

## Centre Stage: Radical Theatre in America, 1925-1934

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### Article abstract

Du milieu des années vingt jusqu'au milieu des années trente, des auteurs dramatiques politiquement de gauche s'efforcèrent d'allier les techniques de mise en scène et de jeu avec un contenu politique de plus en plus explicite et touchant à la condition ouvrière. Dans les pièces montées par la Workers' Drama League (1925) et le New Playwrights Theatre (1927-1929), des auteurs radicaux, souvent associés au périodique *New Masses*, montèrent des spectacles en utilisant des effets constructivistes, à la Meyerhold, de récitations collectives et de mises en scène abstraites. C'est à la fin des années 1920 que le problème essentiel des artistes et auteurs radicaux apparut—le dilemme entre l'innovation formelle, l'habileté technique et le contenu idéologique. A la fin de la décennie, des troupes de théâtre ouvrières se rendirent dans les usines et les villes minières pour présenter des sketches et des récitations « agitprop » et des « journaux vivants. » Vers 1932, le mouvement théâtral ouvrier était solidement établi et soutenu par des articles réguliers dans *New Masses* et *Workers Theatre*, une publication importante du Workers Laboratory Theatre, et aussi par les deux réunions nationales de 1932 et 1934. Pendant la seconde assemblée, on put voir poindre un courant favorable au Front populaire qui se manifesta à travers des spectacles plus traditionnels fixes ainsi que par des « formats agitationnels » itinérants. La Theatre Union, fondée en 1933, était la manifestation la plus évidente de la fusion du théâtre « agit » ouvrier et le théâtre bourgeois. Le Federal Theatre Project poursuivit dans cette direction en mettant en scène des « journaux vivants » sur des sujets approuvés par le gouvernement.

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# Centre Stage: Radical Theatre in America, 1925–1934

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## Résumé\*

Du milieu des années vingt jusqu'au milieu des années trente, des auteurs dramatiques politiquement de gauche s'efforcèrent d'allier les techniques de mise en scène et de jeu avec un contenu politique de plus en plus explicite et touchant à la condition ouvrière. Dans les pièces montées par la Workers' Drama League (1925) et le New Playwrights Theatre (1927-1929), des auteurs radicaux, souvent associés au périodique *New Masses*, montèrent des spectacles en utilisant des effets constructivistes, à la Meyerhold, de récitations collectives et de mises en scène abstraites. C'est à la fin des années 1920 que le problème essentiel des artistes et auteurs radicaux apparut—le dilemme entre l'innovation formelle, l'habileté technique et le contenu idéologique. A la fin de la décennie, des troupes de théâtre ouvrières se rendirent dans les usines et les villes minières

pour présenter des sketches et des récitations "agitprop" et des "journaux vivants." Vers 1932, le mouvement théâtral ouvrier était solidement établi et soutenu par des articles réguliers dans *New Masses* et *Workers Theatre*, une publication importante du Workers Laboratory Theatre, et aussi par les deux réunions nationales de 1932 et 1934. Pendant la seconde assemblée, on put voir poindre un courant favorable au Front populaire qui se manifesta à travers des spectacles plus traditionnels fixes ainsi que par des "formats agitationnels" itinérants. La Theatre Union, fondée en 1933, était la manifestation la plus évidente de la fusion du théâtre "agit" ouvrier et le théâtre bourgeois. Le Federal Theatre Project poursuivit dans cette direction en mettant en scène des "journaux vivants" sur des sujets approuvés par le gouvernement.

The movement for the use of art as a weapon of social criticism and change that appeared in America during the early 1930s arose through a process of gradual politicization of left-wing intellectuals, writers, artists and playwrights based in New York City from the mid-1920s to the mid-1930s. With progressively more sectarian slogans of "proletarian art," "workers' art," and "revolutionary art," radicals debated the often contradictory goals of technical competence, formal innovation and political message, while artists struggled to combine these objectives in their paintings, drawings, graphic work and cartoons with admittedly mixed success.<sup>1</sup> Limited to the illustrations in publications such as the *Liberator* and the *New Masses* or to exhibitions mounted by the John Reed Club, radical artists had relatively limited opportunities to take their work directly to workers whom they hoped to address. In contrast, left-wing playwrights and acting companies of workers, who similarly sought to blend innovative staging, acting and oral presentation with political message, developed productions and performances that were increasingly mobile. By the early 1930s, workers' drama groups regularly travelled to factories, mining towns and workers' clubs, functioning as storm troops of propaganda. Perhaps more than visual artists, these groups closely approximated the radicals' goal of merging innovative form with political message.

Radical theatre in America has its roots in the concept of proletarian art. Initially, proletarian art was thought to be the product of left-wing, bourgeois artists who, through close identification with workers and their lives, used their technical skill and formal training to create works that addressed

workers' concerns and criticized the ills of capitalism. The earliest suggestion of the concept of proletarian art appeared in selected statements in the *Liberator* (1918-24). For example, Max Eastman described Stuart Davis as having "the character of an alley cat" and his art as going "its sordid way with the suave dirty muscular self-adequate gracefulness of power."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Lydia Gibson wrote of Adolph Dehn's close identification with the subject matter of a lowly mother and child he depicted in a drawing: "He is not outside his life; he is one with these hills and one with this mutilated and defiant humanity which wells up so unquenchably in cellar cabarets."<sup>3</sup> In addition to the artist's personal identification with his subject matter and the raw, brute power of his image, the response of workers was "assuredly more sincere and probably more intelligent than that of the Metropolitan [*sic*] newspaper critics."<sup>4</sup> Embedded in these scattered statements of the early 1920s are the basic tenets of the concept of proletarian art that emerged by 1928: the self-deprecating demeanour of the unschooled critic; the unsophisticated worker viewed as a genuine appreciator of art; and the elevation of direct, forthright character as the fundamental artistic criterion. While the above writers implied the idea of proletarian art, Michael Gold addressed the subject directly in his important essay "Towards Proletarian Art," in which he asserted that a distinctly American art would arise spontaneously from the working-class masses.<sup>5</sup>

One of the first theatre groups to stage productions using worker-actors and addressing workers was the Workers' Drama League. Founded in 1925, the League was organized by "professional people closely connected with the radical left."<sup>6</sup> Dr. Alexander Arkatov, who was formerly as-

sociated with the Proletarian Theatre in Russia; Hugo Gellert and Louis Lozowick, both artists associated with the *New Masses*; Michael Gold, a radical playwright and an editor of the *New Masses*; and Harbor Allen, theatre critic of *The Daily Worker*, a Communist newspaper. Its goal was to produce plays that were “new and modern in technique” and dealt “particularly with the worker and his problems.”<sup>7</sup> Its first production, and most likely the first workers’ theatre production staged in America, was *The Paris Commune*, which was held at Madison Square Garden on 15 March 1925. The event was described as a pageant involving “hundreds of comrades” and reportedly was attended by 15,000 spectators.<sup>8</sup> Both the worker-actors and the scale of this production were related to mass spectacles staged in Russia in the early days of the Revolution. Other productions of the Workers’ Drama League included: *Money! Money! Money!* and *Strike*, both by Gold, and *The Biggest Boob in the World*, by Karl Wittfogel.

