirochete*, as in other Newspapers, this involvement was manifested in the "Everyman" role, the symbolic hero, the average American. Techniques that managed to humanize data were other production elements that defined the Living Newspapers. *Spirochete's* parade of the international syphilis sufferers is one example; the dramatizations of data through the human dramas in each of its acts, as developed in the Fournier-Jean Louis-Collette scenes and those of the discharged employee and his family, are others. These scenes of human dramas, used to illustrate facts, were unique to *Spirochete*.

*Spirochete* and other Living Newspapers differed from most conventional theatre of the time with their flexible stages. One permanent unit set with platforms and playing levels formed the basis of many individual sets and scenes. Conventional theatre of the time customarily played in "box" sets with three walls, the audience making up the invisible fourth. Scenery was realistic; settings were furnished realistically. The drama arose from the characters. *Spirochete* and the Living Newspapers, used light and space, sound and action, experimentally, symbolically, and allegorically to present their themes. The drama in these productions came from the identification and description of a social problem that affected Americans and resulted in a quest for solutions.

*Spirochete* was a history of syphilis that spanned four hundred years. It was a combination of historical record, scientific and medical case studies, and the day's public health headlines. Production techniques served to dramatize *Spirochete's* events; they compressed time and linked scenes; they provided sensational moments to underscore ideas.

### Scene Two: Promotion Techniques.

#### The Campaign

In an article written two years before *Spirochete* opened in Chicago, the outline for a successful campaign against syphilis appeared in the *American Journal of Public Health*. Zimand's, (1936) blueprint could have formed the model for *Spirochete's* promotion efforts. The author struck a positive note when he

expressed his certainty that taboos associated with the subject could be overcome. In order to assure success, it was necessary to recognize the dual aims of such a campaign. These were (a) to familiarize people with the essential facts concerning the disease and, (b) to encourage as many persons suffering from the disease to seek advice and treatment. The campaign, a mass health-education work, necessitated the following fundamental conditions to assure the accomplishment of the effort's purpose: scientific accuracy, emotional appeal, concreteness and simplicity.

The success of such a campaign would also require the active support of the medical profession, nurses, social workers, religious leaders, heads of industries and such. Further, the active participation of organized groups was desirable, and, as stated in the article, it would prove useful to secure the support of a group of outstanding citizens. The outstanding clergymen of the district, the leaders of women's clubs, the outstanding civic, physician, or business leader "does a great deal to bring general community approval of this work" (Zimand, 1936).

Many of these same strategies were incorporated by Living Newspaper productions in their own promotion campaigns. The 1936 Chicago opening of *Triple A-Plowed Under* was planned on the same model as that of the New York production's opening which focused attention on the local press with personal invitations. Members of the Chamber of Commerce and other important local dignitaries were to be included in these special considerations. In

addition, George Kondolf, the Project Director at this time reported that it had been suggested that a very prominent local or national speaker be invited to address the audience before the production's opening (NA. Kondolf, 6/23/36).

Publicity and promotion crews for the Living Newspapers seem to have had the promotion of their social problem pageants down to a science. Their tactics were much in line with the syphilis campaign strategy. Efficient, attention-attracting measures calculated to draw the largest possible numbers to the box office accomplished their tasks with little or no money for the more traditional newspaper advertising utilized by conventional theatres. The Seattle report of that city's May, 1938, *One-Third of A Nation* production promotion campaign includes posters and mailing pieces made to simulate the front page of a newspaper. Five-thousand flyers were delivered door-to-door. "Every type of organization, political, labor, charity and social" was contacted and direct sales made (LCFTP. Production Bulletin. *One Third of A Nation*, Seattle 1938, p.42,47).

Another FTP promotion strategy encouraged community organizations to sell tickets by allowing them to keep a percentage of the ticket price. Differential prices were given to high school and college classes. Seattle Federal Theatre members made over 100 speeches in the local area. Seattle Project members were assigned to contact certain types of groups such as unions and university people to drum up support for ticket sales ( LCFTP, PB. OTN, S p.42, 47, 1939).

### *Spirochete's* Chicago Campaign

*Spirochete's* Chicago promotion campaign encompassed many of the aforementioned fundamental suggestions for a successful campaign. One of *Spirochete's* own objectives was to overcome taboos, to break the rule of silence. The promotional materials, taking their cue from the production itself, set about to do the same. Author Arnold Sundgarrd was prevailed upon to say a few words for a promotional piece, accompanied by his picture, that appeared in a local paper a few days before *Spirochete's* opening: "While this may sound like questionable material for the theater, the universal approach makes it both imaginative and intense. It moves swiftly and is exciting and emotional. Incorporated in it are scenes which in themselves are short plays showing the effect of the disease on marriage, children and employees. The tragedy it has brought into the world is not avoided,...showing the valiant fight which men of science have made...a triumphant process" (LCFTP. PBSC,1938). This promotion effort certainly incorporated simplicity, concreteness and emotional appeal.

Courage to speak out was requisite even though the War Against Syphilis appeared almost daily in the newspapers and had done so for the preceding year. Nonetheless, remembers Gerald Meltzer (1976, p.38), a witness to this era, "It took a great deal of courage in the Thirties to present any subject dealing with sex. But the medical profession and press, aware of how desperately ignorant the public was, welcomed the attempt."

The evidence of Dr. O. C. Wenger's involvement with *Spirochete*, as well as that of Paul de Kruif, members of the Chicago Board of Health, and other medical professionals has been examined and is very evident. Their very active support and assistance in the writing and rehearsal phases of *Spirochete* is well documented. They were to do more.

Other pre-opening press releases touted *Spirochete* as a "Home product, a powerful dramatization of the fight against syphilis with a cast of over one hundred players and forty scenes." This promotional piece in the *Midwest Daily Record* headlined: "WPA Theatre to Present Daring Production on Syphilis Friday" (LCFTP. PBSC, 4/26/38).

Cut-out fold-overs, a grinning, shrouded death's head merged with a primly puritanical figure, eyes closed and forefinger prudishly placed over pursed lips, mentioned earlier, performed as *Spirochete's* promotional flyers. These were printed in black and white with red accents. The script below read, "Something to be whispered about out loud!" Inside, the large, curving, red capital block letters of "spirochete" were the focal point while date, time, place, credits, and "Popular Prices" were placed above and below.

Extant posters from the Chicago *Spirochete* in the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection are of two types. One is a complimentary version of the small, folded flyer. The poster is a stark depiction of the merged death's head and puritanical figure, although reversed, and shows a fuller figure, enough so that a

skeletal hand grasping a globe of the world is readily apparent. The same stark, dramatic colors, black, white, red portray and announce the coming of *Spirochete*. There is a red banner across the top and a giant, red capital "S" is followed by the rest of the word "spirochete." The production is identified, as it was in the flyer, as a Living Newspaper, by Arnold Sundgaard. The popular prices are specified as 83-, 55-, 40-, and 25-cents. The poster announced *Spirochete* performances at the Blackstone Theatre every night except Mondays, each performance to begin at 8:30 (LCFTP. *Spirochete*, photographic slide). The chosen colors tell a story in themselves of life, death, martyrs, suffering, disease and, or, sin.

The second *Spirochete* poster in the Chicago collection made its appearance after *Spirochete's* opening performance. It is heavy, white posterboard with large green print. This poster banners "The Tribune says....," and goes on to reprint Charles Collins' laudatory review with its headline "Super story well told in a good drama" (LCFTP. SC, poster).

The Chicago production, *Spirochete's* premier opened at the Blackstone Theatre on April 19, Syphilis Friday, 1938. Before Charles Collins' review of the "syphilis story" appeared in the next day's *Tribune*, syphilis was in the news even before curtain time. Friday's headlines told *Tribune* readers that "Ten States Require Health Marriage Tests" (Chicago Tribune, 4/29/38, p.3).

On page eight of the *Tribune*, a story described Chicago Relief Administration, and noted that those found to have venereal disease

were confined for treatment at the special Relief hospital, opened for that purpose the previous year. The hospital was now filled to its 45-bed capacity. Syphilis patients were confined until they were no longer infectious. On the *Tribune's* front page, other wars were of concern: "France, Britain Pool Arms;" the "AF of L Forms New Mine Union to Crush CIO." The "Weather (would be) Partly Cloudy and Somewhat Cooler 66-52," for *Spirochete's* opening performance. (CT, 4/29/48, p.8, p.1).

*Spirochete's* promotion did not stop with posters, flyers, and newspaper articles. And *Spirochete's* performance did not wait for the first act curtain to rise. The entrance to the theatre was "spotlighted," Hollywood premiere style (NA. Zolotareff, review, 1938). Those theatre critics that covered *Spirochete's* opening night noted that as ticket holders for Friday's sold-out performance walked into the Blackstone's Lobby they encountered a crew of doctors and nurses with their tubes and syringes and a free blood test booth that one critic labeled "that absurd exhibit in the foyer." Other reviewers described the scene as "a little laboratory for blood testing...with a board of health physician in charge and pretty nurse (who) invited you to step up and have a blood test taken." And there were educational pamphlets bearing the imprint of the Chicago Board of Health for the taking. The press observed that "the premier performance had the appearance of a gala affair. Men and women gallantly submitted to free blood tests, under the auspices of the

syphilis control program" (de Kruif; LCFTP. PBSC, reviews, Cassidy, Collins; NA.VC, Gilbert, Zolotareff) .

Writing three years after the Chicago *Spirochete* event, Paul de Kruif (1941, p. 24) thought he would, " never forget the faces of hundreds of people conquering shame as they bared their arms in this public place." De Kruif's memory may have exaggerated the actual circumstances. One reporter who wrote for the next day's papers saw the lobby scene a bit differently: "Eight free tests were given during the evening. Miss Dorothy Baeir, a guest of Dr. Herman N. Bundesen's daughter, was among the group"(LCFTP. PBSC, Collins review). Whatever the actuality, the promotion and drama of *Spirochete* involved its audiences even before they took their seats. Syphilis facts and figures were handed out to them even before they opened their programs. And the spirit and the meaning of the dramatized history, the syphilis pageant that was to unfold on the Blackstone's multi-level stage, received a sensational head start in the lobby.

### Scene Three: Audience, Admissions, and Expenses

#### Audience

*Spirochete's* sold-out opening night performance played to a packed house. As the critic for the *Daily News* noted, if any one had called for a "doctor in the house," half the audience would have arisen. And, this critic added, those who were not doctors were nurses (LCFTP SCPB, p.8). The Blackstone's 365-seat balcony and the main floor, including the 590 orchestra level seats, and another 383

on the mezzanine ( Blackstone Theatre, personal communication, 5/11/89), "were over-crowded with physicians, headed by Dr. Herman N. Bundesen, health editor of the *Chicago Evening American*." (Bundenen was also President of Chicago's Board of Health). Bacteriologists and skin specialists were identified in the crowd (LCFTP. PBSC, p. 9). Among the medical note-worthy in the audience were Dr. Louis Schmidt, Chairman of the Chicago anti-syphilis committee; Dr. O. C. Wenger, Paul De Kruif, and the state representative, William Saltiel, the sponsor for the successful Illinois "hygienic marriage" law only the year before ( p. 7). In addition, Arnold Sundgaard recalls,a committee from the Illinois State Legislature came to see the play (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 23).

*Spirochete* played 32 performances for Chicago audiences, through June 4, 1938, six days a week. Only Philadelphia's 35 performances the next year topped Chicago's total. Despite generally excellent critical reviews and the enthusiasm of the medical community, the production was never able to repeat the box-office success of its opening night. Only a few days after *Spirochete's* opening, Harvey Minturn admitted in a letter to Hallie Flanagan, "Our paid attendance is not what I hoped for so far." The producer explained it as perhaps "due to the general theatrical slump in this particular locality." Minturn promised "every effort to promote block sales," that is to groups of individuals such as service clubs, women's organizations and other special interest groups, to try to make *Spirochete* a popular as well as critical success (NA. Minturn,

5/3/38). Two weeks after *Spirochete's* gala opening night, another letter expressed Minturn's continuing disappointment, "up to now SPIROCHETE (caps in original) has not had the public draw and interest that I had hoped for. We have done a great deal of advertising and put on an extensive promotion campaign, et. cetera, and the notices were as good as possibly could be hoped for in Chicago, and yet there does not seem to be a great deal of public interest." But Minturn expressed hope that the coming week would be much better (NA. Minturn, 5/14/38).

In another two weeks, one week before *Spirochete's* curtain would come down for the final time in Chicago, Minturn, finally disheartened, but without apparent bitterness, although obviously disillusioned by the city's theatre climate, wrote to Hallie Flanagan once more: "Regarding the box office angle of SPIROCHETE, I don't think it is due to lack of proper promotion, but more the peculiarities of this city and to the lack of wholehearted support of the press. While our notices were very good for the play, the newspapers were very lax in the publicizing of stories sent to them and in general recommendation, so I don't think it is fair to judge the drawing power of SPIROCHETE on this one locality. I should like very much to see it tried in other localities" ( NA. Minturn, 5/28/38). Although Minturn was soon to receive word, according to an FTP memo, that Flanagan wanted his advice on "the handling of a series of productions of Spirochete," it would take almost a year before this idea germinated and productions flowered in four other cities. This

same memo relays the information that despite excellent critical reports, *Spirochete* is playing to only fair houses (NA. Brooks Memo to Lavery, 5/16/38). Minturn's final frustration is apparent.

"Chicago as a whole is in the worst theatre depression that I think we have ever had" (NA. Minturn, 5/28/38).

It is interesting to observe how time, and perhaps the felt need to put the best face on things when everything, in this case the Federal Theatre Project itself, seems to be crumbling around you, have the ability to distort realities and play havoc with grammar and syntax. A "Report of activities of Illinois Federal Theatre Project since September 1938," dated May 16, 1939, only six weeks before the entire FTP came to a crashing finale declared: "The second of the Living Newspaper plays, SPIROCHETE, (caps in original) written and produced in Chicago, having been the first to play the Loop theatres of the Chicago Project, it was staged with considerable technical facility. It closed on September 25, 1938, having played through the hottest part of the summer with good attendance" (NA. Report, 5/16/39). *Spirochete's* play-dates and box-office record referenced in this report were perhaps a product of wishful thinking. In addition, the writer appears to have been unaware that the first Living Newspaper to appear in Chicago was *Triple A-Plowed Under*, which opened at the Great Northern Theatre, an institution as old as the Chicago's Loop, in July of 1936 (NA. Kondolf, 6/17/36; Flanagan, 1985, p. 146).

### Admissions and Expenses

Just exactly how many people saw *Spirochete* during its six weeks of Chicago performances is difficult to determine. Some of the *Spirochete* productions in other cities included audience numbers in their records. The Chicago *Spirochete* production bulletins do not include these figures. National Project figures and even Illinois Project admission numbers do not appear to break down admissions by individual productions that played in 1938. Even so, knowing the seating capacity of the Blackstone theatre and figuring a worst-case scenario of an average of half-filled houses for the entire six-week run, it is not unreasonable to think that perhaps 18,000 persons saw and participated in the drama of *Spirochete* during its six-week Chicago course.

Figures are available on a national level for the entire Federal Theatre Project. The financial officer notes in a memo of May 5, 1939, that these figures had been worked out at the request of the investigators from the Dies House Committee on Un-American Activities. "I was again impressed," the financial officer remarks, "by the increasing ratio of admissions collected to the total project costs." Costs were decreasing for the theatre project (NA. Financial Officer, report, 1939). An earlier memo detailing the Project's 1938 average monthly admissions listed that figure as 42,073; the average monthly employment for the FTP was 8,844 and the costs were identified as \$1,001, 909. Those figures indicate that during 1938, Federal Theatre audiences numbered over 500 thousand persons.

