

The Federal Theatre Project in Kansas City, Missouri, 1936

BY

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### Abstract

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP), a sub-program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), created in 1935, included large and small cities all over the United States. In 1936, from January 8 to October 15, the little-known Kansas City unit employed thirty-one workers, six women and twenty-five men, of whom twenty-seven were on relief. Positions included two supervisory, twenty professional and technical, four skilled, five intermediate, and two unskilled. Four workers were returned to private employment. Contrary to *The Federal Theatre Project: Catalog-Calendar of Productions*, that lists five productions, evidence from Kansas City FTP reports indicates that the unit only produced and toured *Ladies of the Jury* for seventy-two performances and *Whistling in the Dark* for thirteen performances for a total of eighty-five performances. The unit may have rehearsed but never actually performed *The Mayor and the Manicure*, *The Royal Family*, and *It Can't Happen Here*; and *St. Louis Vaudeville*, from its FTP unit, may not have performed in Kansas City. In sum, forty-five performances were offered in urban areas with an attendance of 21,705, thirty-five performances were offered to rural areas with an attendance of 40,515, and four performances were staged in institutions with an attendance of 600 for a total attendance of 62,190. The project expenses totaled \$25,139.91, with \$18,947.29 used toward Project 1261 and \$6,192.62 for Project 2407. Although the unit was well-received, the Kansas City unit faced organizational power struggles between WPA State Director, Matthew Murray, who had been hand-picked by Kansas City's "big boss," Tom Pendergast, and State Director for Women's and Professional Projects, Anita Hynes. These state and local factors proved to be too much for the small unit and led to the demise of the Kansas City FTP ten months after its inauguration.

## Acknowledgements

This project has been in the making for me since my first class in graduate school. It was in Theatre Historiography that I first stumbled across a line in a book stating Kansas City had been a part of the FTP. While it was too much of an undertaking for that particular term paper, the idea never left me. I continued to write about the FTP throughout my graduate courses, all of which have led me to this paper.

I could not have accomplished this without the help and support of dear friends and professors. I must also thank the librarians in the Missouri Valley Special Collections in the Kansas City Public library and Eugene Morris with the National Archives Record Administration. These individuals were immensely helpful in directing me toward information regarding Kansas City theatre and the FTP.

Dr. Jeanne Klein deserves many thanks for her role as my advisor. Her enthusiasm for my project kept me motivated and pushed me to search further and deeper for answers to questions. Her attention to detail is unmatched and this paper would not be complete without her suggestions and guidance. Thank you as well, to Dr. Mechele Leon and Dr. Rebecca Rovit, for their time and service on my committee.

Lastly, I must thank my family. My husband, Trent, has been patient and supportive while I attempted this graduate adventure. Ally and Hunter have also been wonderful cheerleaders when I felt I couldn't continue and provided me with plenty of reading opportunities while sitting at games and rehearsals. Thank you for all you have done throughout this journey. Thank you as well, to my wonderful parents who have encouraged and prayed for me throughout my entire life.

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## Introduction

In 1935, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was introduced as a sub-project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The FTP's goal was to create jobs for actors and theatre workers left unemployed by the Great Depression through theatrical units in cities all over the nation. Hallie Flanagan, director of the FTP, envisioned the program as a nation-wide project divided into regions, states, and large and small cities. In Missouri, two cities were included in the project, Kansas City and St. Louis.

Theatre historians find that much of the story of the Federal Theatre Project focuses on New York City to the exclusion of smaller cities. Kansas City theatre scholar, Felicia Hardison Londré, writes, "In the course of my research, I came to realize how very 'New York-Centric' is the published history of American theater. For most traditional historians of American dramatic art, if it didn't happen in Gotham, it was not worth mentioning."<sup>1</sup> FTP scholar, Elizabeth Osborne, concurs,

The Living Newspapers, colorful New York City projects, and the pitched battles with Congress and the Dies committee have absorbed much of the scholarly attention directed toward the FTP. Yet these productions constituted only a small part of FTP activities. Thousands of actors produced hundreds of other plays across the country in cities as diverse as Portland, Tulsa, Omaha, Seattle, and Manchester. In many ways, these plays, produced and staged in locations beyond the confines of big cities like New York, better addressed Hallie Flanagan's ambitious intentions for the FTP and the potential of such a far-reaching project.<sup>2</sup>

Like Osborne, FTP scholars, such as Barry Witham, Jane DeHart Mathews, Susan Quinn, Bonnie Nelson Schwartz, and Paul Sporn, have attempted to move beyond this limited scope of

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<sup>1</sup> Felicia Hardison Londré, *The Enchanted Years of the Stage: Kansas City at the Crossroads of American Theater, 1870 – 1930*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 2.

focus for a project that literally involved the entire country. They have made a plea for more local scholars to investigate their own city's FTP units with the hope that each unit's story will expand upon the multi-layered purposes of the FTP. Osborne writes, "Case studies for an enterprise as vast as the FTP are inherently valuable to scholars as they provide jumping off points that can gesture toward an understanding of the organization and its enterprises as a whole – particularly when one ranges outside of urban centers."<sup>3</sup> This study is intended to be one of those "jumping off points" as an attempt to answer those calls and contribute to the growth of FTP research.