Short-lived, the Workers’ Drama League was reformed as the New Playwrights Theatre in 1927. Consisting of radical playwrights affiliated with the *New Masses*, the New Playwrights Theatre continued the League’s emphasis on formal innovation and proletarian content. Its productions often employed Constructivist sets, such as Mordecai Gorelik’s set for John Howard Lawson’s *Loud Speaker*, which was performed in March 1927.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the New Playwrights Theatre introduced mass recitation, a format that Gold had seen used by Vsevolod Meyerhold’s theatre during a trip to Moscow in 1925.<sup>10</sup>

Occasionally, Gold and other Communist-affiliated writers adopted the slogan “revolutionary art,” a term they associated with Russian Constructivist theatre, as best exemplified by Meyerhold. As early as 1925, a writer for *The Daily Worker* wrote that “Meyerhold has spoken the last word for revolutionary drama in Moscow,” because he “crushes . . . all the bourgeois ideals of the world” and “raises the Communist ideals of struggle, of sacrifices and of comradeship.”<sup>11</sup> S.V. Amter, also writing in *The Daily Worker*, found Meyerhold’s union of revolutionary ideas with innovative techniques an appropriate form for revolutionary drama and called upon “revolutionary artists of this country and their sympathizers, together with members of the Workers (Communist) Party, to stage revolutionary drama: to find new forms for its expression.”<sup>12</sup> Such a union of experimental form and political content was precisely what the playwrights of the New Playwrights Theatre desired. John Dos Passos remarked that “the first step toward realizing a revolutionary theatre seems to me to be to work with new trends.”<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Gold wrote:

All these plays are mass-plays. All of them convey the spirit of workers’ revolt. All of them break with the stodgy tradition of the propaganda play which has bored so many persons, including revolutionists. These plays, strangely enough, will be found fiercely entertaining by their audiences. They are packed with humor, jazz, choral recitation, dancing, grotesquerie, and the new free technique of the stage which has been so greatly proven by Meyerhold and other futurists.<sup>14</sup>

This union of formal innovation and political propaganda was rooted in the Russian Constructivists’ embrace of industrialization as not only providing the utilitarian products and materials of a new society but also embodying the rational principles required by a new social order. Em Jo Basshe, one of the New Playwrights Theatre playwrights, elaborated on the relationship between the machine and workers and speculated on the advent of machine-inspired art that reflected this union:

There is a union of dictatorship today: the Mass and the Machine. They go hand in hand. The rhythm is one. If you believe in fidelity, you must portray both as one. The proletarian theatre will be the first to make use of this “character.” It will create new types, new dances, new songs—the machine motif running through it all . . . It will insist that the playwright forget the important middle class, the perfumed social register, and devote his talents to the portrayal of the brothers and sisters of the machine, of the toilers of the soil—the children of the future.<sup>15</sup>

In attempting to merge innovative Constructivist techniques with politically revolutionary content, the productions of the New Playwrights Theatre became the occasion of an ensuing debate concerning artistic form versus political content. The playwrights themselves wrestled with this issue. Supporting the experimental focus of the group, Lawson wrote: “Symbolism has no place in a real theatre. Away with theories! Away with aesthetics and formulas!”<sup>16</sup> Equating good art with good propaganda, Dos Passos, Francis Faragoh, Gold and Lawson wrote a letter in which they stated that “the whole discussion about art and propaganda is a lot of rubbish. Great art is good propaganda for any cause that bases itself on the vital needs of mankind and great propaganda is good art.”<sup>17</sup> In a revealing statement, Dos Passos articulated the difficult, if not impossible, goal of uniting formal innovation, which referred to bourgeois artistic context, with issues relevant to workers:

By revolutionary [theatre] I mean that such a theatre must break with the present day theatrical traditions,

not with the general traditions of the theatre, and that it must draw its life and ideas from the conscious sections of the industrial and white collar working classes which are out to get control of the great flabby mass of capitalist society and mould it to their own purpose.<sup>18</sup>

In an attempt to dispel workers' hesitant and respectful attitude toward the New Playwrights Theatre, Farago addressed proletarian readers of *The Daily Worker*:

Hell—the place is yours. You are expected to do the work. Let's hear you sing! The theatre is not a temple, not a lecture-room, not the rich man's parlor. The man who "wrote" the "play" is not a divine genius, unerring and sacred and divinely inspired. The actors are just dummies. Why are you so timid, then? Why so awed in the presence of your brothers, who should remain your brothers even on the other side of the footlights?

Come to the playhouse and bring your own theatre with you! Act your own play! Speak your own words! Join in the singing—that's the only way you'll ever have theatre!<sup>19</sup>

The critic Kenneth Fearing struck at the crux of the issue when he observed that "revolutionary propaganda, to be effective, must be one-sided and dishonest and sentimental . . . and any play that is sentimental, no matter how effective it may be, is perishable and intrinsically not good."<sup>20</sup> Posing the dilemma facing radical playwrights, he wrote:

The New Playwrights cannot go on pretending that revolution and modernist technique and good plays are, by some curious magic, a Holy Trinity of which the members are One and the Same. It is probable that the most effective play, from the standpoint of winning new converts, would be an old-fashioned heart-breaker couched in stale language and stale form. And on the other hand, it seems likely that a play of which the directors of the theatre themselves approve immensely would be absolutely valueless from a revolutionary [political] view.<sup>21</sup>

With such criticism highlighting the underlying problem for revolutionary theatre, the New Playwrights Theatre closed in early 1929, effectively ending the bourgeois-supported proletarian theatre in America.