The financial officer noted that "we shall always be vulnerable in our relations with those who play a part in allocating project funds," because audience admissions were not paying a substantial part of the Project's cost. The inference being that the Congressional hands that fed the Project forgot or overlooked Hallie Flanagan's fundamental dictum that the Federal Theatre was to be free or low cost for its audiences (NA. F.O., 8/24/38).

Illinois Project figures for the year June 30, 1937 through the same date in 1938, which include *Spirochete's* Chicago production dates, are available. By this date, the Illinois Project had been reduced and consolidated to the Chicago Project. The Chicago Project was the Illinois Project. From June 30, 1937, through June 30, 1938, \$89,212.72 in admissions were paid. Expenses for the same period were listed as \$87,547.34. The Chicago Project employed during this time 8.8 percent of the total Federal Theatre Project personnel, versus New York's overwhelming 46.14 percent, and California's almost 19 percent of the FTP total. What is of particular interest about these figures is the comparison of admissions and expenditures between the Chicago, New York and California Projects. Even though New York and California counted more persons on their roles by far, their admissions, or box-office percentages closely match their personnel figures, as do their costs. The Chicago Project figures show admission percentages double their personnel and cost figures. The financial figures seem to indicate Chicago Project and Chicago audiences were getting more for their personnel and expense

dollar's worth. The Chicago Federal Theatre project was the epitome of doing more with less; and more people were coming to see it (NA. F.O., report, 7/28/38).

#### Scene Four: The Reviews Are In

After *Spirochete's* Syphilis Friday debut before a capacity crowd, Harry Minturn could not wait for the next day's papers and the critic's reviews. His postal telegraph to Hallie Flanagan is stamped April 30, 2:44 AM, and reads: "Audience reaction splendid. Lobby comments excellent. Performance smooth and well done." He goes on to thank Flanagan "for your confidence and assistance," and promises to forward the reviews (NA. Minturn, 4/30/38). Minturn was as good as his word. The next day's mail found more than half-a-dozen local, generally enthusiastic reviews on their way to the Director of the Federal Theatre Project. More would follow.

The Chicago theatre critics, typing out opening-night reviews of *Spirochete*, although at variance in how they identified the production, and in their specific choices for accolade or opprobrium, were in general agreement in their enthusiasm for *Spirochete's* accomplishments. Gail Borden, *Chicago Daily Times*, was not sure if it was play at all, but thought it was educational and told a much needed story in an entertaining fashion. Some thought it a pageant with brief, richly-costumed tableaux; a dramatic biography. Others considered it an illustrated lecture; yet another described it as episodes in a revue. Observing that *Spirochete* was called a Living Newspaper by its author, one reviewer remarked that it should be

called "pages of medical history." Yet it was a production that succeeded with dramatic suspense and climax. It was propaganda, stated Charles Collins of the *Chicago Tribune*, a valuable contribution to anti-syphilis propaganda. It was healthy propaganda, woven through the pages of medical history (LCFTP. PBSC, reviews, 1938).

Chicago's Claudia Cassidy thought it a curious cross between a clinic and a one-ring circus; as a crusade it was clear, with facts focused on the truth. The sociological preaching, noted by another reviewer, made its appearance but "the threat of dullness was restrained." A *Daily News* critic thought it partly historical, partly propaganda. He noted that *Spirochete*, "consists of eloquent object lessons teaching the necessity for blood tests....," and demonstrates that, "hushing up the matter will endanger life and health of the living and the unborn." "Everyone ought to see it, particularly young people," said Gail Borden, in his column devoted to "His Malefic Majesty" (LCFTP. PBSC, reviews, 1938).

*Spirochete's* technical production came in for unanimous plaudits: "expertly-lighted, vivid tableaux;" "admirably staged," "superb staging and lighting." The critics applauded *Spirochete's* staging as its "most stagewise part, contributing movement and life and color and even ingenuity to the production." *Spirochete's* technical aspects, it was claimed "represented the best work of the Federal Theatre Project to date" (LCFTP. PBSC reviews, 1938).

The acting, Claudia Cassidy observed, was not as good as the staging. It was fair at best. Other were not so severe in their

assessments of the thespians' performances. Some thought the acting in general good, performed in a professional manner. Several picked out George Dayton's "Metchnikoff" as a "splendid" and "excellent" characterization. One reviewer went so far as to remark on the production's "perfect casting," giving special kudos to the player portraying Metchnikoff, and to the actress presenting Collette, who displayed "much talent." The "Patient" a difficult role, observed the reviewer, but successfully played in a romantic vein which "managed to subdue repellent suggestions." The actors who played Jean-Louis, and Paul, the student, pleased the audience; and, it was thought, the entire cast contributed much to the success of the production, according to yet another critic's-eye view (LCFTP. PBSC, reviews, 1938).

The headlines appearing over the reviews reflect the critics comments from a slightly different perspective. Probably the copy editor, the headline writer, had not seen the production. The headlines, themselves encapsulated commentaries, were assessments a step removed and are noteworthy as yet another source of public attitude regarding *Spirochete*. In general the headlines emphasize the educational qualities of the production: "'Spirochete' Educational, Entertaining Drama," "Syphilis Story Well Told in Good Drama," "'Spirochete' is Clinical, but Highly Dramatic," "Fight Against Disease Shown at Blackstone." *The Journal of Commerce* editors did the most to damn *Spirochete* with faint praise, heading Claudia Cassidy's "On the Aisle" column: "Spirochete

Is Well Staged and Serious Play Which Needs Vitality of Brilliant Writing" (LCFTP. PBSC, reviews 1938).

Cassidy throws the most stones by far, comparing the 25-year-old Sundgaard's first produced theatrical effort to old-hand Sidney Howard's Province Town-born and Broadway-bred *Yellow Jack*. The comparison is far from favorable. Pulling no punches Cassidy states, "The early episodes of the play are badly written in a style almost archaic, which some of the actors speak with a halting suggestion of blank verse." She does, however, observe that "it improves materially." She found signs of life in the "traditional tragedy of the endangered French marriage" scene, and the following scene, in which hopes for the marriage are demolished when Jean Louis loses his mind and life to syphilis. Cassidy notes this scene's resemblance to Ibsen's *Ghosts*. She concludes that *Spirochete* is sensational, remarks on the lobby display, and notes, "a crude line or two." *Spirochete* is a crusade, Cassidy writes, and is successful as such, but as theatre the drama suffers; the crusade succeeds at the drama's expense. *Spirochete*, states Cassidy, lacks "the blindingly brilliant vitality of Yellow Jack" (LCFTP. PBSC, reviews, 1938).

### Reviews Redux

In Chicago there was general approval of *Spirochete's* educational aspects and some quite complementary remarks about the production's staging and lighting effects. Nearly all the reviewers remarked on the clinical scenes and the lobby blood-testing laboratory. Cassidy declares *Spirochete* best in its "laboratory

scenes with its men in white with test tubes which exert the fascination they invariably have for audiences even when their acting is not as good as their staging"(LCFTP. PBSC, reviews, 1938).

The theatre critics as a group praised *Spirochete* for its educational qualities, its important scientific story, for telling the story of syphilis, out loud, for presenting this history lesson in an entertaining fashion with some noteworthy performances in the cast of 100. Its mass of material, historical and clinical, transpired in a "decidedly interesting way." "*Spirochete*," said one, "even fulfilled the average playgoers demand for a good show." Many Chicago reviewers thought it educational, and entertaining, as well, despite its subject.

*Spirochete's* subject was deemed a "delicate one," but one critic observed that the opening night performance demonstrated that "Chicago dares to think candidly, that it wishes to join the national call for war on syphilis, that it desires the removal of the veil of secrecy from venereal diseases, and that the dramatic form of instruction upon syphilis is not amiss" ( LCFTP. PBSC, Zolotaref). *Spirochete's* author recalls that this Living Newspaper's instruction about syphilis was supported by the Catholic Church, that the "Catholic Church got behind it." Sundgaard remembers as "an important step," the Philadelphia opening night, "when two priests volunteered...came down and took blood tests in the lobby" (Sundgaard, 1976, p. 23).

*Spirochete's* director, Addison Pitt, in his notes in the production bulletin, expressed a similar view. He wrote "Never let it be thought that this subject is a thing not to be mentioned. Never let it be thought that this is a lecture of any sort. Impress all that the offering is entertainment of the highest order and let the lesson it certainly teaches fight its own way into the minds of the audience and it will. I defy anyone, no matter how narrow-minded, to witness this history without learning a wonderful lesson and as well be interested and entertained" (LCFTP. PBSC, director's note, p.4, 1938).

Soon after the first Chicago reviews were in, one denizen of the National Office expressed his own enthusiasm. Emmet Lavery, who earlier had preferred the name *Dark Harvest*, appears swept up in the excitement of *Spirochete's* opening onslaught in the War on Syphilis. In a memo to Hallie Flanagan he wondered if the Federal Theatre should not launch a nation-wide series of productions of *Spirochete* in conjunction with the U. S. Health Service. "It might mean the wiping out of syphilis--and would that justify Federal Theatre! The reason I send you this memo is I wonder if we don't take the success of SPIROCHETE (caps in original) too calmly. Isn't this the biggest thing nationally that we have at the moment?" (NA. Lavery, memo, n. d., [c.] 5/15/38).

The equanimity of the National Office is evident and perhaps providential, in a memo dated May 16 to Lavery. Although Hallie Flanagan would later write to Minturn about a series of productions of *Spirochete*, the Director of the FTP, stated the memo, did not feel

that the production of this script should be made obligatory on any director (NA, Brooks, memo, 5/16/1938).

The reviews continued to come in. Hallie Flanagan herself would write in *Arena* (1940)

Chicago's own living newspaper, *Spirochete*, (tells) the story of syphilis, what it has done to man and what man has done to it. To handle this theme clearly and directly took courage, for while these are not the days of Brieux or Ibsen, still it is a hazardous undertaking to trace the history of the most deadly of social diseases, to show its insatiable spread over the earth, and to recount the unremitting battle of scientists to isolate the germ and effect the cure. The entire WPA staff was behind *Spirochete*, as were the medical profession and the press. Chicagoans were proud that the play was written by Arnold Sundgaard, a young dramatist on our project...The play was more than a play. ( p. 144)

Perhaps Claudia Cassidy was not *Spirochete's* severest Chicago critic. According to Minturn's previously referenced letters, the harshest commentaries were offered by the peculiarities of the city, the lack of wholehearted press support, and evidenced in not a great deal of public interest (NA. Minturn, 5/ 28/38, 5/14/38).

Even after the Chicago *Spirochete* was finally conquered for the last time at the Blackstone Theatre in June, 1938, it was not allowed to rest in critical peace. A nasty piece of work entitled "Pox Vobiscum," by the surly social critic and king of curmudgeons,

George Jean Nathan, appeared in an August issue of *Newsweek*. Nathan is professionally disgruntled that clinical vocabulary has become commonplace, that "family ladies (sic) magazines" are actually talking about Wasserman and Kahn tests. Nathan admonishes the Federal Theatre for joining in the "promiscuous gabble with a slice of the Living Newspaper called SPIROCHETE" (caps in original) (Nathan, 8/15/38, p.26).

Nathan attacks *Spirochete's* author for, "A crudely amateurish outline of a profound scientific record; with only one fiftieth the dramatic power of such capably contrived plays as...*Yellow Jack*.. and with not one twenty-fifth of even that proficient claptrap on its own theme, Brieux's *Damaged Goods*." The caustic critic castigates Sundgarrd for some of the "most juvenile writing heard outside high school dramatic society" ( p:26).

Since the cutting comments include nothing about staging, lighting, acting and other production elements, it hardly seems probable that Nathan actually witnessed a performance of *Spirochete*. Since the written version of *Spirochete* was included in Federal Theatre Plays published about the time of Nathan's "review," it may have been that the sharp-tongued critic had only *Spirochete's* words to read and passed his acerbic judgements on lines on a page. A play is more than written words, more than lines on a page. And *Spirochete*, as Hallie Flanagan said, was more than a play.

### Summary

The preceding scenes describe the theatrical elements that translate the playwright's themes and concepts from words on a page to the living, breathing, visible, audible stage presence that is the drama. The elements of stagecraft, lighting, costume, acting technique, and scene design, audio and special effects, formed from the playwright's vision and marked by a director's hand, coalesce in the presence of, and with the audience, to become a theatrical experience wherein emotion, intellect, and attitude are engendered and challenged. *Spirochete's* 1938 land-mark Chicago production melded the elements of ancient theatre and modern, experimental stagecraft, much of it gleaned from the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers, together with the history and medical science of syphilis, to engender a demand for social consciousness and social action in the fight for the control and final eradication of the syphilis plague.

Chapter Seven carries *Spirochete's* war against the fallacy of syphilis silence to four other cities, where cast, costumes, scenes, and sets can be seen to change according to local interpretation. *Spirochete's* themes and objectives remained unchanged.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
*SPIROCHETE*, ACT TWO, PART THREE  
THE OTHER *SPIROCHETES*

This chapter surveys *Spirochete* productions in four other cities in 1939, and compares these productions to the original Chicago run. Similarities and differences are compared and contrasted. Possible contributing factors to those differences in production and local reaction are explored. Scene One describes *Spirochete's* production in four cities, Seattle, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Portland, Oregon. Depicted here are the directors' notes, community medical support, and censorship issues in these cities. Scene Two addresses the actors and production elements of the several *Spirochetes*. Scene Three discusses promotion strategies in these cities. Scene Four surveys audience reaction and critical reviews of the 1939 production in the four cities.

Although *Spirochete* productions may have been planned in several other cities after the first critically successful 1938 run in Chicago, there appears to be evidence of its actual production the following year in only four other cities: Seattle, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Portland, Oregon. O'Connor (1977) states, "The play opened in four cities from Boston to Seattle in February, 1939" (p.96). However, records of FTP productions, as well as extant scripts and production bulletins, indicate that the four cities did not include Boston. George Jean Nathan's sour commentary on *Spirochete* in *Newsweek* (August, 1938) mentioned that *Spirochete* was coming to

New York and, although O'Connor mentions a planned Syracuse production, there seems to be no evidence of an actual New York opening. There is a *Spirochete* script in the Los Angeles Project file of "planned productions" but it apparently was never produced in California. National Service Bureau (NSB) records contain a request from the Youth Social Hygiene Committee of Houston, dated January 20, 1939, for information about "the syphilis play." Houston apparently wanted to use it, "as part of an intensive education campaign on the control of syphilis," for National Social Hygiene Day, which would be February 1, of that year. Although a Philadelphia reviewer mentions simultaneous openings of *Spirochete* in Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Houston, (LCFTP. Production Bulletin. *Spirochete*. Philadelphia, p. 71, Klein, review, 1939), it is difficult to imagine that a full production of *Spirochete* could have been produced in Houston in the necessarily short period of time implied by the NSB material, or even within the month, as indicated by the review (NA. FTP. Nat'l Office General Correspondence, NSB). Whatever plans there may have been for other *Spirochete* productions, they were brought to an abrupt halt when the entire FTP was closed down in June of 1939.

Scene One: Seattle, Philadelphia, Cincinnati and Portland

The evidence is clear, however, that *Spirochete* did open in Seattle, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and Portland productions, all within two weeks of each other, during the last two weeks of February, 1939, National Social Hygiene Month. Seattle, the first to open,

staged its opening performance on February 13, and most evidence indicates, ran for only eight performances. The Philadelphia and Cincinnati productions opened Monday and Tuesday, February 20 and 21, and played 35 and 22 performances respectively. The Portland project, the last of the quartet, opened its production on February 26 and played a total of 14 performances.

These four productions of *Spirochete*, additional arrows in the still valiantly contended War on Syphilis, were local and individual productions. Sundgaard's script was used, and in at least one case far from faithfully followed, but each Project built its own sets, designed its own lighting and costumes, and mounted its own individual promotion campaign. These productions are of interest in their differences, dictated by their individual local, social, and political as well as theatrical geography. Although *Spirochete's* message seems to have remained loud and clear its accent varied significantly from place to place.