Why study the Federal Theatre Project in Kansas City, a small unit that produced little material and did not last very long in the scope of the national FTP? Studying this unit provides information to American theatre history as a whole because Kansas City captures the essence of much of what other cities and the nation were experiencing. According to a *Kansas City Star* article in January of 1936, "On the Jackson County stage has been acted a part of the national drama of conflicting and sometimes desperate ideas, of work at high wages and work at low wages, of holding the line against hunger by direct relief methods, of large projects that started and closed within a few months, of projects to drive wanderers to their homes and of projects to make them stay where they were, of saving American idealism by made work and of saving it by groceries."<sup>4</sup>

Any project that recovers and restores a lost piece of history is important. Buried deep within thousands of FTP records, paragraphs in books, and articles in small-town newspapers lay the forgotten story of the Kansas City FTP. I have attempted to follow in other scholar's footsteps who attest to the ability to acquire meaning from the documents that do exist and

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Kansas City Star*, "Relief Cost," January 3, 1936.

endeavor to relate them to the world around it at the time. This requires passing back and forth between the evidence and the surrounding context of the community and nation.<sup>5</sup> At times the available evidence raises questions that have not yet been answered providing room for further research in the details of the rise and fall of the Kansas City FTP.

There is little primary evidence regarding the FTP in Kansas City. In addition to Hallie Flanagan's book, *Arena*, the National Archives Record Administration that houses the FTP records for Kansas City contains much of the primary sources for this paper, such as newspaper articles and official reports. One invaluable secondary source includes a dissertation by John Charles Koch that proved to be instrumental in determining dates and official FTP correspondence. Felicia Hardison-Londré's book, *The Enchanted Years of the Stage: Kansas City at the Crossroads of American Theater, 1870-1930*, has been an incredible resource regarding Kansas City theatre history prior to the FTP.

Most people and sources incorrectly assume there was not an FTP in Kansas City. Even historians, such as Londré and Richard Piland who have researched theatre in Kansas City, had never heard that it was home to an FTP unit.<sup>6</sup> Often when the Missouri WPA is discussed in books and articles, the FTP is not even mentioned as one of the projects under its umbrella.

This project explores the cultural importance of the Kansas City FTP unit and how it may or may not have affected its citizens before, during, and after its demise. Chapter one focuses on the cultural life and theatrical entertainment within the city prior to the FTP with a short history of theaters and statuses of each to understand the kinds of entertainments and competition before the organization of the FTP unit. This chapter also sheds light on Kansas City's political arena at

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<sup>5</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 9, note 22.

<sup>6</sup> Per emails from Londré and Piland to author, 2011 and 2012.



the time, which played an important role in the WPA and thus the FTP in Missouri. Cultural and social trends are also addressed to contextualize life in the area before the start of the FTP unit.

Chapter two addresses how the FTP came into being in Kansas City and what the unit accomplished over its brief seven months. This chapter includes the shows and known venues where actors performed with a history of the cooperating theatre used and its location and associations that impacted the FTP in Kansas City. The shows that local authorities decided to produce tell the story of attitudes and culture in Kansas City. The workers behind the scenes and the actors on stage also demonstrate how these individuals kept theatre alive in Kansas City when it seemed impossible. The administrators in Missouri who had a hand in the workings of the FTP are also as much a part of the story as the actors. This chapter also deals with a large portion of the unit's time spent touring the surrounding areas. Given its location on the border between two states, Kansas City actors travelled in Missouri and Kansas (with no FTP unit). Many states, especially in the Midwest did not like to allow their actors, resources, and money to cross state lines, but for Kansas City that was almost impossible.

Chapter three investigates the downfall of the FTP in Kansas City as well as nationally. It explores possible reasons for the abrupt closure of the unit in regard to the cultural and political hegemony in Kansas City at the time. It also addresses the theatrical scene after the FTP and the Depression.

Good theatre is contained not only in New York City but in smaller cities all over the nation in all kinds of formats. Although Kansas City is not known as a "theatre city" this project, along with Londré's and Piland's, demonstrate Kansas City has a theatre history worth studying. Rediscovering a piece of theatre history in Kansas City is a vital way to keep theatre alive and well in the all-American city.