During 1928, the concept of "workers' art" became dominant. Gold was the single most influential force behind this drive to make art that not only addressed workers (as proletarian art had) but was, in fact, the product of workers themselves. As the newly appointed editor-in-chief of the *New Masses*, Gold initiated a series of biographical

sketches stressing the working-class roots or jobs held by contributing writers and artists. These biographical sketches markedly contrasted with earlier entries that had listed contributors' professional activities and reputations. Now, for instance, Lozowick was described as "worker, globe trotter, student and incidentally artist";<sup>22</sup> Anton Refregier as a textile worker, dishwasher, bakery worker, house painter and "Jack of all Trades";<sup>23</sup> and Gellert as a ditch digger, mule skinner, cotton picker and teacher.<sup>24</sup> Gold urged writers to report on working-class life and industry from firsthand experience—to become industrial correspondents<sup>25</sup>—and proclaimed that "proletarian realism" was "never pointless," that "it portrays the life of workers . . . with a clear revolutionary point."<sup>26</sup>

Complementing his call for workers' art, Gold described "revolutionary art" in sectarian terms after 1928, explicitly aligning the *New Masses* with the Communist Party. It is significant that earlier discussions of revolutionary art were distinctly nonpartisan. As early as 1922, Boardman Robinson had queried:

"Should an artist be a propagandist?" I don't think there is any "should" about it. Everyone is a partisan and to some extent a propagandist of what he likes. If he likes what he thinks to be truth then he is very apt to be a propagandist of it. . . . Art certainly can't exist until somebody gets interested in something. It doesn't make much difference what. As to the propagandist business—the artist is not merely the adorer. He is also the critic. The very conditions of his craft make him criticize whatever he looks upon. That is: he selects, re-arranges. So, when his social sense is stronger than his purely visual faculty, he not improbably becomes a cartoonist, if he can get a job.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Virgil Geddes had called for "a poetry that is born out of the despair of our smoky and grimy existence, yet the ardour of which helps us to rise and escape momentarily from our predicament," verse with "purpose . . . sufficiently inspired as to be encouragement to surmount our present conditions by the vision of a new order." He believed that out of the "tragedy of existence" in America would come "a literature with a social meaning, and with a definite force as a factor in disruption."<sup>28</sup> Geddes' statement implied the agitational, propagandist role of revolutionary art that Gold adopted in 1928 and that became firmly entrenched among radicals after the *New Masses* and the John Reed Club became the American affiliates of the International Union of Revolutionary Writers and the International Bureau of Revolutionary Artists at the Kharkov Conference of November 1930.

The workers' theatre that developed during the early 1930s descended from not only the tradition of the Workers' Drama League and the New Playwrights Theatre but also from grassroots workers' theatrical productions of pantomimes and "living newspapers" that appeared during the late 1920s. The format and name "living newspaper" derived from the animation, dramatization and recitation of the news using techniques of monologue, dialogue, mass declamation, skits and "musicalization" used by Russian "blue blouse" groups, agitprop troupes of workers dressed in blue overalls who performed to audiences of factory workers.<sup>29</sup> Such "living newspapers" of worker-correspondents performing literature, art, news and "a good deal of wholesome fun"<sup>30</sup> were held in San Francisco and Chicago during 1926.<sup>31</sup> Sponsored by the Communist Party and its organ, *The Daily Worker*, these early productions were part of large outdoor celebrations, often picnics. They were parties, not political events, as indicated by the headline announcing one held in San Francisco: "Living Newspapers, Banquets, Music and Rescue Parties Will Feature California Celebrations."<sup>32</sup> While initially isolated events organized for specific occasions, "living newspapers" became a part of the repertoire of workers' theatre groups.

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, hundreds of workers' clubs, often foreign-language groups, were formed.<sup>33</sup> Ranging in size from less than ten to more than one hundred members, these clubs frequently parented dramatic groups. One of the first such groups was the Bronx Hungarian Workers Club, which was founded in about 1926 with three members and in 1929 reported a membership of one hundred and twenty.<sup>34</sup> That same year the New York Dramatic Council reported that it represented twelve foreign-language groups—Hungarian, Finnish, Yugoslavian, Czechoslovakian, Scandinavian and others.<sup>35</sup> One of the best organized workers' theatre groups was Artef, the Jewish Workers Theatre, which held its first performance in December 1928. It consisted of three divisions: the Artef Players, a group of forty-five actors; the Artef Studio, where the actors trained; and the Artef Club, consisting of thirty-five non-actors who provided technical support.<sup>36</sup> The two most productive and best known of the workers' theatre groups in New York were Proletbuehne, the German-language group directed by John E. Bonn, and the Workers Laboratory Theatre, both founded in 1928. By the end of May 1931, the Workers Laboratory Theatre had staged fifty-four performances attended by 50,000 workers, and twenty-four of these occurred in a two-month period. By 1934, the Workers Laboratory Theatre had two play-producing groups, each rehearsing different plays; and its approximately one hundred members were divided among depart-

ments of acting, playwriting, stagecraft, dramatic dance and dramatic chorus.<sup>37</sup> By 1931, similar groups appeared in Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.<sup>38</sup>

At first, productions of these groups were traditional three-act plays, often using scripts of radical playwrights, such as Michael Gold, Upton Sinclair, Harbor Allan and Paul Sifton, playwrights who had founded or been associated with the Workers' Drama League and the New Playwrights Theatre.<sup>39</sup> However, it was soon recognized that to be effective in addressing workers it was necessary to take theatre directly to workers at factory sites and meeting halls. Consequently, workers' drama groups began to form small mobile units that could easily travel about the countryside. For instance, in 1930 the Bronx Hungarian Workers Club and the Elore Dramatic Club co-produced Upton Sinclair's *Singing Jailbirds* which it performed in New York City, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and Passaic and Newark, New Jersey. A cast of thirty used minimal props, and the set—three reflectors, one spotlight, wooden bars and a platform—could be assembled in fifteen minutes.<sup>40</sup> Extremely small, often only about ten members, these agitprop acting troupes functioned as "blue blouse" groups, performing agitational skits, one-act plays, recitations, "living newspapers," and pantomimes. One such group, the Theatrical Shock Brigade, which consisted of ten members, reported that a typical repertoire in 1931 consisted of recitation, chorus, "living newspaper," satire, one-act play and a part of a dramatized version of John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*.<sup>41</sup> While the Workers Laboratory Theatre had toured since its founding, it formally established the "Shock Troupe" in 1934. A group of nine members ages 18 to 23 who lived collectively and were supported by a subsidy from the Workers Laboratory Theatre and from contributions,<sup>42</sup> the "Shock Troupe" became "the dynamic wedge" of the Workers Laboratory Theatre "forcing the revolutionary issue."<sup>43</sup>