The director's concept of the play affects the total production. Frequently changes to the script are made simply for ease of play or, in other cases, whole scenes, or characters, are added, subtracted or have new words put into their mouths. The Seattle production contained many such changes and even the ending was changed. *Spirochete's* last powerful and challenging words were taken away from the Speaker of the House and given to a Legislator (LCFTP Production Bulletin. *Spirochete*. Seattle, director's notes, 1939).

The production elements, of course, are created anew for each locale. Here again, the director's concept influences the way the set looks, the lighting illuminates or shadows, and costumes and staging build drama and action. In Philadelphia, for example, two modern-dance numbers were added because this Project had an excellent dance troupe available. The local Project's size, how many actors and crew are available, and budgetary restraints also play a part in determining the character of each production. In Seattle, a Hammond organ replaced the orchestra. A guitar and accordion, hidden off stage since they were out of period, furnished snatches of "period music," and replaced Sheinfeld's original full orchestral score for *Spirochete*. The original Sheinfeld score was used with full orchestra in the Philadelphia production (LCFTP. PBSS, PBSPH, 1939).

Other than a mention of dates and numbers of performances, the stage manager's script, neatly lettered "Wm. Querner" appears to be all that remains of the 22 *Spirochete* performances at Cincinnati's Playbox Theatre. In the script there are line cuts, dialogue additions and changes. Many of these changes are focused on the clinical scenes and particularly in the Wasserman scene. The changes and additions seem to help clarify the method and importance of Wasserman's successful test for syphilis. The script also contains the stage manager's notes to "warn curtain," light cues for Blackouts; and house lights and music cues. There are set notes as well, such as "move table and bench up stage" (S1877[27]).

Hallie Flanagan was so proud of the Cincinnati Project, after an inauspicious beginning and now housed in its own building, paying all but labor costs, that she included the Cincinnati *Spirochete's* opening night review in *Arena* (1940). "The Cincinnati Federal Theatre," proclaimed the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, "scored its second outstanding success last night by going to press with another one of its living newspaper dramatic presentations." The review went on to praise the production's staging, light, directing and materials as the local Federal Theatre's "best on record" (Flanagan, 1985, p. 172).

#### Directors' Notes

Although it is probable that the few cuts and additions mentioned above were made by the Cincinnati *Spirochete's* director, it is very clear, from their Director's notes, that Seattle, Philadelphia and Portland's directors had very definite ideas about what their own *Spirochete's* should be. The Seattle director, Ricchard Glyer, finding Sundgaard's script full of writing and dramatic faults, took it upon himself to make major changes including the addition and deletion of lines and characters, and even whole scenes. To the 79 speaking parts listed in the script, the director "added several," including a watchman in the opening scene with Columbus. The director also dismissed the "trite writing" of the Fournier-Jean Louis-Collette scene. Declaring that, "it would be impossible to go mad from the disease in such a short time," the director made dialogue changes and added a "tag" on the scene that serves to castigate the medical profession's ignorance.

Other such touches were used to explain Bordet's error in formulating a definitive test for syphilis; newsboys were added to herald Erlich's discovery of Salvarsan; and an off-stage verse-speaking choir was contributed to echo the "Taunters" remarks. And, as referenced earlier, it was the Seattle *Spirochete* whose very climactic ending was changed from Sundgaard's original riveting, climactic version because, the director felt that, "it seems too much of an about face for the speaker to read the final speech, so the tag lecture was spoken by the legislator who had been fighting for the bill." Perhaps it is just as well Sundgaard was in Philadelphia for the opening of that unit's *Spirochete* (LCFTP, PBSS, dn).

The Philadelphia director, James Light, although a thousand miles closer to Chicago than Seattle, found himself, and his cast light-years away from Chicago's "city of the broad shoulders" when it came to social attitudes, even within the cast. It was not just the city of Philadelphia that had to be encouraged to talk out loud about syphilis. The director noted "in many cases in the cast, the Director must break down the same sort of prudishness which the play attempts to remove from the audience." This director, James Light, an accomplished veteran of the Provincetown Players, thought Sundgaard's work was written with "such honesty and directness and is so lacking in any prurient or sensational intentions, that the problem is solved half by the script itself." Most of the cast's misgivings were to dissolve with the director's emphasis and clarification of the social value of the play (LCFTP, PBSPH ,dn).

Philadelphia's *Spirochete* added a dimension to Sundgaard's work that he surely must have applauded. The director felt, as did Sundgaard, judging from his earliest objectives, that the war on syphilis must be waged by the citizens. The Philadelphia director's notes indicate that he felt it was the director's objective to personalize the play's problem for the audience, to make them direct participants in the continued war on syphilis. Director James Light carried out this objective by literally making the audience part of the action, along with the elected representatives, in the legislature scenes. Actors were placed in the audience; the house lights were brought up and the scene were played as if the whole audience were onlookers in the legislature galleries in the midst of the debates. James Light stated; "We feel that the audience in this manner became part, and were fully aware and as enthusiastic as we were with this fight against syphilis, and that it was a part of their personal experience rather than a spectacle existing only behind the proscenium arch "(LCFTP. PBSPH, dn ).

This was a significantly different concept for the legislature scenes than the approach taken by the Seattle director, Richard Glyer. Since many in the Seattle audience, the director felt, would be in sympathy with the legislator who opposed the premarital amendment, it was decided to satirize the legislature. The entire scene was rewritten , Glyer wrote in his director's note, into a "sort of a doggerel blank verse of a rather low-comic variety." Additionally, he says," the scene was set so as to give the impression that the

entire legislature with the exception of 'our hero,' was at an 'out of sorts' angle." This novel approach to the original script was exemplified in the stage settings themselves in which, as photographs clearly indicate, "the pillars, the rostrum, even the legislators themselves were set off the vertical." Even the final legislature scene did not suit the Seattletonians. It too, had to be rewritten, but the satire was "cut down" (LCFTP, PBSS, dn).

### Medical Support

The states of Washington and Pennsylvania both had impending premarital or other syphilis blood-testing bills in their legislatures when the Seattle *Spirochete* opened and when the Philadelphia version followed a week later. The Washington State Board of Health, which was the sponsor of the Washington Bill, was quite happy to support the Seattle *Spirochete*. (LCFTP. PBSS, dn; SPhPB, Shaltz: *Record* ).

Local and state medical representatives were much in evidence in the planning and promotion of *Spirochete* productions. Herald's boasted that Seattle's *Spirochete* was approved by City Health Department, County Health Department, Washington State Medical Association, State Health Department, Committee on Social Hygiene and Syphilis Control (NA, Vassar Collection).

In Philadelphia eminent physician and Director of the Research Institute of Cutaneous Medicine, John A. Kolmer, invited to *Spirochete's* preview performance not only enjoyed it but offered his expertise "to show these excellent actors a few tricks" for several

technical improvements. Members of the cast met in the doctor's office and were coached in proper microscope handling and blood letting techniques (LCFTP, PBSP, p. 59; *Record*, article; NA. Kolmer, letter 2/20/39).

Portland's Dr. Thomas Robertson, a pathologist, gave technical advice for that city's production to be sure that the correct instruments were used and properly handled. However, Portland's Director, Bess Whitcomb, the Project head, was quick to note that *Spirochete* was more psychological and emotional than other Living Newspapers and thus emphasized the human rather than mere factual elements. This director viewed the Inn scene, the scenes with Jean-Louis, those with Paul and Metchnikoff, and those of the employee and his family as studies in psychology and emotion. Bess Whitcomb was content to allow the production's focus to present them that way (LCFTP, PBSP, dn).

#### Censorship: the Columbus Problem

The Seattle director may have added a "watchman" to liven up the Columbus scene but because, the director remarks, there had been "some complaint against the use of Columbus' name, we indicated instead the time, place and Columbus' rank, and the type of his ship--a caravel." Cautious as the director seems to have been, Columbus' name still appeared in the program (LCFTP, PBSS).

Columbus seems to have sailed through the Cincinnati production unscathed. However, only a few days before the Philadelphia *Spirochete* was to open with a special preview

performance to which hundreds of representatives of church and state had been invited, Arnold Sundgaard remembers that Emmet Lavery, Director of the National Project's Play Department, called him from New York. "Emmet was a Catholic," Sundgaard says. "And Emmet said, 'The Knights of Columbus in Philadelphia are objecting to the use of Christopher Columbus' name bringing syphilis back to Spain. They said he was a good Catholic and a very virtuous man and he couldn't possibly have picked up a venereal disease, or his men couldn't have. So, (Lavery) said, 'Could you change it?'"

Sundgaard continues, "I said, Well, its impossible to change that. I was adamant about it I said, 'You can't possibly change that, Emmet.'" I said, "Call off the production. I don't care."

(Lavery) said, "Wait a minute now, let's think this through." He said, "Would you mind calling it an unidentified explorer who returned to Spain in 1493?"

So I said, "No , not at all." As a matter fact, it kind of improved it because people in the audience nudged (each other) and then said, "Oh he must mean Columbus" (Sundgaard, 1976, p.18 ).

Perhaps the matter was easier resolved in retrospect than in actuality. A letter from Sundgaard, dated February 15, 1939, to Emmet Lavery, contains almost two pages of documentation and citation for the Columbus scene. First quoted was the Surgeon General's Book, *Shadow on the Land*. Sundgaard concludes, with "I would like to add that I can see no stigma attached to the fact that the crew of Columbus (had) syphilis...I think it would be a more

tolerant attitude to consider the disease as a disease and not as a sin" (NA, Sundgaard, 2/15/39).

Whatever Sundgaard's attitude, a night letter dated February 16, addressed to the Deputy Director of the Federal Theatre Project in Washington, confirmed that the head of the Pennsylvania Theatre Project, Herbert Humphrys, had been told that it would be the better part of discretion to make certain changes suggested by the Knights of Columbus. "These changes can be made for prevue (sic) Friday night if we know by Friday noon (the next day) exactly what they are but hope to have OK to prevue as is" (NA. Sloan). It was not to be.

The local officials of the American Social Hygiene Association and representatives of Philadelphia's Catholic Diocese were set to attend the "prevue" (sic), Sloan wired, "for purpose of formulating the official attitude of Church." He added that twelve-hundred representatives, physicians, welfare, civic and labor leaders and clergymen had definitely accepted invitations to attend prevue (NA. Sloan, 2/1/38).

With that influential load on his shoulders the Deputy Director opted for change. And the changes that were made in time for that Friday evening's preview performance made the headlines.

"Columbus Loses Role in WPA Play 'Spirochete' Altered on Request of K. of C.," read the headlines in the February 18, *Philadelphia Record* (NA, Vassar Collection, 1939). Although the article recounts the charges against the "Columbian Theory" which banished Columbus from the Philadelphia stage, the article quotes the FTP's Regional

Director, Blanding Sloan, as saying the project had "complied gladly," that "there seems to be no final evidence on either side." This article continues to quote Sloan: "As far as Columbus personally is concerned, no reflection upon him can be found in the scene. He was portrayed as a heroic character, heartbroken because his ship was returning with a crew afflicted with a mysterious malady." The *Record* notes that the deletions were made by Sundgaard a few hours before the curtain went up."

And there may have been more to the story than is indicated in the letters and telegrams. In a special report on the Philadelphia Federal Theater Promotion Department's activities for *Spirochete* by Thomas E. Maulby, received by the National Office a few days before *Spirochete* closed, there are many complaints. Mr. Maulby faults the particular laxness of one department member who seems, on several occasions, to have put sticks in the spokes of *Spirochete* promotion activities. On one occasion involving several days of advertisements, the word "syphilis" was omitted from the publicity. It is the feeling expressed by Mr. Maulby that this certain Project employee was, by his every action, opposed to *Spirochete*, and although Maulby had no proof, the same employee, a member of the Knights of Columbus, had instigated that organization's attempt to stop the production (LCFTP. SPhPB, Maulby, p. 12).

It seems that shortly after the big promotional meeting in early February to form a strong sponsoring committee as "a first line of defense," attended by more than a hundred influential

representatives from the city's medical, labor, and church communities, the Master of the Philadelphia lodge of the Knights of Columbus, who had not been invited to the meeting, was furnished with a copy of the *Spirochete* script by someone on the Project. Within a very short time, Mr. Cornelius O'Brien, Master of the Philadelphia Lodge, approached the head of the Project, Herbert Humphreys, and demanded that changes be made in the script. A meeting was arranged to discuss his demands. A representative of the American Social Hygiene Association came to Philadelphia from New York and brought the Association's Philadelphia representative along to the meeting to demonstrate *Spirochete's* national and local support. Mr. O'Brien who, "had seemingly been considering demanding that the production be discontinued entirely, finally agreed to such revisions as would not materially damage the production" (LCFTP. SPhPB, Maulby, p. 8) .

The storm was not over. Mr. Maulby reports that while the controversy with Mr. O'Brien was taking place, the Cardinal of the Philadelphia Catholic Diocese was contacted to "see if the Church intended to support O'Brien." Mr. Maulby learned that the Church was aware of Mr. O'Brien's stand and was in complete sympathy with it. However, if changes were made, as asked by O'Brien, the Church would not oppose production, "although," Maulby states, "he saw in the Federal Theatre's production of SPIROCHETE (caps in original) a Communist plot to overthrow the Government by insidiously destroying American faith in its popular heroes." (Considering the

tenor of these times, and with the knowledge that Hallie Flanagan was already deep into her Congressional defense of the FTP against accusations of communistic influence and infiltration, it does not seem probable that the Church's representative was joking). Maulby notes that, "the conference was conducted amicably, and the priest agreed to accompany Mr. O'Brien to the preview. It is ironic indeed to conjecture that this priest may have been one of the priests recalled by Sundgaard as coming down to have his blood tested in the lobby of the Walnut Street theatre" (LCFTP. PBSPH, Maulby, 3/23/39, p. 8).

A letter from Edward Kienle, Publicity Director for the American Social Hygiene Association, confirmed the meeting with Mr. O'Connor and informed Miss (sic) Flanagan that, "We were fortunately able to meet their objections" (NA. Kienle, 2/24/39).

Another letter with the same date addressed to the National Administrator of the WPA, from the Assistant Supreme Secretary of the Knights of Columbus, demands more. This letter indicates that Philadelphia's Mr. O'Brien went to Washington a week earlier and had already met with the National WPA Administrator. Further, as the result of a meeting of the Supreme Officers of the Knights of Columbus held in Chicago on February 21, the Assistant Supreme Secretary requested that the National Administrator advise them that "the parts of the Federal Theatre Project play 'Spirochete' that are objectionable to the Knights of Columbus will be eliminated from

all future productions of the play in Philadelphia and elsewhere in the United States" (NA. Conway, 2/24/39).

On March 1, 1939, a memorandum went out to all regional Directors and Managers of FTP Service Bureaus. "If you are rehearsing or contemplate putting into rehearsal the play, SPIROCHETE (caps in original)...will you please omit all references to CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS.. he can be referred to as merely a sea captain..." Other changes would follow shortly but, the memo emphasized, "it is important that the first part of this letter be adhered to strictly" (NA. Koppelman, 3/1/39).

The loop was closed with a letter dated March 13, from Florence Kerr, Assistant Administrator of the FTP, to the Assistant Supreme Secretary of the Knights of Columbus, informing him that instructions had already been issued that all future productions must incorporate the changes made in the script for the Philadelphia presentation. An interesting caveat is made. "Since this play is not the property of the Federal Theatre Project, (it was Sundgaard's by copyright), we cannot, of course, guarantee that such revisions will be made if the play is done by any producer other than the Federal Theatre Project (Kerr, 3/13/39). The point was not especially germane. By March 13 all the *Spirochete* productions were closed with the exception of Philadelphia's own hot bed of the Knights of Columbus, and it would only be twelve days before the curtain closed in Philadelphia, or anywhere, on *Spirochete* for the last time.