## **Chapter One**

### **Pre-Federal Theatre Life in Kansas City**

By 1930, Kansas City's population was just shy of four hundred thousand, making it the nineteenth largest city in the United States. Kansas City's centrality lent itself to growth via railroads which was its major economic industry. While urban Kansas City saw major industrial enterprises grow, such as meat-packing, Hallmark greeting cards, and a new airport, the nearby rural country was booming with agricultural production. Technology in the form of automobiles and radios became a large part of daily life for many middle- and upper-class citizens within and outside the city's limits.

Politically, Tom Pendergast ran Kansas City. His administration was referred to by many as "the machine." Pendergast was essentially a mob boss who was also chairman of the Jackson County Democratic Club. Pendergast rose to power in 1910, following in his older brother Jim's footsteps. He served for several years in city government, but soon switched to the more lucrative business world as the owner and operator of Ready-Mix Concrete Company. As a fiscally sound business man, he hand-picked and backed many political candidates and thereby came to control the strings of many decision-makers in the city and even the state. His power gave him control over the Kansas City police force which turned a blind eye to gambling and prostitution during Prohibition.

Despite the rampant illegal activities, Missouri was a highly religious state. The centrality of the state, as well as Kansas City in particular, made it a popular location for religious revivals that would attract visitors from more rural areas as well as other cities. While most of the state

was classified as Protestant, Kansas City had more Catholic and Jewish members than other denominations, such as Methodists or the Disciples of Christ.<sup>7</sup>

Although African Americans made up only ten percent of the city's population, several noteworthy bands instituted a distinctive Kansas City jazz style that differed from New Orleans jazz. The jazz district at 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine became a popular nighttime destination. Some of the great African American jazz musicians came through Kansas City at one time or another. Count Basie led a successful band that performed in the city which he re-formed after its original founder, Bennie Moten, died at the age of thirty-nine. Singers, such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, were also popular entertainers in the city. While African Americans were creating the much-loved music, white patrons were often the only persons allowed in the clubs because Jim Crow laws still prevented many African Americans from attending the shows. Pendergast's "blind eye" to the area actually gave African American entertainers an opportunity to perform and succeed that otherwise may not have existed.

Baseball became another major source of entertainment for African Americans who caught the baseball fever from the extremely popular Kansas City Monarchs. One African American newspaper noted that, "the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues draw so many fans to Sunday baseball games that black churches adjust[ed] their worship hours."<sup>8</sup> Outside of the city, fishing, boating, hunting, and hiking also became popular sporting past-times.

### **Theatrical Entertainment in the 1920s**

After Colonel Kersey Coates built his opera house in Kansas City in 1870, the course of theatre in the growing city changed. As Felicia Hardison Londré details in her history of Kansas

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<sup>7</sup> Richard S. Kirkendall, *A History of Missouri, Vol. V: 1919 to 1953*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 95.

<sup>8</sup> Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 220.

City theatre from 1870 to 1930, the Coates Opera House started a wave of new theatre buildings, most of which were destroyed by fire at some point. Some rebuilt. Some were gone forever.

Kansas City had been a central hub for touring productions since the 1880s. In the 1920s expenses for shows increased which in turn increased Kansas City's revenue and status within the show business world. According to Jere C. Mickel, "During this period, Kansas City ranked third behind Chicago, and New York, as a booking and general theatrical center."<sup>9</sup> By 1920, thirteen theatre venues, staffed by professional stagehands, presented vaudeville, burlesque, motion pictures, or professional road shows that featured many stars from New York City, such as Mrs. Fiske, Eddie Cantor, and Will Rogers.<sup>10</sup>

Like the rest of the nation, Kansas Citians enjoyed vaudeville at a variety of venues during the 1920s. Londré states, "In the 1910s and 1920s, vaudeville surpassed legitimate theater in sheer volume of attractions and at the box office. It did not happen quickly or easily in Kansas City, but as the result of a careful strategy partially orchestrated by out-of-town business interests."<sup>11</sup> Martin Lehman and then his son, Lawrence, managed the Orpheum Theatre on the Radio-Keith-Orpheum vaudeville circuit from 1914 until 1938 when circuit managers decided to close the theatre after it began losing money. This theatre boasted the same accommodations and amenities for African Americans as offered to white patrons. According to the *Journal*, "It is the first time in Kansas City, or in any city for that matter, where negroes [sic] may purchase their seats in advance and have them reserved just the same as others do."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jere C. Mickel, *Footlights on the Prairie: The Story of the Repertory Tent Players in the Midwest*, (St. Cloud: Northstar Press, 1974), 86.

<sup>10</sup> Maier, Ray, *History of I.A.T.S.E. Local No. 31*, (Kansas City: International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, 1995), 37.