While employing numerous formats in their productions— one-act plays, recitations, pantomimes and "living newspapers"—all followed common guidelines. Scripts were developed, from conception to final form, collectively (though usually written by a single person); and plays were directed by the group. Further, characters symbolized class-conscious perspectives; improvisation and exaggerated gesture were principle acting techniques (Fig. 1); emblems, banners and posters were essential elements in staging and costuming (Fig. 2); and a black cloth served as the portable backdrop<sup>44</sup>—standard devices used by "blue blouse" groups in Soviet Russia and Germany. In 1932, the Workers Laboratory Theatre introduced a novel format, the political side-show, whereby the techniques and characters of the side-show were adapted to political satire: an announcer

Figure 1. Workers Laboratory Theatre. Scene from *Free Thaelmann!* Reproduced from *New Theatre*, 1 (October 1934), cover (Courtesy of the author).

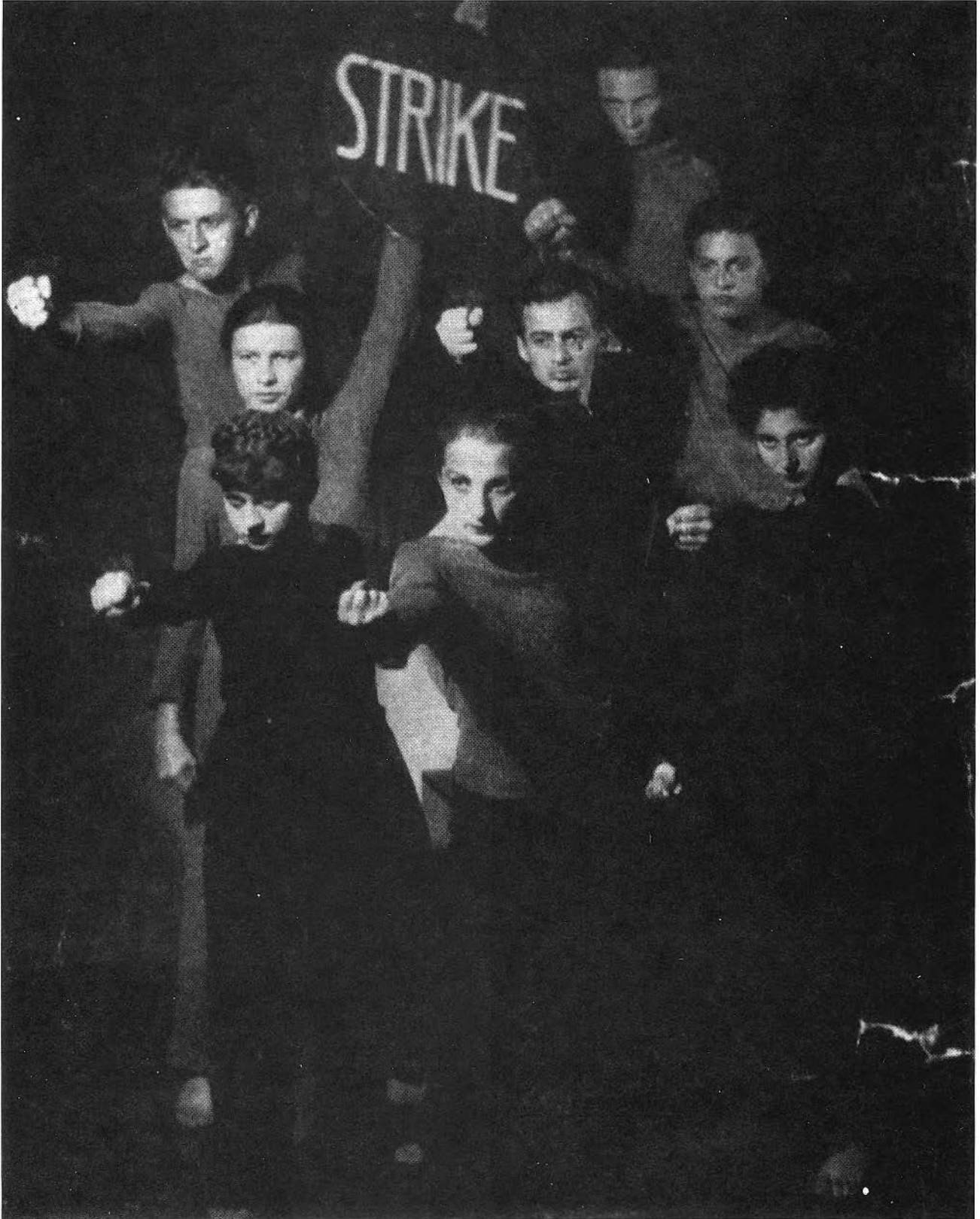
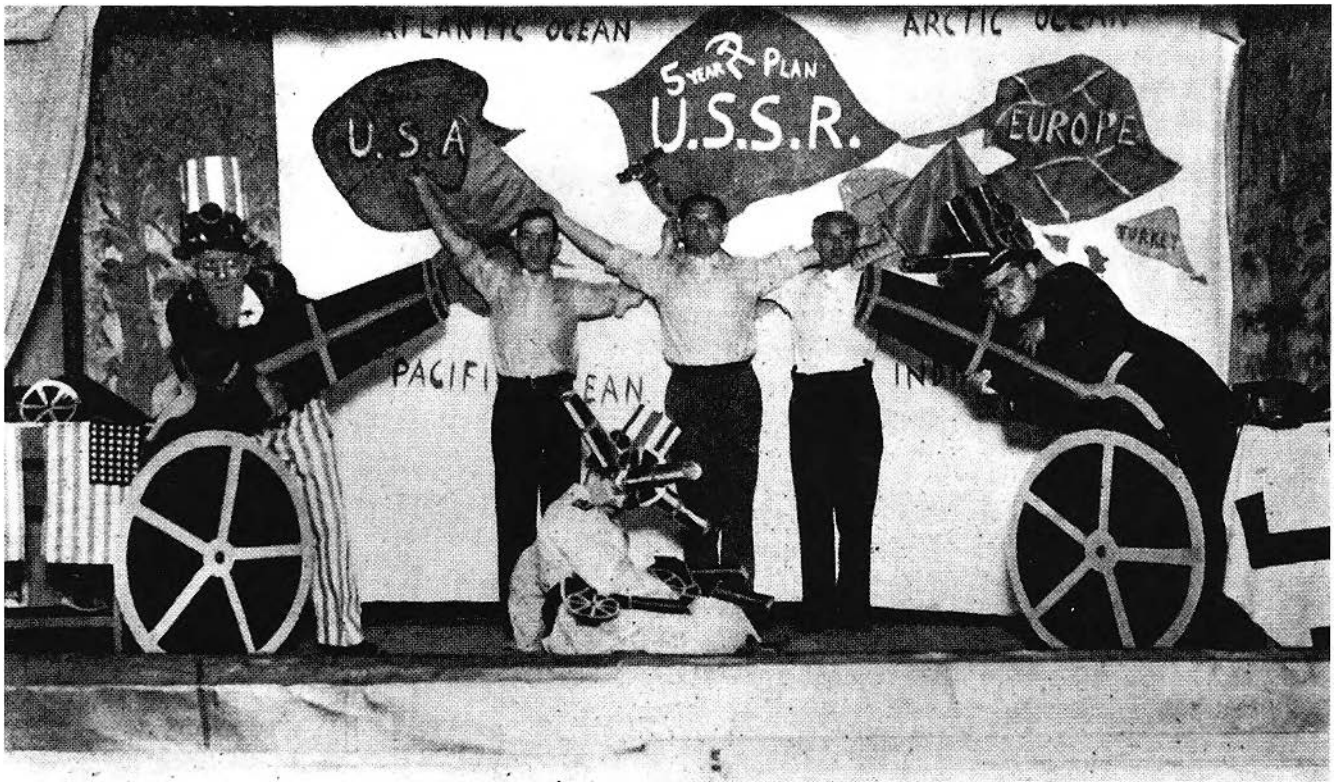