The Columbus censorship story is another reflection of the times in which *Spirochete* appeared in America's theatres. Despite the national campaign that had made syphilis a familiar topic in newspapers and popular magazines, a subject suitable for women's clubs as well as medical professionals, the very silence and punitive attitudes which this Living Newspaper set out to challenge were successful in censoring its words, if not the impact of its voice. What was the complaint? At issue were the few lines in the beginning of the play where the physician summoned to treat the crew calls for "Captain Christopher Columbus," and Columbus asks, "Who calls Christopher Columbus?" That is all. Not really all, of course. The problem was not just two lines in the script but the fear and aversion, the association with sin, and the stigma of anything or anyone connected with syphilis that controlled the minds and emotions of many Americans. *Spirochete* was very true to life (S1877[3] 1-1-1).

Scene Two: On and Off-Stage Action. Other

Actors

The *Philadelphia Record* advertised a cast of 60 with 40 scenes. The *Bulletin* spotted a cast of 45 characters. Other reviews and ads offered as many as 80 parts done by 60 actors, not to speak of the dance company of 12. However many characters were listed on the program, with or without Columbus, the cast was down from the 100 that took the stage in Chicago. These subsequent productions of *Spirochete* were produced a year later. Their

producers, unlike Chicago's Harry Minturn in late 1937 and early 1938, did not need a show with a big cast. The Congressional investigations of the Federal Theatre Project, begun the previous year, put a serious crimp in fiscal and personnel resources for Federal Theatre. As early as July of the 1938, only weeks after the closing of the Chicago *Spirochete*, Hallie Flanagan read a statement in a New York paper declaring that the Project was dominated by Communists. Late in the year Hallie Flanagan had gone to testify before the Dies Committee to answer attacks the WPA could no longer ignore. Now, in February of 1939, the Project had only a few months before the curtain would fall, not just on *Spirochete*, but upon the entire Federal Theatre Project ( Flanagan, 1985, p. 335).

A list of Philadelphia's *Spirochete* expenses counted a company from rehearsals to the opening that included 42 actors, a dance director and a stage and supervising director. Twenty musicians and a music director are noted as well. The Seattle director, noting that there were 79 speaking parts indicated, and that he had added several more, did all this with a troupe of only 37 players. Much "doubling" and not infrequently, "tripling" of parts apparently solved the numbers problem. In Portland, the 80-some parts were played by a company of half that number (NA. FTP. Unbound PBSP, p.77; LCFTP. SSPB, SPPB ). The Seattle director noted that "casting was always difficult with half enough actors but we are fortunate in having enough good men to play the parts that demand really fine characterization" (LCFTP. SSPB).

In Philadelphia apparently there were not enough good men. The poignant role of the syphilitic employee's blind child was transmuted from son to daughter and the part was played by a young girl (LCFTP. PBSPH, p.69).

Hallie Flanagan saw a rehearsal for the Seattle *Spirochete* and despite the Director's complaints could not believe the same company she had seen a year earlier was now responsible, "For the effectiveness of the staging which suggested now the waterfront in Spain, now the tavern in Naples, now the Pasteur Institute." She asked, "Where did you get Metchnikoff?" She was impressed with the way in which one of the older actors scored point after point. The director replied, "Our company may not be so good in drawing-room comedy but they were trained in the art of snappy entrance and exit, the pause, the climax. The living newspaper is really vaudeville with a basic idea." The man who played Metchnikoff, Flanagan noticed, played most of his scenes by a table or chair. Toby Leitch was an old vaudevillian, the director told her. "Both his legs are broken: smashed'em in his barrel act twenty-five years ago" (Flanagan, 1985, pp. 309-10).

### Budgets

Despite ever increasing cutbacks in Project personnel and project budgets due to shrinking Congressional appropriations in the last years of the Federal Theatre Project, the Philadelphia *Spirochete* budget seems lavish, certainly in comparison with those of the Seattle and Portland productions. In Philadelphia a total of \$10, 214

was spent from first rehearsal to first public performance for labor and materials. Slightly more than \$2000 was spent for technical labor hours and almost that amount was spent for materials and supplies. This figure does include company salaries, as does the Seattle figure, for labor and materials, of \$2,967. Portland made do, with almost twice as many labor hours, for a figure slightly less: \$2,727. Portland added only \$411 for materials to that figure. Many of the labor figures in Seattle and Portland come to less than one dollar an hour. The same is true in the Philadelphia company although the acting contingent fared slightly better. The Philadelphia musicians and their director rated almost \$2 an hour (NA. ub. PBSS, PBSP, PBSPh, p. 77).

### Costumes

Although there is no break-out for separate labor and materials costs for the Philadelphia costumes from the "Technical" totals, five costume makers are listed. The Philadelphia *Spirochete's* costume designer, Martha Decker, however, reported in detail the materials her department used for the construction of *Spirochete's* wardrobe. Many new costumes were designed and made especially for the production; others were altered from costumes on hand; aprons and vests were constructed for interns and laboratory assistants. Six dance skirts and four pairs of pants were assembled for the modern dance group. Seventy yards of satin, 45-yards of lace, 250-yards of sateen, ten-yards of velvet, and many more of ribbon, hooping, velveteen, and cotton net made their way onto

Philadelphia's Walnut Theatre stage. All this was accomplished and ready for the preview performance in only two weeks. The State Procurement Office did not, states Martha Decker, furnish the materials until that time (LCFTP, PB,SPh p. 24) .

In Seattle thirty-five authentic period costumes were constructed for *Spirochete* at an average cost of \$2.50 each. Wigs and other costumes were rented at a cost of \$97.50. The wardrobe materials total came to \$185.50. Portland's costumes were about equal in cost with \$73.62 spent for materials and \$120. 47 expended for labor (NA. ub., PBSS; LCFTP. PBSS).

Although we can only guess at how many hours the residents of the Philadelphia *Spirochete* wardrobe department put in during those harried two weeks after they received their materials and before the previews, costume sketches and photographs of the production attest to the labor and the yards and yards of multi-colored fabrics and trimmings. The Philadelphia costumes appear to be the most elaborate of any of the productions. The bride's gown (there is a sketch and a photograph of the finished product), is of a shiny fabric, perhaps satin, hoop-skirted, trimmed in layers of lace ruffles with three-quarter sleeves adorned with tiered lace. Her full-length veil falls from a flowered crown. The effect is lovely and fresh (LCFTP. PBSPH, cs, photos).

Collette's counterpart in Portland, where costumes for the entire production only cost about \$200, appears almost as equally elegant with a tiered, hoop-skirted gown which seems only to lack

the fancy trimmings. She too has a long veil of some fabric which falls from a circlet (LCFTP,SPPB).

Seattle's bride seems less fortunate in wardrobe. The \$2.50 average per costume was probably not much exceeded for her gown. The dress falls shapelessly from her shoulders to a limp two-tiered dust-ruffle effect at her feet. The leg-o'mutton sleeves extend limply to her wrists. The gown does not seem to fit well. It is not a happy dress and it is difficult to discern that it could belong to a bride, even one so hapless as the poor Collette (LCFTP. Photos, SS.).

Photographs of Portland's serving-maids at the Neapolitan Inn present them dressed in realistic period costumes, "insofar as our resources allowed." Some seem as if they would be right at home on an Elizabethan stage while their colleagues appear gathered and rucked in gingham and taffeta ready for an "old west" movie set. The sketches for Philadelphia's tavern maids indicate colorful, rather peasant-like costumes, about mid-calf length with laced bodices. Their long aprons contrast with their skirts. Full, long-sleeved blouses with ruffled necks and cuffs complete the rather gay, almost "Gypsy" effect. There is, unfortunately, no key to the colors used for either production (LCFTP. PBSP, PBSPH, cs).

The Chicago "Patient" was remarked to be costumed in "grave wrappings" and ghostly makeup by one reviewer. Photographs reveal that he wore a full-length, enveloping cloak over the long surplice, or soutane, as discussed earlier. The Philadelphia "Patient," noted for his good looks in the reviews, seems much more like an

"everyman" than either the Chicago or Portland sufferer.

Philadelphia's "Patient" is dressed in what appear to be conventional dark trousers and a full, long-sleeved, open collared lighter-colored shirt of shiny fabric. He has no hat, no cloak, no shroud. He is a fairly ordinary person (LCFTP. SPhPB).

In Portland's production the "Patient", in contrast to the realistic period costumes of the rest of the cast was, "dressed in a symbolic stylized full-length cape of tan cotton twill." The symbolism so expressed meshes with this director's avowed psychological and emotional interpretation of the play. Photographs show the patient enveloped in the cape (LCFTP. PBSPH, PBSP). The Seattle director's notes tell us that he considered the "Patient" part "difficult to imagine, let alone cast." So the Seattle "Patient" was picked. the director states, for his voice and appearance, "a sad nasal rasp, and 'weight of the world' expression." Seattle's "Patient" takes the stage in tights and doublet, or tunic sort of apparel, and a page-boy wig. This "Patient" remains "difficult to imagine," as a man for all seasons, an everyman (LCFTP. Photo,SS).

It is again worthwhile to consider that although *Spirochete's* characters remained the same from city to city, the local accent, emphasis and interpretation varied. Chicago's "Patient" was perhaps only Chicago's. Philadelphia's celebratory Collette was part of and recognizable to Philadelphia audiences while Seattle's Collette was perhaps very identifiable and fitting for her audiences. However, the drabness of her dress may just as well reflect that director's evident

lack of enthusiasm for her scene and perhaps for the whole of Sundgaard's *Spirochete* as well. Constraints fashioned by time, fiscal resources and the director's interpretation all played a part in the physical presentation of *Spirochete's* characters.

### Production Techniques

Staging, light, sound, and special effects all contribute to a dramatic production and, again, like costumes, are all very individual and characteristic to the regional Project in which they are produced and played. Seattle's *Spirochete*, opening February 13, for just eight performances had a set composed of two platform levels, spatter-painted, as its unit set, but no upper and lower stage as had the Chicago and Portland productions. Seattle's unit set consisted of platforms and steps. This director, rather than making an effort to include the audience as had been done with the stage extensions in Chicago and the actual inclusion of actors in the audience in Philadelphia, seems to have backed away from the audience. Feeling that the full stage was too large for his small company, he built a false proscenium in back of the one in place, twelve feet upstage, thus cutting the playing area, rather than extending it. The effect was to move the stage further from the audience. Further, a black curtain downstage served to prevent the audience from seeing set changes, which in other productions had been carried out with the shifting of light; or, variously having the actors carry on properties to effect the many quick scene and time variations (LCFTP. PBSS, dn).

Philadelphia's *Spirochete* played on three levels, a series of platforms covered with black duvetyn, a soft napped fabric. Small set pieces could be carried in by one or two people, as in the opening marriage license bureau scene. Philadelphia's set had been designed specifically in view of the "drastic reductions in personnel, the few labor hours available and so a very simple set with as few movable pieces of scenery and properties as possible," was the desired objective (LCFTP. PBSPH).

Portland's *Spirochete* played on two levels, but instead of platforms used a secondary, balcony-like elevated stage above the playing floor. Here, too, set pieces were used on both levels to indicate different locales. Philadelphia indicated the Columbus scene with a balustrade around a trap door opening. On the first platform a mast with a sail was set. This production "flew" scene-indicating flats and scenery down to the stage level, and, as with the ship's mast, flew them up again out of the way. A medieval, Gothic window, which could be lit from behind, and a floating skylight window were flown in and set over the rear platform. These windows gave a sense of period and "set the scene." The skylight window, built to show a long perspective, was used in the laboratory scenes. The lighting effects through these window cast dramatic shadows and contributed to the mood of the scenes played before them (LCFTP. PBSP) .

The Seattle production also included a window, a tall "leaded" window which cast sharp shadows. Travelers, legs and boarders are

curtains that can be pulled on stage to give or separate playing areas; those that are arranged in rows from the back of the stage to the front; those at the sides of the stage to curtain off the audience's view of the off stage areas; and those that hang above the stage to mask the view of the flies or above the stage. They were used in all productions. Usually black, in Portland they were blue and blue denim. In Philadelphia a black cyclorama, a semi-circular curtain that surrounds the side and back of the stage, with a wide blue screen was used as a background for all scenes that used the full stage (LCFTP. PBSPPh, PBSS, PBSP).

There seems to be no record of the illuminated map, or the appearance of the microscopic spirochete, or other special effects in Seattle or Portland. However, the Philadelphia lighting notes explain that their cyclorama was split so that stereoptican slides could be projected from the rear onto the screen. This device was used to project slides while the soldiers of the various nations "walked into the picture to the center, walked back down and into the lamp, giving an effect (of) enlarging as they marched toward the lamp" (LCFTP. PBSPPh).

The Philadelphia *Record* noted the appearance of "a nude figure suddenly...lighted before a huge map of Europe to symbolize the spread of the disease" (LCFTP. PBSPPh). The leading character of the Philadelphia syphilis play, the spirochete, was constructed of china silk, stuffed with steel wool and sewed to "cello-glass," placed against another piece of cello-glass representing the blood spot, and

lit from behind. This construction was to give the effect of the field on a slide through a microscope but the reviewers did not applaud. "Almost laughably amateurish...the poster picture of the magnified spirochete, dangling from a red blob meant to be a red corpuscle," said Steven Spencer in the *Bulletin* ( p. 69).

The "Taunters" fared somewhat better. Notice was taken of their rhythmic speech and laughter representing scornful society. Philadelphia thought it one of the most effective scenes in the play (LCFTP, PBSPH, p. 64). In Philadelphia and Chicago, the "Taunters" were played by women. Men took the parts in Seattle and Portland. And, as mentioned earlier, the Seattle "Taunters" were echoed by an off-stage chorus.

Sex was not the only thing to suffer a sea change. Although the "Taunters" remained female in Philadelphia, one reviewer gave credit for the "impressive" (musical ) score to Louis Van Es, the Philadelphia music director who conducted David Sheinfeld's Chicago score.

As noted earlier, Sheinfeld's score did not travel to Seattle. In Seattle a new score was composed for the mighty Hammond organ to provide musical "bridges, musical montages," borrowed, said the director, from radio, to pull together the "conglomeration of conflicting writing techniques" (LCFTP, PBSS, dn). Seattle's *Spirochete* also employed other audio effects such as recorded tolling of a huge bell and a distant fog bell to set the action. In addition to the off-stage accordion and guitar for the Neapolitan Inn scene, recorded

string music was used at other times. A high, wavering note on the organ and a "pin" spot light on the student Paul's face gave, so stated the director, the impression of a "train of thought" to the end of the scene in which the Paul has persuaded the doctor to infect him with syphilis in order to test the new calomel cure.

There appears to be no mention made of sound or music in the Portland materials except for the Intermission music performed by two pianists, Moszkowski's, *From Foreign Parts* (NA. VC, playbill).

### Scene Three: Promotion Strategies

*One-Third of a Nation*, the only other Living Newspaper to reach as many as and more cities than *Spirochete*, was produced in Philadelphia, Portland and Seattle the year before *Spirochete* came to town. The advertising and promotion plan for the earlier Living Newspaper may well have served as a model for *Spirochete's* promotional efforts in these cities. It is well to remember, however, that *Spirochete* was the first Living Newspaper to appear in Chicago since the early showing of *Triple-A Plowed Under* in 1936. Chicago's promotional efforts for the original *Spirochete* encompassed much the same territory as did the later efforts of *Spirochete's* legatees.