<sup>11</sup> Londré, *The Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 222.

<sup>12</sup> *Journal*, December 27, 1914 (quoted in Londré 230).

Many other theatres in Kansas City offered vaudeville entertainment, but most were a combination of vaudeville performances and motion pictures. The Mainstreet Theatre which opened in 1921 and ran until 1930 was one of the largest, seating three thousand. According to the *I.A.T.S.E. History*, it featured many new innovations, such as a nursery for mothers, and “was equipped with an elevator off stage so that elephants could be brought up from the animal room which also had a seal pool.”<sup>13</sup> The Garden Theatre, originally the Hippodrome, and the Uptown Theatre, were also combination houses. The Garden Theatre was built in 1911 and became a Loew’s theatre in 1919. It was torn down in 1930. Other theatres in Kansas City that offered vaudeville and motion pictures were The Newman, The Pantages or Tower Theatre, The Globe Theatre, Liberty Theatre, Royal Theatre, and The Gayety (which eventually featured first-class burlesque).

The Shuberts owned 150 theaters in cities across America, and Kansas City had two theatres associated with the Shuberts. The first Shubert theatre in the area opened October 1, 1906 with the name of Sam S. Shubert Theatre. It started out as legitimate theatre offering stars, such as Minnie Maddern Fiske, but by fall of 1907 it was essentially a vaudeville house. The second Shubert theatre was originally Butler’s Standard or the Standard which opened in 1900. It underwent several name changes over the years, as the Standard, the Century, the Lyric, and the Missouri. The Shubert Missouri Theater was the name given by the Shuberts when they assumed the lease in 1923. It featured vaudeville and burlesque which is allegedly where “Gypsy Rose Lee began her rise to burlesque stardom.”<sup>14</sup> Her mother operated a vaudeville troupe, Rose Louise and Her Hollywood Blondes. Their engagement went several weeks longer than planned due in part to Louise’s (Gypsy Rose Lee) talent for burlesque.

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<sup>13</sup> Maier, *History of I.A.T.S.E.*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> Londré, *Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 250.

The Empress Theatre also featured first-class burlesque. The Gilliss Opera House, on the other hand, originally a legitimate theater in Kansas City, presented rather low-class burlesque. As burlesque rose in appeal, legitimate theatre began to suffer, in Kansas City. As Londré notes, in 1923 J.J. Shubert claimed that Kansas City had gone from being one of the best show towns to the worst and expressed concern over sending any good shows as it was “hopeless.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite the Shuberts’ opinion of Kansas City’s theatrical status, shows did continue to tour through the Shubert Missouri Theatre. “From 1923 to 1929, Shubert’s Missouri Theatre presented plays that can now be seen as a good cross-section of dramas and comedies of the 1920s,” according to Londré. Not only did tours visit the Missouri Theatre, but they could also be seen at the Orpheum, Auditorium, and at Kansas City’s Conventional Hall, one of the largest venues in the Midwest. The building owed its existence to the generosity of William Rockhill Nelson who felt the city needed bigger accommodations for conventions and concerts. According to Londré, the most memorable event for the Convention Hall was Max Reinhardt’s *The Miracle*. It played for three weeks to over eighty-eight thousand individuals in 1926. The Convention Hall was razed in July of 1936 and replaced with Municipal Auditorium.

As touring companies and stars began to decline, a new movement began. FTP scholar, Elizabeth Osborne found, “In order to compensate, community theatre, stock companies, vaudeville troupes, and little theatres sprung up in many communities.”<sup>16</sup> The Little Theatre movement, begun in the 1910s, became synonymous with community theatre in response to the widespread commercialization and control of Broadway tours and independent theatre models in Europe. However, without an endowment of sustaining members, the Kansas City Little Theatre

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<sup>15</sup> Londré, *Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 248.

<sup>16</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 152.

was forced to shut down.<sup>17</sup> According to Weldon Durham's directory of American Theatre Companies from 1888 to 1930, the Auditorium Stock Theatre Company was Kansas City's only, short-lived stock company from 1913 to 1915.<sup>18</sup>

Traveling tent shows and chautauquas grew in popularity across the Midwest during the summers, as Kansas City became the central railroad hub for arrivals and departures. Missouri was one of five states with the highest concentration of chautauquas.<sup>19</sup> Small-time, tent show actors who tired of the road settled in Kansas City.<sup>20</sup>

Last, but not least, motion pictures became a major source of entertainment for Kansas City. In addition to the multi-purpose theatres that showed both vaudeville and motion pictures, several theatres were built expressly for movies. Loew's Midland Theatre, which opened in 1927, was the third largest theatre in the United States with a seating capacity over 3,500.<sup>21</sup> The Doric and the Regent Theatre also presented movies. Moving pictures made the huge spectacles and melodramas that had been staples of American theatre somewhat obsolete, especially after 1927 when Al Jolson ushered in the first "talkie." Movies began to edge out live theatre due to lower cost and increased availability. By 1929, theatres in Kansas City that produced live theatre were few and far between, as expensive road shows died and movies replaced live performances.