Figure 2. Coney Island Drama Group. Scene from *Hands Off*. Reproduced from *Workers Theatre*, 11 (June–July 1932), 9 (Courtesy of Tamiment Institute Library, New York University).



enticed passers-by to enter, and placards at the entrance advertised typical side-show freaks—the fattest man on earth, Siamese twins and the bearded lady—who symbolized political positions (Fig. 3).<sup>45</sup>

The proliferation of workers' theatres was greatly assisted by the *New Masses* and the *Workers Theatre*. The "Workers' Art" column, which appeared regularly in the *New Masses* beginning in October 1929, published letters from workers' groups nation-wide and functioned as a national bulletin board for groups reporting their activities and seeking advice. While this monthly column primarily published news items and correspondence, the *Workers Theatre*, a monthly publication begun by the Workers Laboratory Theatre in 1931 as a typed newsletter, featured articles on training, staging and directing,<sup>46</sup> as well as scripts of one-act plays and revues, and other forms of agitprop productions. The magazine was a great impetus to the formation of small workers' theatres throughout the country, such as the group of miners in East Ohio who reported that they rehearsed *Charity*, a play published in *Workers Theatre*, for four or five days before performing it in various mining towns.<sup>47</sup>

From 1928 to 1932 the workers' theatre movement gained tremendous momentum. By December 1930, there was sufficient interest in proletarian culture that the Work-

ers Dramatic Council of New York announced a proletcult conference.<sup>48</sup> In 1932, delegates from fifty-three dramatic groups from coast to coast attended the First National Workers Theatre Conference and Festival, which was held in New York on 16–17 April. At this conference, the League of Workers Theatres of the U.S.A., a national federation affiliated with the Moscow-based International Workers Dramatic Union, was formed. The League's aims included: (1) "to make the workers theatre movement an efficient cultural weapon for the toiling masses in the class struggle"; (2) "to spread the idea of the workers theatre . . . by exposing the class character of the bourgeois theatre"; and (3) "to establish contacts with all sympathetic elements in the bourgeois theatre and to make it possible for them to participate in the workers theatre movement."<sup>49</sup> Significantly, the League encouraged not only agitprop "blue blouse" groups but also the more conventional stationary workers' theatre.<sup>50</sup> A Spartakiade, a Socialist dramatic competition, accompanied the conference: twelve theatrical groups presented revues and mass recitations not exceeding fifteen minutes,<sup>51</sup> indicating the prevalence of agitprop productions within the workers' theatre movement during the early 1930s.

Despite the proliferation of workers' theatres, especially small agitprop groups, the conflicting demands of dramatic

Figure 3. Workers Laboratory Theatre. A political side-show. Reproduced from *Workers Theatre*, II (August 1932), cover (Courtesy of Tamiment Institute Library, New York University).



technique and artistry, on the one hand, and propaganda, on the other, continued to be debated. At a symposium on workers' theatre in 1931, it was reported that a discussion raised the issue of "art, aesthetics, expressionism and other high-falutin isms" versus the utilitarian goal of workers' theatre, with the writer observing that "all the so-called arts of the theatre should be determined by this theatre [sic] utilitarianism."<sup>52</sup> The issue also appeared at the Spartakiade of 1932, where one workers' theatre group was criticized for having "sinned to some extent on the side of intellectual and poetic diction."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, a review of *We Demand* by the John Reed Club of Philadelphia, which won third prize in the competition, reveals the technical and artistic weaknesses that often typified agitprop productions:

The play as a whole outweighed the performance. Both in acting and direction the performers were uneven. Exaggerated, grotesque make-up was used by the player impersonating the government, while other players either had no make-up or were made up in conventional fashion. Frequent exits and entrances made in an uninteresting, non-theatrical manner, clogged up the performance. There was some good acting that made the most of the clever lines, and there was some mediocre attempts of "character portrayal" in the routine sense of the word.