All the *Spirochete* productions sought and received support and endorsements from city, county, and state health and medical groups. Efforts were made to enlist union groups and social and service clubs. Radio interviews with Project staff and short dramatizations from *Spirochete* were used in radio promotions. There seems to have been few available financial resources for

newspaper advertising, but small ads were taken out in Philadelphia and "herald's (flyers, handouts) were distributed. In Philadelphia, the largest billboard-type poster used in that Project's history, a twenty-four-sheet poster was created for *Spirochete*. In a report on the Philadelphia Federal Theatre Promotion Department, the writer found fault with the promotion manager's limited experience and background "typical of the small house manger." It was noted that the giant *Spirochete* billboard-size posters paralleled three burlesque theatres. Hundreds of smaller posters and 1,000 window cards were printed and "shared billing in every third-rate barber-shop and hash-house" (LCFTP. PBSPH, p. 12).

One of these eye-catching posters depicts a dark-shadowed drawing of a snake twined around the nude torso of a man. The man, grasping the snake in one hand, has his other hand clenched in a fist as if about to strike the serpent's head. The poster declares: "A Living Newspaper on Man's Conquest of Syphilis!" (LCFTP, SPh, Poster). There was a special poster for colleges and schools (LCFTP. PBSPH, p. 50-51, pp. 3-13).

The Philadelphia unit used the same montaged red, black and white puritanical/skeletal figure for their heralds but these were not shaped, or "cut out" as were the Chicago heralds. The dramatic flyers boasted that *Spirochete* was endorsed by press, pulpit and the medical profession. This Philadelphia version also had a startling list of statistics on the back reciting the grim figures of the syphilis story: 60,000 babies born with syphilis each year; 2,500 born dead;

75 percent of syphilis victims were between the ages of 16 and 30; syphilis cost the tax payers \$50,000,000 annually. Inside the herald were laudatory snippets from five Philadelphia papers preview performance reviews. There was also the announcement of Saturday matinees. There had been no matinees in Chicago because of the large cast. Philadelphia reduced the price of its tickets to 75 cents top with the hopes of encouraging a broad audience. Special rates were given for theatre parties and special groups with savings of 30 to 40 percent on block purchases of 25 or more (NA, VC, LCFTP, PBSPH, pp. 50-51).

In sharp contrast, Seattle and Portland *Spirochetes* were announced by an undistinguished black on brown sheet, the same designs for each location. The dates, place, sponsoring agencies are changed. The folded half-sheet declares on the front, "Something to be Whispered About Out Loud !" A slightly different introductory blurb is used for the inside facing page. Prices for *Spirochete* seats in Seattle ranged from 27-cents, to \$1.15. At Wednesday and Saturday matinees in Portland at the Oregon WPA Theatre, all seats went for 35-cents (NA, VC).

Inside, the Seattle herald announced "'Spirochete,' a play by Arnold Sundgaard; the play that "all Seattle is talking about." Further, this herald declares: "NOW 6 MORE PERFORMANCES MARCH 8-9-10-11." This is a curious and intriguing announcement. Was the "rewritten" *Spirochete* such a hit that it was re-opened some three weeks after its documented run of eight performances closed?

Theatrical runs are frequently extended, as seems to have been the case in Portland where a promotion flyer announces the dates of the coming *Spirochete* as "FEB. 26th to MAR. 5th incl." All records indicate that *Spirochete* continued its performances at the Oregon WPA Theatre through March 11 (NA.VC).

Sometimes, after a period of time, very successful theatrical productions are "revived," but it is far from usual for a show, once the final curtain has fallen, to be brought back only a few weeks later. All other previous records of Seattle's *Spirochete* appear to cease after the last of eight performances that ended February 18. However, a supplementary data page describing publicity arrangements for the Seattle production mentions special cards in the street cars advertising the "two runs"(NA.ub PBSS). The Seattle production notebook, or bulletin, containing the details of the Seattle production is dated February 23, 1939. There seems to be no other mention of additional performances in Seattle production bulletins in the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project or National Archives *Spirochete* files, Flanagan's definitive story of the Federal Theatre, *Arena* (1940), or the Vassar Collection at the National Archives. In the records of the LCFTP, however, a Region 5 Regional Production Chart finding aid notes 14 Seattle performances of *Spirochete*, February 13 through March 11, but offers no source for this information regarding six extra performances and no explanation for the hiatus or second run. The *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, February 18, 1939, tells only of *Spirochete's* closing after that evening's

performance (NA. VC). A study devoted to Seattle Federal Theatre Productions might find this an interesting point to research further.

Heralds, flyers, and handouts were only a fraction of *Spirochete's* promotional artillery. Philadelphia mailed over 300 invitations to a selected list of doctors, lawyers, clergy, and labor leaders to attend a special sponsoring committee meeting. Some 500 letters were sent to labor units along with information about the play and 3,000 invitations were mailed to doctors judges, heads of welfare organizations, labor unions clergy, city officials, and WPA supervisors for the Friday evening preview presentation. These letters stressed *Spirochete's* importance as a powerful instrument for placing the problem of syphilis control before the people as well as its social importance. Another letter compared *Spirochete* to *One -Third of a Nation*, its masterful Living Newspaper technique serving to "illustrate what a tremendous power for good a theatre devoted to the real interests of the people can be" (LCFTP. PBSPH, pp. 56-57).

Twelve hundred letters went out to the teachers union and 12,000 general letters including heralds and information were mailed a week before the opening. All this was accomplished for less than \$500 in materials. Philadelphia did things in a big way.

The Philadelphia unit also managed to officially open *Spirochete* on the same night that Katharine Hepburn opened in Phillip Barry's new comedy, *The Philadelphia Story*. *Spirochete's* audience on its opening night was about 500 persons. The box-office take was about \$60.00 (LCFTP. PBSPH, report, p.10). The Walnut

Street Theatre seats over well over one thousand play-goers with 500 seats in its orchestra section alone (Walnut Theatre, personal communication, 5/15/89). Actually, it was a great time for theatre in Philadelphia. Besides *Spirochete* and *The Philadelphia Story*, Clifford Odets' *Golden Boy*, with Betty Furness, and Clair Boothe's, *The Women*, with an "all feminine cast of 40," competed for the public's attention that February week in Philadelphia (LCFTP. PBSPH, p. 68).

Seattle and Portland spent less than Philadelphia's \$500 to publicize *Spirochete*. In Seattle, \$85 was the amount spent. The \$154. figure for Portland included "booking, contact and exploitation" (NA. ub. PBSP). The files of Portland materials contain a hand-lettered, Mimeographed sheet announcing *Spirochete's* coming production and promotional articles for the local newspapers. Among the local organizations endorsing *Spirochete* were the Oregon State Medical association, Oregon Social Hygiene association, the Visiting Nurses association, and the city health officer, Dr. Adolph Weinzirl, who urged people to see the play. Each of the articles carefully cautioned that *Spirochete* was not recommended for those under 16 years of age. This caution is perhaps understandable in view of the times and an assumed degree of sophistication in Portland, but this caution is unfortunate in view of the terrible statistics demonstrating that 75 percent of syphilis victims were between the ages of 16 and 30. Philadelphia sent special invitations to their Teacher's Union

and many students came, surprised to find that *Spirochete* was not a movie (NA.VC. LCFTP. PBSPH, report).

In Seattle the publicity department took pains to avoid playing up the "sex angle," but took equal care to avoid the impression that *Spirochete* was "merely a form of educational lecture" (LCFTP. PBSS). To this end, ten radio programs, fifteen minutes in length, taken from *Spirochete's* script, were produced over local stations. Time was donated by the Board of Health and the Medical Association.

Efforts were made to contact many special interest groups before the production. As a result approval and support, including the sale of blocks of tickets, came from groups such as the Federated Women's Clubs, the Graduate Nurses School, the P.T.A. and several other women's clubs. Thousands of posters decorated city light poles and store fronts. Thirty-five thousand found their destinations through mailing lists, hospitals, doctor's offices, department stores, apartments, and hotels. For the first time the entire local WPA was contacted by putting special rate tickets in all the county WPA pay envelopes. This approach brought a "gratifying WPA attendance" (NA. ub. PB SS).

#### Scene Four: Audiences and Reviews

If Seattle's WPA made a fine showing in *Spirochete* audiences, the Portland *Spirochete's* responsive opening night audience was composed mainly of members of medical and kindred professions (NA, VC, *Oregonian*, 2/27). Portland's medical establishment and other health-related organizations, civic sponsorship, and

conscientious, almost daily newspaper reminders brought in 2,169 persons to participate in *Spirochete's* fourteen Portland performances. Although some of the audience thought Portland's *Spirochete* "brave and exciting," the project staff expressed disappointment with other levels of their audience's reaction. Many in the audience found the subject matter revolting and/or thought it "too chemical a matter" for theatrical treatment. Others who came "seeking the sensationalism of a 'sex' motion picture" were disappointed not to find it. The general reaction was perceived to be that Portland's *Spirochete* was a "fairly interesting script of good intention, well-staged and adequately accurate" (NA.ub. PBSP. LCFTP. PBSP). The *Oregon Journal's* opening night report observed that *Spirochete* held the interest of the audience, brought frequent applause and, "sent those present away talking - and out loud" (NA, VC).

Recognizing only that *Spirochete* had an unusual dramatic technique, a press notice in the *Seattle Argus* compared *Spirochete* to a conventional drama, noting its unusual, by comparison, twelve scenes (down from 40 advertised in Philadelphia!) portraying developments in the history of the disease. There is little evaluative judgement in the article which asserts only that drama and color are enhanced in the presentation by the dramatic technique, use of lighting and off-stage voices. The settings, observes the article, were numerous and well done. There is nothing here to tell us what the audience thought of *Spirochete* (LCFTP. PBSS).

The *Argus* article remarks that *Spirochete* was described as a dramatic history. The words Living Newspaper do not appear in Seattle press, program or promotional material. Only the previous year, a sensational Seattle production of the Living Newspaper *Power* had been a box-office success, drawing \$4,000 in five nights of sold out houses with 25 and 40 cent admissions. *Power*, with its theme, the history of the use and abuse, and control of electrical power, seems to have struck the people of the Northwest where they lived and were employed. Hallie Flanagan explained that in spite of, or perhaps because of *Power's* public popularity, the Seattle press bombarded the Federal Theatre with an inky uproar, accusing it of, "attacking, abusing, satirizing, assailing, exposing, and condemning private utility ownership." The state WPA was concerned with the virulence of the press onslaught. The directors of the Project resigned (Flanagan 1985, p.306-7). Perhaps Richard Glyer, *Spirochete's* director, and other project personnel did not relish a replay of the noisome incident and so chose deliberately not to draw the Living Newspaper connection or attention to *Spirochete*.

Portland's promotional staff seems to have had no such qualms. Portland publicized *Spirochete* as done in the "flash-action 'living newspaper technique. *Spirochete* was proudly identified in the program as "A Living Newspaper play by Arnold Sundgaard dramatizing the 400 years' War of Science Against Syphilis" (NA. ub.PBSP, VC).

The Philadelphia reviews, after the sparsely attended opening night, were good enough for laudatory blurbs to be excerpted and rushed into a flyers with the familiar merged puritanical and death's-head figures that announced, "The Critics Whispered About it Out Loud." On the back was a quote from Abraham Lincoln about public opinion: "He who moulds public opinion goes deeper than he who enacts statutes..." (NA,VC) .

Philadelphia reviewers, perhaps moulders of public opinion themselves, commended the Government players for bringing the "much shied- at problem into the open." They labeled the production as a propaganda play setting out to "tell a very definite story and plant the seed for a definite purpose." *Spirochete* was declared to, "pack plenty of punch," with plenty of drama. The FTP, exhibiting a "fine flair for new provocative trends in drama," presented a *Spirochete* with the "courage to defy taboos and present a vital but hitherto banned theme to the intelligent theatre-goer..." One might conjecture about the rest of the theatre-goers. (NA. VC).

Perhaps the most pallid, or conservative, critique came from the *Evening Public Ledger* whose reviewer accomplished the remarkable feat of describing *Spirochete* using the word syphilis only once and that was when he mentioned that the "ailment" received its name from a poem about a shepherd by the name of "Syphilis." For the rest of the article, its author refers to "social disease." Ironically, the opening of this review refers to the "dramatic and somewhat clinical plea for less prudery on the

subject." The piece concludes that "Mr. Sundgaard's tract is entitled to a hearing." It seems obvious that the writer, or perhaps his editor, did not hear, or if he heard, did not understand *Spirochete's* message (LCFTP. PBSPH, p. 70).

*Spirochete* had 35 hearings in Philadelphia. *Spirochete* played thirty-five performances in the Walnut Street Theatre, more than in any of the other four cities in which it was produced. There are over one thousand seats in Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theatre. Over five hundred are orchestra seats and the remaining seats are divided between two balcony levels. *Spirochete's* official opening night parade was rained on by Katharine Hepburn and *The Philadelphia Story*. Still, *Spirochete* managed to fill half the house that first official evening. If even only half the seats were filled for the remainder of the Philadelphia run, the dramatized history of syphilis, Sundgaard's tract against silence and for social action in the War on Syphilis may well have been heard by 16,000 persons, or more, in the City of Brotherly Love.

### Summary

*Spirochete's* war against the fallacy of syphilis silence was taken to four other cities where cast, costumes, scenes and sets, and promotion strategies could be seen to change according to local interpretation. But *Spirochete's* themes and objectives remained unchanged. Thousands more Americans heard, and saw, and were changed somehow by the experience. Reviews called it propaganda,

an illustrated lecture, a parade, and, perhaps not great drama; but no one called it dull.

Chapter Eight, "*Spirochete*, Act Three, The Curtain Falls," appraises and evaluates *Spirochete's* contributions to the War on Syphilis, to public health issues and attitudes. The chapter surveys contemporary commentary from medical and popular sources, health professionals, the clergy and other concerned professionals regarding *Spirochete's* place not only on the stage but in the social milieu of the late 1930s. Concluding observations examine present-day evaluations for retrospective appraisals of *Spirochete's* contributions to public health education and social action.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *SPIROCHETE*, ACT THREE, THE CURTAIN FALLS

#### ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF *SPIROCHETE'S* CONTRIBUTIONS TO PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUES AND ATTITUDES

*Spirochete* was an able general in the Surgeon General's War on Syphilis, commanding America's theatrical front and leading its troops into local media and community consciousness terrain.

*Spirochete* made many thousands aware, many perhaps for the first time, not only of the history and extent of the syphilis plague, but of the importance of testing and seeking and following through with treatment. Syphilis was curable. *Spirochete* made its audience aware that falsely moralistic social attitudes surrounding the disease were just as crippling as the corkscrew bacillus itself.

*Spirochete* was not the only "general" in the war. In this, as in other wars, there are many generals. Neither can it be said that *Spirochete* was the first, nor the most important general, or even aide de camp. Rather, *Spirochete's* contributions to this cataclysmic battle, begun only a few years before, can be counted as an extension of the Surgeon General's mighty and innovative arm. *Spirochete* offered an additional complement of troops and innovative new weapons to the fight that extended the struggle to further shores. *Spirochete's* contributions to the War on Syphilis and public health issues and attitudes are chronicled in contemporary 1930s accounts and present-day assessments.

## Scene One

The War on Syphilis: Dispatches from the Front

Surgeon General Thomas Parran wrote "Lifting the Shadow of Syphilis" for the August, 1940, issue of *Scribner's Commentator*. The article appeared, excerpted, simultaneously in the *Reader's Digest*. This dual publication of the Surgeon General's assessment of how the War was going repeated the publishing events of his original declaration of war and call to arms, *Shadow on the Land*, also published simultaneously in the two popular magazines, as well as in its original hard-cover edition just four years earlier. The forward to the later *Reader's Digest* article cites the General's drive for education and action. "The General has accomplished a remarkable feat," states the introduction; "he has put two distasteful, tabooed words, syphilis and gonorrhoea, into the mouth of polite society." Parran, declares the *Digest*, has reasoned correctly that familiarity would breed respect instead of contempt for the twin scourges (*Readers' Digest*, August, 1940, p. 109).