Theatre in Kansas City followed the trends common across the nation. Stock companies gave way to touring companies and vaudeville and burlesque rose in popularity. Motion pictures were a new and exciting form of entertainment that could reach even small towns that once only saw the occasional tent show. According to Londré, "Legitimate theater died a slow death in

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<sup>17</sup> Kenneth MacGowan, *Footlights Across America: Towards a National Theater* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 247.

<sup>18</sup> Durham, Weldon B., ed. *American Theatre Companies, 1888 – 1930* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 38 – 40.

<sup>19</sup> Canning, Charlotte M., *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Mickel, *Footlights on the Prairie*, 87.

<sup>21</sup> Maier, *History of I.A.T.S.E.*, 39.

Kansas City, a gradual demise from the time of World War I and through the 1920s.”<sup>22</sup> The Depression would draw Kansas City’s glory days of theatre to a close.

### **The Depression Era**

Kansas City was hard hit by the Great Depression that began after the Crash of 1929. The state as a whole struggled as manufacturing and agriculture, two of the state’s largest enterprises, plummeted in production and profits. Manufacturing dropped fifty-one percent while agriculture saw price drops in everything from land to hogs. Weather issues did not help the situation as drought affected crops in 1930, 1934, and 1936. Kirkendall notes more than three hundred Missouri banks closed their doors and ultimately, “unemployment in the state soared to nearly 16 percent of the work force in 1930, to 27 percent the following year, and to above 38 percent in 1932 and 1933, well above the national average . . . With no state or federal relief programs to turn to in the early 1930s, the unemployed had to rely upon private and local agencies for help.”<sup>23</sup> FDR’s New Deal began creating jobs for Americans in 1933 as best it could, but keeping up with the demand was nearly impossible.

By 1934, about one in ten Kansas City residents were on public relief, but other cities were twice as high.<sup>24</sup> While the state was in bad shape, Kansas City had already made preparations that provided a somewhat better state of affairs. The city owed much of its better fortune to Tom Pendergast. As Kirkendall points out, “Kansas Citians gave Pendergast much of the credit for the benefits that rained down on Kansas City from Washington, and with good reason, for he had good working relations with the Roosevelt administration, and his people were in charge of much of the New Deal activity in Kansas City.”<sup>25</sup> Pendergast’s power was also

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<sup>22</sup> Londré, *Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 289.

<sup>23</sup> Kirkendall, *A History of Missouri*, 132.

<sup>24</sup> Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 216.

<sup>25</sup> Kirkendall, *A History of Missouri*, 173.



strengthened by his close relationship with Harry Truman whom he helped elect as a United States Senator in 1934. This state of affairs created mixed emotions for Kansas City residents. While many disapproved of Pendergast's corrupt ways, it was hard to argue the successes that he made in the city, especially during tough economic times.

It was also dangerous to speak out against Pendergast and his government-run operations. Those who did faced threatening phone calls, higher taxes, and death threats. For example, in 1932, Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg, head of the Temple B'nai Jehudah on East Linwood Boulevard, began to speak up in opposition to Pendergast's rule of the city. His crusade gained attention in 1932 when he called out Pendergast's activities while speaking to a civic organization. He continued to crusade against Pendergast, but his safety was jeopardized. After his bulletproof car was sprayed with gunfire, he started sleeping with a gun. In 1933 Mayerberg was forced by the board of trustees of his temple to withdraw from politics as many were concerned for their safety and status in the community. Despite this withdrawal, he was asked to run for governor in the 1934 election, but he refused. Mayerberg was one of the few brave enough to take a stand against Pendergast, but he was unable to force much immediate change.<sup>26</sup>

In January of 1935, the *Kansas City Star* reported that "A total of \$4,845,480 has been spent for administration of relief activities in Missouri between January, 1933, and December 1, 1934."<sup>27</sup> Approximately fifty thousand individuals (or one-eighth of Kansas City's population) were on relief. It is important to note that one had to be on relief, or at least eligible for it, before he or she could be placed in a government job. Those who found themselves on relief rolls were not particularly proud of it but were grateful to have an income.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>27</sup> *Kansas City Star*, "In Kansas City, 50,174," January 22, 1935.