The workers in the main were the most effective in their mass-scene. Despite the clumsy lines formulating the workers demands, there was fire and revolutionary fervor in the closing scene, and the message of the play was communicated to the audience in a forceful manner. It was this "strong finish" that more than made up for the weaknesses and shortcomings of the production.<sup>54</sup>

In the wake of the success of the first national conference, the number of workers' theatres grew at a rapid rate, largely due to the encouragement and guidance provided by the *Workers Theatre*. By the end of 1933, workers' theatres were located in farm communities as well as in cities and industrial centres, as reported in *The International Theatre*, a publication of the International Union of Revolutionary Theatres (Moscow), which stated that there were "three hundred revolutionary dramatic groups existing in America" of which seventy were farmers' groups.<sup>55</sup>

In April 1934, the League of Workers Theatres held its second national festival and conference in Chicago. Again, the dramatic competition focused attention on the issue of poor technique and artistry. One critic noted "serious faults" in the performances, which he found demonstrated "too much stylization, too much abstract speech, too little variation in themes, and a too quick development of charac-



Figure 4. Impressions of *Newsboy*, staged by Workers Laboratory Theatre. Reproduced from *New Theatre*, 1 (March 1934), 9 (Courtesy of the author).



ter.”<sup>56</sup> *Newsboy*, the winning play performed by the Workers Laboratory Theatre, was described as employing visual counterpoint or montage,<sup>57</sup> as suggested by a drawing of the performance (Fig. 4).

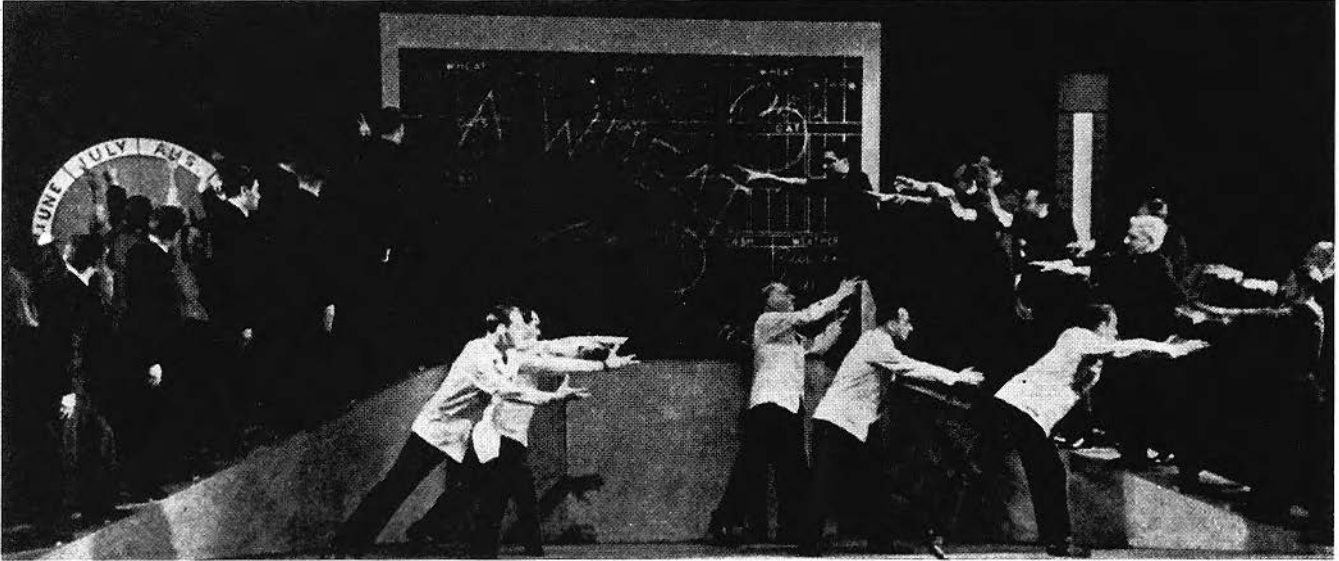
The second conference of workers’ theatres highlighted changes within the radical theatre movement. Most notable was the interest in bourgeois issues of creativity and organization. In addition, a distinct shift away from the partisan issues and inflammatory rhetoric of the previous years emerged in 1934,<sup>58</sup> as indicated by the change of the names of previous proletarian groups: the *Workers Theatre*, the League’s publication, became *New Theatre* in 1934, and the Workers Laboratory Theatre adopted the name “Theatre of Action” in the spring of 1935. Significantly, the League of Workers Theatres not only changed its name to “New Theatre League” in January 1935 but also announced its commitment to the political platform of the Popular Front and to artistic achievement: “For a mass development of the American theatre to its highest artistic and social level; for a theatre dedicated to the struggle against war, fascism, and censorship.”<sup>59</sup>

Notwithstanding this depoliticization of rhetoric, discussions of revolutionary art and workers’ theatre appeared regularly in the much-expanded *New Theatre*.<sup>60</sup> In a noteworthy shift of emphasis in the ongoing conflict between

experimental form and effective propaganda, critics now increasingly faulted poor acting and staging and called for revolutionary “culture,” a term not used during the partisan years of agitprop workers’ theatre. For example, Conrad Seiler wrote:

The most pertinent criticism to be levelled at the workers’ theatre of this country is that it is pitifully deficient in *craftsmanship*. After all, acting or play production is as much a craft as piano playing or brick laying. Barring a few excellent New York organizations . . . there is a pronounced tendency among workers’ cultural groups to present plays in a slipshod manner, with little or no consideration for anything but correct ideological content. Workers with no training and no natural aptitude for theatrical work are urged to act; insufficient time is devoted to rehearsing; direction is bad; lines are only half mastered; plays are mounted without taste or intelligence. Too often the workers’ theatre is a mere replica of some inept bourgeois group—mediocre amateurs with an implacable yearning to exhibit their mediocre “talent.” All this is horrible, not because it violates certain principles of “pure art,” but because it militates against the effectiveness of the workers’ theatre as a medium of revolutionary culture. . .

Figure 5. Federal Theatre Project, WPA. Scene from *Triple-A Plowed Under*, 1936. Reproduced from *New Theatre*, III (May 1936), 25 (Courtesy of Tamiment Institute Library, New York University).