A few months earlier, the Assistant Surgeon General, R. A. Vonderlehr (1940), asked in *Survey Graphic*, "Are We Checking the Great Plague?" Both these major "generals" in the War concluded that although much progress had been made, there was much to be accomplished before victory could be declared in this nation. Parran's assistant commander commented that the price of one battleship spread over the twenty years since the end of the first World War could have meant triumph in the War on Syphilis. His

comment is of especial interest because, after the Congressionally-engineered demise of the Federal Theatre Project in June of 1939, Hallie Flanagan said that the same amount, approximately the cost of one battleship, \$46 million dollars, had provided four years of Federal Theatre with its thousands of productions, including *Spirochete*, before an audience of millions (Flanagan, 1985, p.436).

If victory in the War on Syphilis was not yet achieved, quantifiable progress, besides the breaking of taboos and the drive for education and action, could be measured. One such measure of the progress that had been made can be illustrated by the fact that the American Social Hygiene Association opened a syphilis exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair (*NYT*, 5/11/39, p. 23). Syphilis was the number-one killer andcripler among preventable diseases.

Beginning with President Roosevelt's original appropriation of \$3 million after the cornerstone Washington conference in December of 1936, the sum grew to \$14 million, augmented by matching state funds, for the year 1939. Free and part-pay clinics increased from 800 in 1936 to more than 2500 in 1939. The number of blood tests increased from about two million done by state laboratories in 1936 to over five and-a-half million in 1939. Almost a quarter of-a million patients sought treatment in 1939, a 67 percent gain over the preceding year. By 1939, 20 states had passed laws requiring premarital syphilis testing. When *Spirochete* made its national debut in Chicago in 1938, Illinois had become one of the first ten

such states just the year before. In 1939 there were prenatal examination laws in 14 states (Parran, 8/40, pp. 52-57).

The nation's top physician, Thomas J. Parran, now found that the attitude of industry toward infected employees had undergone a radical change for the better. More than a million blood tests for syphilis took place in industries across the country and many firms were instrumental in seeing that employees received treatment either at company clinics or through private physicians. Some businesses even made sure to retain syphilitic employees in times of lay-off in order to make certain that the employees continued and completed their treatment (Parran, 1934, pp. 51-51).

The War on Syphilis seemed to be making inroads against its dreaded enemy. In 1939, 200 thousand persons had been treated so that they were cured or no longer infectious. At the same time, almost 5,000 new cases were reported. Parran states that the war was not one-fifteenth over. Despite the hope of new drugs and new treatments, the answer lay in teaching the youth of the land to avoid infection. Social and legislative change would also have to play a part.

News from the War on Syphilis provided encouraging statistics, important nationally as proof that life could be made better for many more persons. The campaign, documented by Paul de Kruif, provided indisputable evidence that the battle was going well in Chicago, the city that had sounded the call to arms, the city in which *Spirochete* carried the flag. "Chicago was the first American city to attack this

situation with bold and wholesale methods. Combining science and ballyhoo in a spectacular campaign, Chicago tested the blood of one out of every five of its inhabitants" (de Kruif, 1941, p. 23).

Comparing the 1938-1939 result with the next year's period, numbers showed signs that the counter-offensive was making some progress against the disease. There was, states de Kruif, a striking downward trend in positive blood tests for every comparable group. The positive blood test percentages for blacks was reduced from 18.9 to 14.9; that for whites from 3.2, to 2.4. Of most significance, those with early syphilis, the infectious cases, dropped from 8 per 10 thousand to 5, found in the same number of reported samples. De Kruif asserts that these facts proved that ordinary citizens were not ashamed to take the blood test and that a great majority of infected persons could be persuaded to follow through the treatment (De Kruif, 1941, pp. 24-26).

These facts, these statistics, stand for changed lives in Chicago. These statistics and figures are the quantifiable results of the combination of science and ballyhoo in a spectacular campaign. *Spirochete*, with its crew of doctors and nurses and blood-testing booths in the theatre lobby; *Spirochete*, the syphilis play, was a unique, distinctive and dramatic part of that campaign.

### Scene Two

#### Education: Issues and Attitudes.

More than ballyhoo, more than science, *Spirochete*, said its reviewers, was education; it was history; it was socially important.

*Spirochete* presented facts and dramatically illustrated how those facts affected the common man, his family, his employment. In an article in the February 1939 issue of the *Journal of Social Hygiene*, Eleanor Shenehon, a spokesman for the American Social Hygiene Association, stated that there were two important facts about syphilis that everyone ought to know: syphilis kills and disables; syphilis can be prevented and cured. This was the message that *Spirochete* took to Federal Theatre audiences in five cities. The article, "Citizen's Guide to Syphilis Control," explains that the marvels of medical science and government can only do so much. The rest is up to the people.

#### *Spirochete*: Education for Health

*Spirochete* was a valuable medium for health information. It reflected and dramatized on stage society's changing attitudes. It portrayed the need for action, for social change. Only four years before, the Surgeon General of the United States, Dr. Thomas J. Parran, was refused permission to mention syphilis over the radio. Most newspapers and magazines had strict taboos against the mention of venereal disease. Publishers and broadcasters, states *Newsweek* (2/20/39, p. 350), feared the storm of protest that they believed would follow such frankness. There was a conspiracy of silence against the nation's number-one killer andcrippler.

The Federal Theatre in Chicago, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Seattle and Portland joined the fight against syphilis and the silence that surrounded it. Chicago said that *Spirochete* made a valuable

contribution to anti-syphilis propaganda; the impressive scientific story would enlighten the laymen (CT, 4/30/38, p.15). One columnist (Borden, 1938) commented that although Brieux wrote a play about venereal disease, and Ibsen implied the presence of the "unmentionable," *Spirochete* was the first to present a frank portrayal of syphilis on the stage. Readers were encouraged to see the production, "in the name of common sense," since a little knowledge of syphilis, even that portrayed on the Blackstone's stage, might save lives and prevent lives of misery (LCFTP, PBSC, pp.5-6). *Spirochete's* Chicago director, Addison Pitt, thought it not a lecture of any sort, but rather a wonderful lesson as well as a source of interest and entertainment (LCFTP, PBSC, dn, p.4).

Not quite a year later in Philadelphia, *Spirochete* was called a play that should be seen by every well-thinking, serious minded, foresighted man and woman; it presented a vital but hitherto banned theme. As one reviewer wrote, "only a little while ago, nobody spoke the word syphilis above a whisper. Now there's a play about it--a play that shouts it (NA,VC *Record*, 12/6/39).

Another theatre critic wrote, "In step with the anti-syphilis campaign so vigorously prosecuted by Surgeon General Thomas Parran...the play combines history with propaganda." "*Spirochete* " is a propaganda play," said Philadelphia. "It sets out to tell a very definite story and plant the seed for a definite purpose" (LCFTP, *Daily News*, 2/21/39). The Philadelphia director, James Light, felt the audience's participation in *Spirochete's* dramatized fight against

syphilis on stage at the Walnut Street Theatre moved the production beyond spectacle to integrate the material presented into the audience's personal experience (LCFTP, PBSPH, dn, p.4).

And in Portland, Oregon, the public was urged to see the "social drama," *Spirochete*, as an aid to the efforts of health authorities in making information about syphilis available to the public.

"*Spirochete*" serves to focus the attention on the remarkable change in viewpoint that has come about in recent years regarding subjects such as the social disease on which it is centered that were, within the memory of all of us of adult years, matters 'shushed' by the prudery of past generations. Here they are discussed openly, sanely and in good taste" (NA. VC. *Journal*, 2/27/39). The City Health Officer endorsed *Spirochete* as a valuable public health information medium (NA, VC. Playbill).

Theatre reviews applauded or castigated *Spirochete* for its didactic drama, its factual history of syphilis, its mode of educating the theatre-goer to the socially important problem of syphilis in the late 1930s. The medical profession and community groups supported *Spirochete* as their ally in their loudly declared battles in the War on Syphilis. The Church, urged early on to preach the necessity of syphilis testing from the pulpits, may well have been, if author Sundgaard's memory serves him well, at least willing participants in *Spirochete's* efforts to spread the word out loud. The Church was certainly regarded by health professionals such as the

American Social Hygiene Association, as a valuable and interested party to the community's fight against syphilis.

However, an article, "Fighting the Red Plague" (4/13/38, pp.291-292), in *The New Republic* asserted that the one great stumbling block in the United States was the attitude of important religious groups about the disease. Many such groups, claimed the piece, associate venereal disease with "sin" and were inclined to sit back with their hands folded and let the sinner take the consequences.

But newspapers, journals and popular magazines, even radio had taken up the flag in the War on Syphilis and were indeed talking about syphilis--out loud. On June 10, 1938, barely a week after the Chicago *Spirochete* passed the Salties Hygienic Marriage Act amendment amid the celebratory crowd of legislators and "the people" on the Blackstone's stage for the last time, the Federal Theatre Project Radio Division debuted a series of weekly programs broadcast nation-wide based on Paul de Kruif's medical best sellers. The first four sets of episodes told the stories of *Microbe Hunters*, *Hunger Fighters*, *Men Against Death*, and, *Why Keep Them Alive?* The series of ten episodes based on de Kruif's book, *Men Against Death*, ran from Christmas Eve of 1938, through March of the following year. Within this series of weekly programs, one week's script was "Spirochete," the story of the fight against syphilis, was one week's script in this series of weekly programs. Medical history and information, and disease prevention education reached

thousands of Americans each week through the Federal Theatre's Radio Division in audibly colorful and dramatic form over the CBS Network airwaves until the close of the Federal Theatre Project in June of 1939. The "Men Against Death" series created such interest and acclaim that scripts and recordings of the series were made available to schools, colleges, and other non-profit groups by a grant from the Carnegie Foundation (LCFTP. Stevens, 1975; "Men Against Death," 1938-39).

Despite the silence, or at least the hushed whispers that remained in some sections of the nation's communities, voices were raised in others. Voices were heard. Action was demanded and taken. The last scene in *Spirochete* came true in state legislatures across the country. *Spirochete's* final scene dramatically presenting the Illinois passage of the premarital testing amendment would be recreated in ten more states by 1940, double the number since the Illinois deed was done.

*Spirochete*, by most accounts an acknowledged and vital character in the drama that was the War on Syphilis, can without doubt be listed as featured player in the shattering of the taboos, the breaking of the silence that surrounded syphilis in the 1930s. *Spirochete* should not, however, in light of the greater campaign, be considered an end in itself. A contemporary source cautioned that "The removal of the taboo is a necessary preliminary to the campaign for eradication but not part of the campaign itself. Those who most need to know about the campaign of education are the

ones who hear of it last and are least likely to" ("Fighting the Red Plague," 1938, p.292). This Cassandra explained that, although the incidence of disease could be reduced, only a frontal attack on economic and social factors would result in the eradication of syphilis. These concepts are not unique. The Surgeon General himself understood that education without action, testing and treatment without legislation, without determining and eradicating the root causes which allowed syphilis to survive and spread, were not enough (Parran, 1940).

*Spirochete's* contemporaries, sources in the theatre, in the media, and in the medical community identified *Spirochete's* contributions to the public health issue of syphilis and to contemporary social attitudes. *Spirochete* was a force for education, a purveyor of facts. *Spirochete* was a dramatic historian of the syphilis plague. Moreover, *Spirochete* gave a new voice to the Surgeon General's War on Syphilis. This voice was three-dimensional. *Spirochete* was a voice of scientific fact and sentiment; it was the voice of the laboratory, and that of the syphilis sufferer. *Spirochete* was the voice of the people demanding action for social change. *Spirochete*, said its supporters, was a voice against silence and death. *Spirochete*, a representative of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper tradition, was surely, "born out of the sternest of all realities - necessity...an instrument for disseminating knowledge of reality" (Garnett, in Bigsby, 1983, p. 232).

### Scene Three

#### Present-day Assessments and Evaluations

Present-day researchers are in general agreement with the reviewers of the past in their consideration of *Spirochete* as a medium of public health education. *Spirochete* was a worthy member of the Federal Theatre's unique Living Newspaper genre. As a member of this special collective, "*Spirochete* shared a raw energy, a rational analysis of events, an external view of behavior, and a sense of determinism to be neutralised only by the collectivity...a powerful epic drama...its effects traded for a subtle appreciation of individual psychology and a more sophisticated model of social action and historical process" (Biggsby, 1983, p. 232).

Cheryl Swiss (1986), who offered a detailed account of production elements in the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers, the dramatic mechanisms found in *Spirochete* and other Living Newspapers, identifies *Spirochete's* sensitive and sophisticated treatment of the history of syphilis. As a Living Newspaper, Swiss declares, *Spirochete* provides information, education and entertainment (p. 104).

William Stott (1973), in his introduction to an article in his introduction to an article on the Federal Theatre in *Documentary Expression in Thirties America*, declares the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers were the documentaries that treated the public questions of the day. They were "white propaganda." They sought to persuade; they quoted authority. The Living Newspaper confirmed

what the audience knew so that the audience then could be better convinced of what they did not know. Living Newspapers presented evidence and represented that evidence right before the eyes of the audience. *Spirochete* enlists the audience in the excitement of the moment of discovery when the scientist Schaudinn at last discovers the spirochete, *treponema pallidum*. The members of the audience look at the "microscope specimen slide," along with Schaudinn, and see the villain for themselves. *Spirochete* and other Living Newspapers were unquestionably and uniquely successful, states Stott, in their mission to inform the public. Living Newspapers influenced public opinion on contemporary issues. White propaganda was effective.

Writing for the "Theatre and Social Action" issue of the *Theatre Review* in 1977, Professor John S. O'Connor states that *Spirochete* served as an essential part of the nation's program to educate the public. Around *Spirochete's* productions, cities developed anti-syphilis public education and publicity campaigns. *Spirochete*, a representative of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper and 1930s theatre, proved to be an effective tool, states O'Connor, in educating the public and creating a demand for social change (p. 98).

Barbara Melosh, Curator of Medical Sciences at the Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, in her 1986 article for *Medical Heritage*, observes that *Spirochete* dramatized the rhetoric of the public health movement to advocate premarital screening for syphilis. *Spirochete* captured the excitement of medical discovery; it

dramatized current events. Its central dramatic tension, states Melosh, was ignorance versus knowledge. The play illustrates the advance of science and knowledge against superficial morality. *Spirochete's* public health message educated the public and was a link between scientific discussion and improved health. *Spirochete* used medical history to deepen the contemporary debate about medicine, states Melosh. Using the didactic methods of the Living Newspaper, *Spirochete* demonstrated medical research for alleviating human suffering, not just for its own sake. *Spirochete*, demonstrating medical history, demanded comparable advances in social reforms; it provided a bridge between the experts and laymen. Information and knowledge inspired the ordinary citizen to active involvement in social decisions. Only such democratic policy, declares Melosh, could guarantee the use of scientific discoveries in the public interest. "Knowledge was potent only in motion: once educated, the citizen must use that understanding to act. This reform vision brought medical history to life, using the scientific past as a resource for the present and an inspiration for the future" (Melosh, 1986, p. 46-47).

In 1936 the Surgeon General, Thomas J. Parran sounded the clarion call that began the nation-wide War on Syphilis. This outspoken and fearless national physician, undaunted by prevailing public mores, took on syphilis, the ancient killer andcrippler of lives. The battle cry was testing and treatment. The message was education for public health, for life. Dr. Parran declared that the

syphilis plague thrived on silence, that its end was death.

*Spirochete's* production and performances made significant contributions to the Surgeon General's War on Syphilis.