After the WPA became a formal project of the New Deal in April, “Pendergast controlled 6,000 government jobs – double what City Hall needed. Critics charged that the city required applicants in the federal Works Progress Administration to seek Pendergast’s approval,” according to Montgomery and Kasper.<sup>28</sup> Under his political administration, the city saw the building of a new County Courthouse, City Hall, and Police Headquarters, along with improvements to city roads, to name just a few of his accomplishments. The WPA was one of the first federal institutions to fight discrimination by allowing African Americans on relief rolls along with white Americans. As Smith writes, “So eager were WPA officials, from the beginning to prevent discrimination that many of the innumerable record and report forms prescribed for use by WPA and relief agencies made no provision for the inclusion of information regarding a worker’s race, religion, or politics.”<sup>29</sup>

In February of 1926, Pendergast appointed Matthew Murray as the director of public works in Kansas City. Murray was born in Dayton, Ohio, graduated from the University of Dayton, and moved to Clinton, Missouri, in 1902.<sup>30</sup> He worked for the railroad and relocated to Sikeston, Missouri where he entered politics. Murray had engineering experience and soon was climbing the political ladder to become Missouri’s chief engineer, specializing in highway studies. Through this work, he met Thomas Pendergast as Pendergast owned a concrete company and was busy paving Missouri roads. From this connection, Murray and Pendergast quickly became associates helping each other out politically and financially. Murray moved to Kansas

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<sup>28</sup> Montgomery and Kasper, *Kansas City*, 227.

<sup>29</sup> Anita Rosalie Smith, *Social and Economic Conditions of WPA Employees in Kansas City, Missouri*, (Saint Louis: Washington University – dissertation, 1948), 13.

<sup>30</sup> J. Christopher Schnell, “Murray, Matthew S.” in *Dictionary of Missouri Biography*, edited by Lawrence D. Christensen, William E. Foley, Gary R. Kremer, and Kenneth H. Winn, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 566-567.

City once he was appointed director of public works. In 1935, with the help of Pendergast and Truman, Murray was appointed to the position of State Director of the Missouri WPA.

Pendergast began to lose political control in December of 1936 when a grand jury convened to investigate charges of voter fraud. By 1937, as his health worsened, individuals associated with his machine were found guilty of these charges. That same year, Missouri Governor Lloyd Stark began a campaign to bring Pendergast down. After the Bureau of Internal Revenue launched a formal investigation into Pendergast's income and taxes in 1938, Pendergast was indicted on two counts of tax evasion on Good Friday, April 7, 1939. He was convicted and sent to Leavenworth penitentiary on May 29, 1939.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the Depression, cultural arts and entertainment were slim but not absent despite hard economic times. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art broke ground in 1930 and opened in 1933. The Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra was also founded in 1933 and the University of Kansas City was established. Sports continued to be popular with the public, especially when minor-league baseball team, the Blues, won the championship of the American Association of baseball in 1932. Jazz also flourished in the city, drawing in stars from all over the country.

### **Depression Era Theatre**

After the Crash of 1929, the numbers of theatres presenting live professional entertainment dropped dramatically with only five buildings left operating through 1936. According to Londré's accounts, the Gilliss Opera House and Shubert's Missouri Theatre (today's Folly Theatre) presented rather low-class burlesque. The Missouri went dark in 1932 and did not reopen until 1941. The Sam S. Shubert Theatre, a former stalwart of live theatre that showed occasional films, was razed in 1935. Convention Hall, one of the largest venues for

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<sup>31</sup> Larsen, Lawrence H. and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 127.

concerts in the Midwest, was razed in July of 1936. The Pantages or Tower Theatre closed for three years from 1931 to 1934, but managed to reopen featuring the “Tower Adorables” and select vaudeville acts.

The Orpheum Theatre, the city’s only remaining legitimate theatre, “presented road shows and stock companies off and on until 1938, when it became a motion picture house.”<sup>32</sup>

Municipal Auditorium, a massive undertaking built with partial funds from the WPA, opened to the public on December 1, 1935. Upon its completion in June of 1936, Municipal Auditorium contained the Little Theatre seating three thousand and the Music Hall seating over two thousand. It also featured air conditioning and a new sound system. These two professional venues were the only remaining theatre buildings during 1936 in Kansas City.

The Little Theatre Movement opened an avenue for amateur actors to begin training and performing. The Jewish Community Center opened the Resident Theatre in 1932. The idea for the community theatre was sparked by Max Bretton, Executive Director of the Young Men’s and Young Women’s Hebrew Association, and Harry Couloff, an associate of Bretton’s. Richard Piland, author of *A History of the Resident Theatre*, describes the venue where shows were staged during the 1930s: “The Association had a large barn-like banquet hall in its building at 1600 Linwood Boulevard which was suitable for stage plays and money to pay for the productions.”<sup>33</sup> The Resident Theatre focused on recent Broadway hits to bring in audiences and educate actors and audience alike on theatre trends. The theatre operated by subsidy from the Jewish Community Center and ticket sales. Jerome Mayer was its first director.