The workers' theatre must become efficient, and efficiency can only be attained through study and training.<sup>61</sup>

Further, in commenting on the instructors of a workers' theatre school, Seiler remarked that "it is not so important that such instructors have the right 'political line'; but it is of utmost importance that they *know* the theatre."<sup>62</sup>

The Theatre Union, the first professional workers' theatre in America, was the clearest manifestation of the merging of the agitprop workers' theatre with the more traditional bourgeois theatre. Founded in 1933, the Theatre Union brought a new professionalism to the workers' theatre movement, by reasserting the stationary theatre, returning to the production of full-length plays, and opening a school. Two principles governed the Theatre Union: "1. That there was an immediate need for a workers' theatre to produce plays with working class propaganda content. [and] 2. That such a theatre must compete in technical skill and artistic attraction with the Broadway theatre and Hollywood movie . . ."<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, its first production, *Peace on Earth*, hearkened back to the Workers' Drama League and the New Playwrights Theatre with its use of Russian Constructivist devices of ramps, stairs and platforms. With low ticket prices, the Theatre Union was well received by workers and the radical press.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to the return of full-length plays performed in stationary theatres after 1933, the "living newspaper," the earliest grassroots format of workers' theatre in America, was revived and recast by the Federal Theatre Project, Works Progress Administration, in 1936. WPA "living newspapers" were evening-long productions focusing on current domestic issues of a non-controversial nature that affected all

classes. Such productions included: *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936), which dealt with the farm problem and drought; *Highlights of 1935* (1936); *Power* (1937), which dealt with public power utilities and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA); and *One Third of a Nation* (1938), which dealt with the need for public housing. Although utilizing a form of radical workers' theatre, these productions were a far cry from the class-conscious themes of workers' groups of the early 1930s. Criticism focused on censorship and the re-writing of scripts. Most notably, *Ethiopia*, the first "living newspaper" planned for 1935, was banned by the Works Progress Administration, because it condemned Italy during a time when the American government maintained a policy of neutrality. Another script, which originally dealt with lynchings, share-croppers and other social struggles in the South, was transformed into an agricultural theme entitled *Triple-A Plowed Under*.<sup>65</sup> Avoiding controversial subjects and sectarian interpretations, these WPA "living newspapers" nevertheless adopted the exaggerated gestures of agitprop productions (Fig. 5), thereby assimilating the radical workers' theatre movement into the mainstream of American bourgeois theatre.

\* I would like to thank Claire Keith for translating the résumé of this article into French.

1 For discussion of radicals' ideological evolution, see Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "New Masses and John Reed Club Artists, 1926-1936: Evolution of Ideology, Subject Matter, and Style," *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* (DAPA), XII (Spring 1989), 56-75. See also Marquardt, "Art on the Political Front in America: From *The Liberator* to *Art Front*, 1918-1937," *Art Journal*, LII (Spring 1993), 72-81.

- 2 Editor [Max Eastman], "A Great Magazine of Liberty," *Liberator*, I (March 1918), 3.
- 3 Lydia Gibson, "Adolph Dehn," *Liberator*, VI (May 1923), 26.
- 4 Don Brown, "Hugo Gellert—A Happy Rebel," *Liberator*, VI (June 1923), 8.
- 5 Irwin Granich [Michael Gold], "Towards Proletarian Art," *Liberator*, IV (February 1921), 20-24.
- 6 Max Geltman, "The Workers' Drama League," *The Daily Worker*, 15 January 1927, supplement, 3.
- 7 "Plan Workers' Theatre," *The New York Times*, 22 May 1926, amusements section, 15.
- 8 Alfred V. Frankenstein, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *The Daily Worker*, 28 February 1925, supplement, 9.
- 9 Subsequent productions were: *Earth*, by Em Jo Basshe; *The Belt*, by Paul Sifton; *The Centuries*, by Em Jo Basshe; *The International*, by John Howard Lawson; *Hoboken Blues*, by Gold; *Airways, Inc.*, by John Dos Passos; and *Singing Jailbirds*, by Upton Sinclair.
- 10 For Gold's endorsement of mass recitation, see "Foreword," *New Masses*, July 1926, 19. For an example, see Michael Gold, "Vanzetti in the Death House: A Worker's Recitation," *New Masses*, May 1928, 8-9.
- 11 Frankenstein, "The Revolutionary Theatre," 9. Also see Don Brown, "An Impression of the New Playwrights Theatre at Work," *The Daily Worker*, 28 January 1928, 7.
- 12 S. V. Amter, "The Revolutionary Drama," *The Daily Worker*, 2 April 1926, 6.
- 13 John Dos Passos, "Did the New Playwrights Theatre Fail?" *New Masses*, August 1929, 23.
- 14 Michael Gold, "A New Masses Theatre," *New Masses*, November 1927, 23.
- 15 Em Jo Basshe, "Theatre, Mass and Machine," *The Daily Worker*, 19 March 1927, supplement, 8.
- 16 John Howard Lawson, "Does New York Want a Proletarian Theatre?" *The Daily Worker*, 26 March 1927, supplement, 8.
- 17 "To the Dramatic Editor of The Daily Worker," *The Daily Worker*, 5 April 1927, 4.
- 18 John Dos Passos, "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," *New Masses*, December 1927, 20.
- 19 Francis Edwards Faragoh, "The Peep-Show is Doomed," *The Daily Worker*, 12 March 1927, supplement, 8.
- 20 Kenneth Fearing, "Hoboken Blues," *New Masses*, April 1928, 27.
- 21 Fearing, "Hoboken Blues," 27.
- 22 *New Masses*, June 1930, 22.
- 23 *New Masses*, December 1931, 31.
- 24 *New Masses*, January 1931, 23.
- 25 Michael Gold, "Notes of the Month," *New Masses*, February 1930, 3-4.
- 26 Michael Gold, "Notes of the Month," *New Masses*, September 1930, 5.
- 27 "A Letter from Boardman Robinson," *Liberator*, V (July 1922), 29.
- 28 Virgil Geddes, "The Poetry of Revolution," *Young Worker*, II (February 1923), 5.
- 29 Frantisek Deak, "Blue Blouse," *The Drama Review*, XVII (March 1973), 40. The term "blue blouse" derives from an initial event when a few journalists in Moscow wearing workers' blue blouses expressed their grief on the occasion of Lenin's death (Harry Jaffe, "More on Soviet Blue Blouses," *New Masses*, December 1930, 20).
- 30 *The Daily Worker*, 7 May 1926, 3.
- 31 See "Living Newspapers, Banquets, Music and Rescue Parties Will Feature California Celebrations," *The Daily Worker*, 7 January 1926, 5; "Noted Artist Assists Daily Worker Party," *The Daily Worker*, 12 January 1926, 2; "Second Edition of Living Newspaper in English," *The Daily Worker*, 1 June 1926, 5.
- 32 *The Daily Worker*, 7 January 1926, 5.
- 33 For a history of workers' theatre in America, see Douglas McDermott, "The Theatre Nobody Knows: Workers' Theatre in America, 1926-1942," *Theatre Survey*, VII (May 1966), 65-82.
- 34 "Workers' Art," *New Masses*, October 1929, 28.
- 35 "Workers' Art," 28.
- 36 See A.B. Magil, "Artef Theatre Opens," *New Masses*, December 1931, 36-37.
- 37 See [Bernard] Reines, "The Workers' Laboratory Theatre of the W.I.R.," *Workers Theatre*, I (July 1931), 8-10; and Peter Martin, "A Day with the Shock Troupe of the Workers Lab. Theatre," *The Daily Worker*, 23 May 1934, 5.
- 38 See Victor Cutler, "The Rebel Players of Los Angeles," *The International Theatre* (Moscow), no. 1 (1934), 19-20; Belle Louis, "Boston Blue Blouses," *New Masses*, March 1931, 22; "Chicago Blue Blouses," *New Masses*, October 1931, 29; Samuel A. Pevzner, "Boston," *New Masses*, October 1931, 28; Robert Reznikov, "The John Reed Dramatic Group of Philadelphia, U.S.A.," *The International Theatre Bulletin* (Moscow), no. 4 (1933), 20-22; Ben Sager, "The Blue Blouses of Chicago," *The International Theatre* (Moscow), no. 1 (1934), 18-19.
- 39 See V. Cutler, "Workers' Theatres in California," *New Masses*, August 1930, 20; "The Rebel Players," *New Masses*, March 1931, 22.
- 40 William Weinberg, "Proletarian Drama," *New Masses*, July 1930, 20-21.
- 41 William Weinberg, "New York," *New Masses*, December 1931, 26. Also see Ruth Weinberg, "Report of the Elore Dramatic Club's Shock Brigade," *Workers Theatre*, I (December 1931), 23-24.
- 42 See Richard Pack, "Shock Troupe in Action," *New Theatre*, I (November 1934), 13, 33.
- 43 Peter Martin, "A Day With the Shock Troupe of the Workers Lab. Theatre," *The Daily Worker*, 23 May 1934, 5.