### Summary

*Spirochete* productions, at least 111 performances in five cities from April of 1938 to March of 1939, presented vivid evidence testifying to the need for syphilis testing and treatment. *Spirochete* informed. *Spirochete* identified and clearly depicted the ages-old social problem, the living history of syphilis. Science and medicine at work were played out on stage. *Spirochete* educated. Syphilis statistics took on visible form in dramatic spectacles, in emotion-laden vignettes of marriage, family and industry. *Spirochete's* production and performances presented the War on Syphilis for all to see in colorful, dramatic, and affecting form, the search for the common man for the solution to syphilis, the social problem that was crippling the nation. *Spirochete* modeled changing social attitudes. On stage *Spirochete* played out the on-going battle of knowledge versus ignorance. This unique example of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper portrayed the advance of science that demands from the people, inspired by information, empowered by education and new understandings, positive growth in social attitudes and perspectives; and through democratic process, social action for positive change.

## CHAPTER NINE

### GREENROOM: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents a summary of the study and draws conclusions from the study of *Spirochete*. Also included are implications for the discipline of adult education, and research themes and issues for future research.

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper, *Spirochete*, as a unique example of the interweaving of the forces of government, education, health and the arts at a specific moment in time. The theme of *Spirochete's* relationship to public health education in the late 1930s and the examination of *Spirochete* as a theatrical presentation of the Federal Theatre Project formed the basis of the inquiry.

The background of this study presented a brief description of Depression-era America. The Works Projects Administration was one of the many projects formulated by Franklin D. Roosevelt to help heal the still-festering wounds of Depression-torn America. Millions of jobless were sent back to work. A subsidiary of the WPA, Federal Project No. 1, was specifically formulated to give employment to unemployed artists and musicians. Under its aegis, Hallie Flanagan created the Federal Theatre Project, creating jobs for thousands of unemployed actors, directors, scenic designers and technicians. From the Federal Theatre Project sprang the roots of a national theatre

which brought education and entertainment to millions, many of whom who had never seen a "live" theatre performance before. The Federal Theatre's most unique and most controversial creation was the Living Newspaper. This unique theatrical form took the day's headlines and translated them into dramatic offerings which defined and illustrated a current social problem, then presented the search for its solution through social action and change. The Living Newspapers incorporated the form, methods, and stylings of experimental theatre, which brought a sense of immediacy, excitement, and audience involvement to the theatre. The Living Newspapers also created many new dramatic mechanisms and techniques.

The ravages of the economic Depression of the 1930s left the nation's health vulnerable and at risk. The public was ignorant about many important health issues. Social conventions discouraged discussion. The still- grim and desperate economic conditions exacerbated by social silence, encouraged the spread of disease, and raised the severity, and number, of casualties. In 1935 the nation's newly appointed Surgeon General, Thomas J. Parran, announced that the syphilis plague was the nation's number one preventable killer andcrippler. It killed millions of Americans annually and left others severely damaged for life. The danger to the unborn was appalling. The disease took a dire toll on the nation's youth. The cost to the taxpayer's was formidable. The Surgeon General declared War on Syphilis.

*Spirochete* was a unique and specific vehicle for public health education in the late 1930s, and figured prominently in the national War on Syphilis campaign in several cities across the country. The study of *Spirochete* provided an historical perspective on changing society and produced an extraordinary forum for the forces of government, medicine, education, and the arts. *Spirochete*, a unique representative of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper genre, was epic theatre, displaying events of hundreds of years of syphilis history on its stage. It was social allegory representing "every man." In *Spirochete*, the "Patient," everyman, travels through the years seeking the answers to syphilis. Humanity will benefit from his quest. *Spirochete* dealt syphilis, the still vital 1930s social issue with accurate information and sought to enlighten and inform, as well as entertain, its audiences. *Spirochete* had a point of view. It was produced with theatrical techniques and form designed not only to entertain but to influence its audiences to take action.

The study presented a discussion of the philosophical and theatrical foundations, rationale and precedents for theatre as education and concluded that theatre, since its earliest origins, has included some elements, themes, theses, concepts, or ideas for learning, change and growth. Theatre informs. It has the power to influence, communicate, stimulate, enlighten, raise issues and educate. Theatre can be a weapon against ignorance, and for social change.

A review of the literature provided further background for this inquiry and introduced the Federal Theatre Project, its aims and objectives, and the socio-economic and political times in which it was born, lived and died. In its short, four year life-span, the FTP employed more than 12,000 people in 150 separate units in 22 states, and produced almost 3,000 stage plays. The FTP was a theatre of classics, the circus, marionettes, and experimental drama. It played to an audience of some 30 million. The Federal Theatre was intended to entertain and to instruct. After months of Congressional hearing before the Dies Committee and amid accusations of inefficiency and communist infiltration and influence, the Federal Theatre was brought to an abrupt halt on June 30, 1939.

The study's literature review provided a description of Hallie Flanagan, the Director of the Federal Theatre Project, her hopes, objectives and goals for the Project. Hallie Flanagan and the FTP were committed to making Depression-era life better for Americans.

The literature review provided the basis for a discussion of the Federal Theatre's contributions. These contributions included the employment of thousands of unemployed theatre artists and technicians, a policy of free or very low -price theatre, a wide and varied audience of millions, educational and professional services to the theatre, and educational and social commitment to its audiences. The FTP created a system of regional theatres and provided opportunities for the development of new acting and play-writing talents. The FTP's most innovative, creative, and controversial

contribution to American society and the arts was the Living Newspaper. The study provides a synopsis of this powerful and dramatic creation, "partly history, partly propaganda."

The study's literature review also included historiography of the Federal Theatre Project. Doctoral research, contemporary-1930s era commentary and critique, and present-day comment which focus on the Federal Theatre, contributed information and understandings of the Federal Theatre Project and the Living Newspapers.

The questions that provided the research framework for the study concerned (a) the origins of *Spirochete*, (b) the production and promotion techniques of *Spirochete*, and (c) the contributions of this production to public health education. Contemporary, 1930s-era and present-day assessments of *Spirochete* were evaluated

The overall guiding theme of the study brought new focus and definition to the question of theatre, specifically, *Spirochete* as a viable avenue, or instrument, for education. The study demonstrated *Spirochete's* relationship to education and social change, and the role of adult education in change. The study provided an assessment and evaluation of *Spirochete's* production techniques, how they were created and used to help convey themes and content. The underlying foundation for the study was an investigation of the interwoven forces of government, education, health and the arts in *Spirochete*.

The research design for the study was historical research. *Whisper Out Loud* is an historical case study. Public health

education provided the study's pattern of meaning. This concept was illustrated with the patterns of beliefs, behavior and events that surrounded the creation and production of *Spirochete*. The study of *Spirochete* provided an interpretation of the complex, dynamic 1930s-era system which was made up of segments from government, health, education, and the arts.

Research materials for the study were found in the Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Special Collection, Fenwick Library, George Mason University, and in the materials from the Records of the Works Projects Administration, located in the United States National Archives. Specific sources from these archival materials included play scripts and production bulletins, and cultural artifacts such as posters and playbills. Administrative records were the source for much valuable information found in correspondence and reports. The audio-tape-recording and transcript of an interview with author Arnold Sundgaard was studied.

### Main Findings

The study's research provided facts and interpretations from many sources about the creation and production of *Spirochete*. A synthesis of the research was made to provide an in depth description of *Spirochete* as an episode in the American theatre, and in the socio-economic and political culture of the 1930s. The main findings of that synthesis concerning the origins of *Spirochete*, its production and promotion techniques, and its contributions to the socio-cultural spheres of its time follow.

## Origins

The study demonstrates that *Spirochete's* origins lay in the unique culmination of the socio-economic and political environment of Chicago, and of the nation, during the fast-changing years of the mid- to late-1930s. The play was a product of the Federal Theatre Project, which was a major outgrowth of President Roosevelt's plan for the nation's Depression-era recovery. The hundreds of persons who produced *Spirochete*, including its author, had been writers, actors, artists, musicians, technicians and stagehands, forced out of work by the Depression, and onto Relief roles, until the FTP put them back to work using their skills for which they had been trained.

*Spirochete* was inspired by the vast, innovative campaign embarked upon by the nation's valiant Surgeon General in an effort to halt the devastating toll that syphilis was wreaking on an already Depression-weakened population. The country, its children, its youth, its future were at terrible risk from the dark shadow that syphilis cast on the land. Ignorance and social reticence about the disease meant death for millions and ruined lives of countless more.

*Spirochete* was a product of its times and a vocal and willing participant in government-sponsored efforts to make life better for the nation's citizens. *Spirochete* emerged from this arena, a product of the Chicago unit of the Federal Theatre Project, marked by Chicago's own unique socio-political atmosphere, a conscious and dedicated volunteer marching to the battle front in the great War on Syphilis.

The study determined that *Spirochete* was similar to other Living Newspapers in its goal to inform audiences about a pressing social problem, to present facts and information about how the problem affected individuals, and then to motivate, through dramatic presentation, a solution resulting in action for social change. It was author Arnold Sundgaard's avowed intent to transmit knowledge about syphilis and through a dramatic presentation of the facts about syphilis to inculcate sensitivities and create new attitudes about the disease. This play, as other Living Newspapers, considered the ultimate goal in this endeavor would culminate in social changes inspired by these new attitudes and ushered in through democratic action.

The production of *Spirochete* had other specific objectives which included the personal and professional needs and desires of those on the Chicago Unit and in the community. The Chicago Project needed a hit. Syphilis was a timely subject. Cast and facilities were immediately available. Local medical and political support, gathered for this city's initial salvo in the War on Syphilis, seemed eager to welcome and assist another recruit in the fight. Midwestern Play Bureau Director and playwright in her own right, Susan Glaspell wanted a regional play with local interest to win recognition for the Chicago Unit.

The study describes *Spirochete's* legacy from other Living Newspapers in form and techniques. It was written in many short scenes, flash-action, often brought to conclusion with a quick Black

Out. It told the story of an individual, who represented all of mankind and presented the search for a solution to a social problem. Like other Living Newspapers, *Spirochete* examined the "story" of the problem but, in this case, the history of syphilis was four hundred years long and dramatic flashbacks were used to tell it.

Although Living Newspapers sought to dramatically present the effect of the social problem on the individual, most did so in representational, non-realistic style with graphs, statistics, and symbolic stagecraft. *Spirochete's* scenes contrast past and present, the sentimental and clinical. *Spirochete*, unlike the others which utilized direct quotes from published speeches, created dialogue for its historical participants. Then through the use of dramatized case histories, acted out the effects of syphilis on marriage, families and employment in dramatic sequences which revealed the human element of the facts and figures. Many found these scenes particularly effective although some reviewers faulted them for their obvious sentimentality.

The study illustrates that *Spirochete* shared in many technical aspects of the Living Newspapers because their directors knew of or had actually directed other Living Newspapers, as had been the case with the production's Philadelphia director who had previously directed *One Third of a Nation*. Simplified staging using different levels and platforms, evocative lighting effects, off-stage voices that served to guide the audience from scene to scene, staging effects that appeared to condense time or signified whole populations were part

of the Living Newspaper and evidences *Spirochete's* technical production. And there was the symbolic "little man" character, *Spirochete's* "Patient," who symbolized the average citizen in his search for answers.

The Living Newspapers were known for their special effects. Although evidence indicates that *Spirochete* incorporated only two major special effects, the shadow dancing across the illuminated map signifying the spread of syphilis across Europe, and the hugely magnified and illuminated "microscope specimen" of the spirochete, they seem to have been not only noteworthy but effective and dramatic as well, definitely underscoring the message of the particular scene.

*Spirochete's* unique laboratory scenes contributed excitement, immediacy and drama to the various scientific and medical discoveries that occur in the play's "living history" of syphilis. Not only medical professionals who viewed the play in its many productions, but theatre reviewers as well found these scenes well-done and authoritative, adding credence to the facts and information which they helped impart. Many community medical professionals came forward to assist the cast with their technical expertise.

The study delineated *Spirochete's* guiding forces and personalities. The Surgeon General's recently declared War on Syphilis shaped *Spirochete*. More directly, the city of Chicago's efforts as the first city to do all-out battle with the disease brought the vigorous ballyhoo and actual bloodletting to the Chicago FTP

unit's front door. The Chicago press featured the syphilis story almost daily. The "generals" in the Chicago campaign became familiar local personalities: Paul de Kruif, Dr. O. T. Wenger, Dr. Herman Bundesen and others. The Chicago Federal Theatre was an amalgam of perhaps uneasy bedfellows dealing not only with the variable external politics and press, but their own struggles within the unit.

Susan Glaspell, noted novelist and playwright, co-founder of the Provincetown Playhouse, was responsible for enrolling 25-year old Arnold Sundgaard in the Chicago Federal Theatre. Sundgaard enlisted in the Chicago Project as a \$94 a-month play reader for Glaspell's Midwestern Play Bureau late in 1936. After a regional drama he had written, *Everywhere I Roam*, had failed to find favor with Project Director, George Kondolf, Sundgaard, with Glaspell's inspiration, encouragement, and support, began the research for *Spirochete* late in 1937. Support from the national office was cautionary and concerned at best until only a few days before *Spirochete* was to debut late in April, 1938. By that time, local medical authorities had offered and exercised their expertise, and there was a groundswell of enthusiastic support, both locally and at the national level for Sundgaard's project.

The study demonstrates that *Spirochete's* most remarkable characteristic, its subject, assures this play a unique place among the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers. Despite the Surgeon General's active campaign, syphilis was not the subject for polite

conversation. Its direct approach to a disease closely associated with the taboos of sex and sin was an earthshaking theme for the theatre in those days. *Spirochete* was brave; courageous in its choice of subject matter, as well as educative and informative in its portrayal of the "dramatized history" of the dread disease. *Spirochete* was a unique combination of facts and the human element; of science, psychology and emotion.

*Spirochete* also has a unique place in the annals of the Federal Theatre Project for other reasons. Its author began with the avowed purpose of writing a living Newspaper, but by his project's completion he was not sure he had. Arnold Sundgaard researched and wrote *Spirochete* on his own, not collectively as the other Living Newspapers had been created. The play evidenced its author's voice, said some reviewers. Perhaps more importantly, *Spirochete's* dramatic case studies portrayed the human element and differentiated it from other Living Newspapers. Another point of difference, its subject matter, made *Spirochete* the star when Hallie Flanagan, testifying before the Congressional Committee, was asked if she could name any of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers where organized labor did not "have the best of the other fellows." Flanagan most assuredly could, and did (Flanagan, 1985, p.344). Nonetheless, *Spirochete* shared common goals and objectives with other Newspapers.

### Production and Promotion Techniques

The study revealed that many of *Spirochete's* production and promotion techniques can be found in other Living Newspapers. Many of the production techniques, lighting and staging effects have their roots in the experimental European stages of Meyerhold, Piscator and Brecht, and Hallie Flanagan's Vassar Experimental Theatre. The dramatic mechanisms of extended playing areas to bring or actually incorporate the audience into the action, separate playing areas differentiated by light and levels, sound and music, dance movement, rhythmic language, all served to assist in and promote the delivery of *Spirochete's* history and call for action. These brought drama, immediacy, and urgency to *Spirochete's* story. There was even a "syphilis green" spotlight in *Spirochete* to underline the misery of the "Patient." The study demonstrates that *Spirochete's* promotion techniques appear to be patterned after successful Living Newspaper productions in the New York Unit. Additionally, they seem to bear a remarkable resemblance to instructions for conducting an anti-syphilis campaign published in 1937 in the *American Journal of Public Health*. The common result is that *Spirochete's* promoters made every effort to involve the community in production and promotion activities even before the play was scheduled to open.