The Resident Theatre opened its first season with *He Who Gets Slapped* by Leonid Andreyev on March 12, 1932, a Russian play that had premiered in New York in 1921. The next

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<sup>32</sup> Londré, *Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 237.

<sup>33</sup> Richard N. Piland, *The Illustrated History of the Resident Theatre Kansas City, Missouri 1932-1983*, (Fairfield: Personalized Research), 2011.

production in November began an actual season for the Resident. For the 1933-1934 season, the Resident hired W. Zolley Lerner as its director after Mayer's departure for other ventures. Lerner was instrumental in creating a season subscription series as well as introducing community-wide auditions. He also operated under a six- to nine- week rehearsal period which resulted in more professional and quality productions. From 1933 to 1935, seasons included *The Dybbuk* by S.A. Ansky, *Ladies of the Jury* by Fred Ballard, *The Devil Passes* by Benn W. Levy, and *Biography* by Samuel N. Behrman.

In the summer of 1934, the theater was remodeled by sloping the house floor and replacing the wooden seats with cushioned ones. The stage was raised and panels installed for optimum sound. These improvements were financed by donors. These physical as well as organizational improvements resulted in national recognition for the little theatre in 1934 as

Piland explains:

Later in the season the Incorporated Society of Author's Representatives recognized the Resident as a leader in the American Little Theatre movement and awarded it a "professional" rating, placing it on the same level of a commercial stock company with first choice in the selection of new plays for production in the Kansas City territory. These unsolicited honors gave the Resident national recognition and placed it on par with well respected [sic] theatres such as the Pasadena Playhouse, Provincetown Players and Cleveland Civic Theatre.<sup>34</sup>

Like many community theatres, the Resident had to rely on ticket sales to meet expenses, in addition to its subsidy received from the Jewish Community Center.<sup>35</sup> Under the direction of Zolley, the Resident produced high quality productions with amateur actors and stagehands to compete with Kansas City's existing legitimate theatres.

At the same time the Resident was making a name for itself in Kansas City, universities on both sides of the state line were implementing dramatic groups that would perform for public

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 2.

audiences. The University of Kansas City (now the University of Missouri at Kansas City) opened in 1933 and by 1936 had graduated eighty students. W.C. Troutman ran its theatre department and directed the University Players. They performed shows such as *The Cradle Song* by Gregorio Martinez Sierra at the Resident in 1935. Georgia H. Brown, a leader in educational theatre for Kansas, was the “head of the dramatic arts department at the State University of Kansas and director of the university players.”<sup>36</sup> Brown eventually founded and operated her own independent Dramatic School, initially at the Auditorium Theatre, until her death in 1932.

This summary of Kansas City theatre from the 1920s through 1935 establishes the economic and political conditions and the cultural contexts that existed prior to the Federal Theatre Project. While professional theatre struggled to remain vital and relevant in Depression-era Kansas City, amateurs tried to fill a void left by the touring and stock companies. Londré and Piland both express that the community Resident Theatre and the University Players kept theatre alive in Kansas City through the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Londré, *Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 188.

<sup>37</sup> Londré, *Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 290, and Piland, *History of the Resident*, 4.

## Chapter Two

### Enter the Federal Theatre Project in Kansas City

As National Director of the WPA, Harry Hopkins saw a need for more than just manual labor. Having noticed the thousands of musicians, artists, writers, and actors who were left jobless during the Depression, he created Federal Project Number One that included the Federal Music Project, the Federal Art Project, the Federal Writers Project, and the Federal Theatre Project. At the outset, respective directors would report to Jacob Baker, one of five WPA assistant administrators in charge of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Federal Project Number One would report to the Division of Professional and Service Projects which was a part of the WPA and FERA. (See Appendix A for WPA and FTP lines of authority.)

Being an actor during the 1930s was either feast or famine. For example, Ethel Waters earned \$5,000 a week performing on Broadway, but for the average actor, paychecks were few and far between.<sup>38</sup> Flanagan stated, “Because art in America has always been regarded as a luxury, artists in all fields had been the first to experience the effects of the depression.”<sup>39</sup> Motion pictures continued to severely cripple the theatre industry, therefore the standard seventy-nine dollars a month that each FTP worker was to receive was greatly appreciated during such tough economic times.<sup>40</sup>

### Organizing the Federal Theatre Project in the Midwest and Missouri

In May of 1935 Hopkins contacted a college friend, Hallie Flanagan, who worked for Vassar College as head of the Vassar Experimental Theatre, to head the theatre division of Federal Project One. Flanagan accepted and began working and making plans to get the Federal

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<sup>38</sup> Glenda E. Gill, *White Grease Paint on Black Performers: A Study of the Federal Theatre, 1935 – 1939*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1988), 190.