- 44 See Douglas McDermott, "Agitprop: Production Practice in the Workers' Theatre, 1932-1942," *Theatre Survey*, VII (November 1966), 115-24.
- 45 "Look! Look! Look!," *Workers Theatre*, II (August 1932), 4-6.
- 46 See John E. Bonn, "Problems of Play-Directing," *Workers Theatre*, I (December 1931), 7-8; (January 1932), 10-11; Mordecai Gorelik, "Scenery: The Visual Attack," *Workers Theatre*, I (March 1932), 3-5; Albert Prentis, "Basic Principles," *Workers Theatre*, I (May 1931), 1-2; Albert Prentis "Techniques of the Workers' Theatre," *Workers Theatre*, I (January 1932), 5-7; Florence Rauh, "Workers' Theatre Plays," *Workers Theatre*, I (February 1932), 6-7; Bernard Reines, "The Collective Method in the Workers' Theatre," *Workers Theatre*, I (May 1931), 3-4; Alfred Saxe, "Directing the Agitprop Play," *Workers Theatre*, III (May/June 1933), 3-4; H. Shapiro, "Training the Actor for the Proletarian Theatre," *Workers Theatre*, I (July 1931), 2-4.
- 47 "Agit-Prop, Shifting Scenes," *Workers Theatre*, II (August 1932), 23.
- 48 "To All Worker Groups," *New Masses*, December 1930, 20.
- 49 "Constitution of the League of Workers Theatres of U.S.A.," *Workers Theatre*, II (May 1932), 14.
- 50 See "First National Workers Theatre Conference on the Development, Prospects, and Tasks of the Workers' Theatre in the United States," *Workers Theatre*, II (May 1932), 5-6.
- 51 See Nathaniel Buchwald, "The Judges Award," *Workers Theatre*, II (May 1932), 11, 13; *idem*, "The Prize-winners of the Spartakiade," *Workers Theatre*, II (June-July 1932), 10, 23.
- 52 A[lbert] Prentis, "The Mess at Verdun," *Workers Theatre*, I (May 1931), 6b.
- 53 Buchwald, "The Judges Award," 13.
- 54 Buchwald, "The Prize-winners," 23.
- 55 "The Middle Western Section of the League of Workers' Theatres," *The International Theatre* (Moscow), no. 2 (1934), 60.
- 56 Mark Marvin, "Workers' Theatre Marches," *New Masses*, 8 May 1934, 29.
- 57 Peter Martin, "Montage: A New Form for the Revolutionary Theatre," *New Theatre*, I (March 1934), 9-10. Also see Alfred Saxe, "Newsboy—From Script to Performance," *New Theatre*, I (July-August 1934), 12-13, 29. The other winning plays were: second prize, *Oh Yeah!* by the Ukrainian Workers Drama Circle of New York City; and third prize, a tie between *Court Witness* by Gary [Indiana] Workers' Dramatic Group and *A Shopping We Will Go* by the Los Angeles Blue Blouse (Marvin, "Workers' Theatre Marches," 29).
- 58 See Marquardt, "New Masses and John Reed Club Artists."
- 59 Quoted in Ben Blake, *The Awakening of the American Theatre: The Story of the New Theatre Movement* (New York, 1935), 52.
- 60 See Michael Blankfort, "Facing the New Audience," *New Theatre*, I (1 June 1934), 11-12; I (July-August 1934), 14-15; I (November 1934), 25-27; Mordecai Gorelik, "Scenery — The Visual Machine," *New Theatre*, I (January 1934), 9-10; Stephen Karnot, "From a Director's Notebook," *New Theatre*, I (1 June 1934), 8; I (September 1934), 12-13; John Howard Lawson, "Towards a Revolutionary Theatre," *New Theatre*, I (1 June 1934), 6-7; Oscar Saul, "Workers Theatre From Coast to Coast," *New Theatre*, I (1 June 1934), 16-17.
- 61 Conrad Seiler, "Workers Theatre: A Criticism," *New Theatre*, I (1 June 1934), 17. Also see Molly Day Thacher, "Revolutionary Staging for Revolutionary Plays," *New Theatre*, I (July-August 1934), 26.
- 62 Seiler, "Workers Theatre," 17. Also see "The New Theatre School," *New Theatre News*, I (January-February 1939), 5-6.
- 63 Emery Norhrup, "Meet the Theatre Union," *New Theatre*, I (February 1934), 8.
- 64 See *The International Theatre* (Moscow), no. 2 (1934), 60; and no. 3-4 (October 1934), 56.
- 65 Morris Watson, "The Living Newspaper," *New Theatre*, III (June 1936), 6-8, 33.