*Spirochete's* promotion strategies were not limited to newspaper advertisements. Funds for such advertising were scarce. Cast members' speeches to community groups; radio programs

carried scenes from the play; dramatically striking placards and posters were placed throughout the community. Thousands of homes received "heralds" and information packets. Community groups received offers of discounted tickets for group sales. Free tickets were distributed. Despite these efforts and despite the fact that *Spirochete* was the second-most performed Living Newspaper, after the initial hoopla of the usual standing-room only first nights, evidence indicates that dramatized history of syphilis played to less than full houses.

#### Other Productions

The study identified and described *Spirochete* productions in four other cities, besides its Chicago point of origin. The study found that, although all were produced within two weeks of each other in 1939 at the climax of the anti-syphilis campaign, the productions varied according to the particular project director's interpretation, and fiscal and human resources available. The temper of the individual cities, and that of their FTP unit, the study indicates, may well have colored the productions and influenced their acceptance as well.

Health professionals, and local reviews lauded *Spirochete* for its educative value, its courage in breaking taboos, its dramatic presentation of the facts about syphilis, and the portrayal in human terms of its effects. Many reviewers, as in Chicago, criticized it for inept writing and language, and faulted its blank verse rhythms, particularly in the first act. Many of these, nonetheless praised its

laboratory scenes and often individual actors, such as the ones who played Metchnikoff, merited applause in all the cities.

In Philadelphia *Spirochete* met opposition and censorship, instigated by the Knights of Columbus who objected to the play's portrayal of that sea captain's responsibility for introducing syphilis into Europe. Where there are reports available from the general public, views range from "revolting," and "too clinical;" to "brave and exciting." Paid attendance was not what had been hoped for.

Approximate figures for even half-filled houses indicate well over 40,000 persons may have seen *Spirochete*.

#### Contributions

The study determined that *Spirochete* made considerable contributions to public health issues and attitudes, including those that follow.

*Spirochete* helped break the silence that surrounded syphilis, that contributed to the death and disease of millions of Americans each year in the 1930s. Such a frank and straight-forward discussion of syphilis had never before been presented on stage. *Spirochete* presented historical facts and dramatized actual case histories.

*Spirochete* not only presented the excitement of scientific discovery, often after a long frustrating search, but included the audience in the quest and the excitement of success.

*Spirochete* presented the human element of the disease. Dramatic vignettes portrayed the effect of syphilis on ordinary people. The audience could relate to these situations and people.

*Spirochete* graphically presented the need for social change and presented the steps by which that change could be accomplished. The persistent, unwavering search by medicine and science provided the method; the people through democratic legislation would provide the power. This dramatized catechism of social change made the audience aware that they as individuals were participants and key to victory in the War on Syphilis.

*Spirochete* imparted facts about syphilis in short lectures, interspersed with dramatically presented vignettes, clearly illustrating the effects of the disease. Information was offered; the means for increasing sensitivities and broadening attitudes was extended. *Spirochete's* colorful and dramatic history delivered the message that syphilis kills and cripples, that syphilis can be cured to many thousands in five cities free, or at very low cost.

### Conclusions

This study demonstrates that *Spirochete*, the Federal Theatre's Living Newspaper with syphilis as its subject, was a unique product of the relationship among the elements of government, health, education, and the arts in the United States in the late 1930s. The study provides conclusions about theatre, and *Spirochete* in particular, as a vibrant and viable educational form. The conclusions which follow describe and establish *Spirochete* as an original forum

for syphilis education in the late 1930s. The study demonstrates the motives and actions of adult education in a specific context and describes *Spirochete* as a vehicle for cultural diffusion. The study established the roles played by institutions and social groups in *Spirochete's* origin and production. The study displays *Spirochete* as a unique vehicle for meeting changing social, economic, and political conditions. The study determines that *Spirochete*, although short-lived, successfully met its own goals. It was an instrument and avenue of information and education; and it may be considered good theatre.

*Spirochete* was education. It was propaganda. Reviewers declared that it planted a definite seed for a definite purpose. *Spirochete* was a powerful commentary on society. It was a leading actor in the Federal Theatre's pioneer theatre, a part of the tremendous rethinking, rebuilding and redreaming of America described by Hallie Flanagan. According to Flanagan, *Spirochete* and other Living Newspapers represented a new frontier in America, a frontier against disease, dirt, poverty, illiteracy unemployment and despair, and at the same time, against selfishness, special privilege and social apathy (Flanagan, 1985). And *Spirochete* was definitely education. It was a deliberate intention of persons, groups, associations and institutions to transmit knowledge and sensitivities, values, attitudes, and interest.

*Spirochete* was easily recognized by some of its contemporary critics as not being great drama. They thought that good theatre

suffered at the hands of its message. Few even judged it as drama but, rather, recognized it as a viable form for the socially significant themes and concepts it carried. There were some, however, such as the Philadelphia director, who considered it by no means a lecture, that it indeed was entertainment. The lesson it taught would fight its way into the minds of the audience; they would learn a wonderful lesson as well as be interested and entertained.

Was it good theatre? Writing in 1949, Eric Bentley, one of this country's foremost writers on the theatre, identifies things theatre must be if it is to live, if it is to be great theatre. These are elements for survival rather than excellence. Such dramatic art must be concerned with the bedrock of human experience, Bentley declares, the art of the elemental. Sheer lumps of life do not constitute drama. Truth requires imaginative talent for its presentation (Bentley, 1953).

John S. Lovell, editor of *Great American Plays* (1961), selects as great plays those that represent a single aspect of American drama or that have made strong impact on the nation's social or political thinking. Such plays, Lovell states, reveal the temper of their times and portray a particular element of American life. As the study demonstrates, *Spirochete* was concerned with the bedrock of human experience: humankind's search over hundreds of years for the solution to the suffering brought by syphilis. *Spirochete* was faulted for inept writing. Bentley would also fault it for presenting lumps of life. *Spirochete* lectured; it disgorged lumps of information. *Spirochete* made an impact on the nation's social, dramatic and

political thinking, although it is difficult to determine the strength of that impact. The study makes clear that the play is a definite reflection of the temper of its times and unquestionably portrays a particular element in American life. *Spirochete* was an active participant in the War on Syphilis.

Nevertheless, the study does not demonstrate and does not infer that *Spirochete* was great drama. But the study furnishes evidence to indicate that it was probably good theatre. The color, the action, the fast-paced scenes, the intensifying suspense that climaxes Act One is the excitement of scientific discovery. There is demonstrable drama and excitement again in Act Two in the scenes that portray the human damages of syphilis, followed by those that depict the passage of the revolutionary social amendment, and capped by a dramatic and rousing charge to the public to carry on the fight. *Spirochete's* theatre, given a good production, must have made for a "good show." The study gives evidence that *Spirochete* was not just a lecture; it was not just a grim procession of dull facts. It was enlivened with spectacle, music and dance, and even light and humorous moments. There were special effects, a parade of period costumes, a pageant of historical figures, moments of pathos, and the suspense and excitement of scientific discoveries. Dramatic Black Outs and quickly shifting scenes provided a panorama of centuries, yet *Spirochete* had the immediacy and vitality of the Movietone News that brought movie-theater patrons many short, exciting glimpses of the news of the day.

The study draws the conclusion that in *Spirochete's* greater arena of the Federal Theatre, it was a success. Perhaps not "boffo at the box office," but in the greater scheme of things. As a representative of the Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers, it furnished employment for many theatre people; it integrated the artists and the public in a forum of relevant ideas. It participated actively in the attempt to transform hearts and minds and lives. It made culture accessible. All this was attempted in an atmosphere complicated by the despair that still lingered from the debts of the Depression years in the specter of relief, the burdens of bureaucracy, and the continuing threats and realities of local and national politics and press. Judged on these goals, *Spirochete* was a success.

The study concludes that, evaluated on its own goals and objectives, *Spirochete* was especially successful. Chicago's Federal Theatre Unit needed a play that would make the local critics happy. The director needed a play with a big cast. Others wanted a play of local interest. The author wanted to write a play that would be produced, a dramatic vehicle that would help break the taboos, so long in place, that prevented even the discussion of the timely and vital, socially significant subject of syphilis. Chicago's health authorities, enmeshed in their own dramatic campaign, were only to glad to add this new and unique weapon to their arsenal in their War on Syphilis.

The study establishes that *Spirochete* was not only a recital of facts, it was an advocate for the people. *Spirochete* assisted in the

growth of more open attitude, made way for more open discussion about the disease that threatened one out of every ten Americans. It illustrated the steps for action that would result in a better life for more people.

Evidence from the study indicates that the persons who most desperately needed to hear *Spirochete's* message were not in the theatres to hear it. As previously recognized, not everyone in Chicago read the *Tribune*; not everyone read any newspaper at all. The facts made plain by Chicago's massive testing program were that in positive blood samples there was a huge disparity between the city's black and white populations and that the vast majority of the syphilitic population was between the ages of 16 and 25. It is evident that the medical and health professionals, the women's groups, the education groups, representatives of the city's most influential groups who packed *Spirochete's* opening nights and gave their support to its efforts were probably the ones in least need of *Spirochete's* message. Chicago statistics do, however, indicate that inroads against the disease had been made in all comparable groups by 1939-40. The message was getting through.

The study demonstrates and gives evidence for the understanding that, as Hallie Flanagan declared, to know is not enough. Drama is doing. Flanagan felt that the modern drama was about the swift, simple experience of the communication of ideas. Drama should be about the ability to act so as to produce some change. Drama should provide a translating of energy into power.

This dynamic effect of a play releases energy; something is there that was not there before. A current is generated. This energy, this current could arouse, amuse, teach, stir to action. "That is why," Hallie Flanagan observed, "it is feared by people who do not want change but only to preserve the status quo" (Flanagan, 1943, p. 156).

The study gives voice to Flanagan's concepts. The study demonstrates that *Spirochete* was dynamic; it aroused; it amused; it taught.

The study concludes that *Spirochete* was education; it was a deliberate intention to transmit relevant, meaningful information; it modeled sensitivities and attitudes with the understanding, characteristic of the Living Newspapers, that through dramatic presentation, attitudes could be changed.

Further, *Spirochete* was propaganda for social change that would improve the lives of millions across the nation. *Spirochete* was not great drama according to the criteria set forth by some theatre authorities, but it presented the bedrock of human experience and made it timely and relevant for its audiences. Still, *Spirochete* may well have been good theatre with its myriad, colorful, and innovative production elements. But there is no doubt that this living history's dramatic mechanisms conveyed its message, powerful, challenging and hitherto unheard in the theatre, or in much of contemporary 1930s society at all.

The study concludes that *Spirochete's* dramatic and many-dimensional message, heavy artillery for the War on Syphilis, was

deceptively simple. Syphilis kills and cripples; syphilis can be cured; but silence is death. *Spirochete* presented the elemental: humanity's search for a solution to a problem of vital social significance; it presented the eternal conflict between knowledge and ignorance. *Spirochete* was knowledge of the past translated and transmuted into energy, power for action today and a strong and healthy nation for the future. In essence, *Spirochete*, this unique product of the Federal Theatre, was an exceptional and viable instrument for community health education during the years 1938-1939. It was a living demonstration that, indeed, past is prologue.

The study provides the following major implications for adult education. Theatre, thoughtfully and imaginatively conceived and produced, is a vital, and valid multi-media method for the deliberate transmission of knowledge, sensitivities, skills, values, attitudes and interests. Education need not be limited to conventional materials, methods, and places. We learn through all our senses. Theatre has the potential to remove or surmount many barriers to learning. Theatre offers another way in another place. Theatre can provide energy and infuse power; power for change. Most importantly, the study demonstrates that *Spirochete* and other Living Newspapers filled an urgent need of their audiences for knowledge of contemporary, socially relevant issues. The Federal Theatre Project in its very brief span of only four years was an exciting, vivid, effective and influential avenue for adult education.

Beyond *Spirochete*: An Agenda for Research

The study of *Spirochete*, as an archaeological endeavor, exposed several valuable and related areas for research in the dissemination of public health education. There is a continuing need in adult education research today to contribute to our understanding of the history of adult education, its important figures, and the myriad and various avenues of the dissemination of knowledge, skills, attitudes, sensitivities, and interests. The field for study is rich; by cultivating it our knowledge and understanding of our beginnings, implications of where the future lies, and intimations of how best it may be reached will be strengthened and enriched. The following topics provide an agenda for such research.

The Federal Theatre Project itself provides a rich area for further research in the areas of health and education. Other *Spirochete* productions, such as those in Cincinnati, Portland and Seattle, might well provide further insights into the War on Syphilis in these communities if examined more extensively. There is still much to learn about the elusive "planned" productions in other cities, as well.

In addition to *Spirochete*, evidence indicates other health-oriented productions, for example *M.D.*, in Tacoma, and many planned productions, even a Living Newspaper, *Medicine Show*.

There is much material and readily available access to the Federal Theatre Radio Division archives of the Federal Theatre Project. A further study of the de Kruif series and other health and

science oriented radio shows produced by the Radio Division could provide further information about the dissemination of health information in the late 1930s.

Evidence indicates that the Living Newspaper format was used effectively in Britain during World War II to provide current information to troops. An investigation of this avenue of education would provide yet another aspect of adult education.

Those interested in the dissemination of health information to the public during the 1930s might do well to study the American Hygiene Association. Another venue for the dissemination of information about syphilis that could well provide a worthwhile topic for related research is that of the "Bad Blood Wagons." These were trailers, mobile centers for blood testing and information distribution that traveled the back roads of Southern Georgia during the late 1930s to reach populations that statistics indicated were among the highest risks for syphilis infection and transmission.

Perhaps the foremost subject for further research that has come out of the study of *Spirochete* is that of the valiant Surgeon General, Thomas J. Parran. He is a towering figure in the War On Syphilis and any study of adult education could well consider Parran, his motives and methods, topics of import and interest. As an extension of this suggestion, research providing a comparison of the figures of Parran and the present-day Surgeon General, C. Everett Koop, instrumental in today's fight against Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, would surely provide a wealth of worthwhile

and socially important material. Further, of course, is the clear need for a researched comparison between the War on Syphilis of the 1930s and today's battle against AIDS. A study of government involvement, public education policies, and public attitudes in each instance would be eminently instructive and socially valuable.

Theatre, as an avenue of public health education in the later part of the 1980s, might well be a fruitful area for the researcher concerned with the AIDS epidemic. Several plays have been written and produced on the topic in recent years. A comparison of these, their goals, their production and promotion methods, and their contributions to contemporary education and attitudes could contribute a valuable contemporary look at cultural diffusion and the relationship of theatre with government, health, education and arts issues in the 1980s, and beyond.

\* \* \*

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## APPENDIX

### List of Abbreviations

cs	costume sketch
dn	director's notes
FO	Financial Officer
FTP	Federal Theatre Project
LCFTP	Library of Congress Federal Theatre Project Collection
LN	Living Newspaper
NSB	National Service Bureau
ONTNS	<i>One Third of A Nation</i> , Seattle, February, 23 1938
PB	Production Bulletin
PBS	Production Bulletin, <i>Spirochete</i>
PBSC	Production Bulletin, <i>Spirochete</i> , Chicago, IL, Blackstone Theatre, April 29, 1938
PBSPh	Production Bulletin, <i>Spirochete</i> , Philadelphia, PA, Walnut Street Theatre, February 20, 1939
PBSS	Production Bulletin, <i>Spirochete</i> , Seattle, WA. Metropolitan Theatre, February 23, 1939
PBSP	Production Bulletin, <i>Spirochete</i> , Portland, OR. WPA Theatre, February 26, 1939
SC	<i>Spirochete</i> , Chicago, 1939
Sp	<i>Spirochete</i>

## APPENDIX (continued)

- ub unbound, as in unbound production bulletin from the National Archives Records of the Works Projects Administration, Federal Theatre Project
- VC Vassar Collection of playbills, promotional materials, and reviews located in the National Archives WPA FTP records

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