<sup>39</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 12.

<sup>40</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post*, “WPA ‘White Collar’ Efforts in K.C. Varied, But Include No ‘Boondoggling,’” February 23, 1936.

Theatre Project off the ground. One of her close friends, E.C. Mabie of the University of Iowa, helped immensely in creating the plan that she would implement for the FTP. Initially, Mabie became the Regional Director of the Prairie (or Middle West) Region which included North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri.<sup>41</sup> Flanagan's appointment was announced in July at the National Theatre Conference held in Iowa City, and she was officially sworn in on August 27, 1935.

The Regional Director of the Midwest WPA was Howard Hunter who worked out of Chicago. Mabie would have to work in cooperation with Hunter to accomplish any goals he had for the Prairie FTP region. According to Flanagan, Chicago was the supply center, retraining ground, central writing and design office, and equipment construction site for the FTP Prairie region. As such, administrators in Chicago were in charge of more than just their city projects. Three men were vital to this operation: "Robert McKeague, manager for all the arts, E. Kendell Davis, from first to last administrative executive of the theatre project, and Russell Spindler, personnel director."<sup>42</sup>

At the first Washington, D.C. meeting of regional and state FTP directors in early October, Jacob Baker explained the plan of operation for FTP projects. Flanagan wrote that he, "explain[ed] that our projects, while unlike other W.P.A. projects in that they were responsible to national directors, would still as a matter of economy operate through offices of the state and district W.P.A."<sup>43</sup> This was no easy task as the lines of authority were unclear. FTP scholar, Paul Sporn, writes an excellent example of this:

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<sup>41</sup> John Charles Koch, *The Federal Theatre Project: Region IV – A Structural and Historical Analysis of How it Functioned and What it Accomplished* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1981), 6-7  
<http://www2.lib.ku.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com.www2.lib.ku.edu> (accessed January 2012).

<sup>42</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 135.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 44. The duality of the organizational system can be complicated. For further clarification, see Appendix A.



Theater units in the field had to route their responsibilities through two different lines of authority. One went directly to the national director of the Theater Project in Washington, Flanagan herself, who in turn reported to the assistant administrator of Federal One, who reported to Hopkins. But the field units also had to move along an authority line to their direct administrative agency in the states, the district supervisors of the Women's and Professional Projects (the WPA subdivision in charge of white-collar programs). These district administrators were in turn responsible to the WPA district directors of all district projects, who then had to go to two statewide agencies, the state directors of Women's and Professional Projects and the state WPA administrators. The state directors of Women's and Professional Projects also reported to the statewide administrators and had to report as well to the Washington director of Professional and Service Projects (the highest tier of white-collar programs). Meanwhile the WPA state administrators were under the jurisdiction of the WPA field representatives, who reported to the Washington office of Women's and Professional Projects, and from thence to Hopkins.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the confusion, Flanagan forged ahead creating artistic procedures in addition to the bureaucratic. In Flanagan's Manual of Instructions for the FTP, she explained the protocol for play selections. She encouraged directors to consider the quality of the work and its relationship to the community as well as the opportunities selected plays would give all involved in addition to operating costs. Flanagan also provided tips for the directors on how to accomplish these tasks.<sup>45</sup>

Mabie continued to work diligently on his region compiling lists and determining which states and cities had enough qualified personnel to participate in the FTP. All the while, he encountered resistance from state WPA Administrators who were often uncooperative and even ignored directives from their superior, Hopkins. Despite the bureaucratic difficulties, actors and directors showed great interest in the project. In October of 1935, F. Cowles Strickland, Director

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<sup>44</sup> Paul Sporn, *Against Itself: The Federal Theatre and Writers' Projects in the Midwest*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 167.

<sup>45</sup> Hallie Flanagan, "Instructions for Federal Theatre Project: Play Rentals, Non-Royalty, and Choice of Plays," *Library of Congress: New Deal Stage*, May 6, 1936, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin> (accessed March 13, 2012), 4.

of the Little Theatre of St. Louis, wrote to Flanagan offering assistance in the hopes of securing an FTP unit in the city.<sup>46</sup>

Beginning an FTP unit required interested parties to jump through a series of hoops. In *Arena*, Flanagan outlined the questions she asked of any one requesting to be part of the FTP.

1. How many theatre people, *now on relief rolls*, does your plan propose to put to work?
2. At what date?
3. Are directors available in your community? If so, state education and theatre experience.
4. List any civic, state, or local organizations actively interested in the support of your project.
5. State the entertainment and cultural value of your project.
6. State the practical working plan under which you will operate: i.e., repertory, stock, touring, etc.
7. Give estimated superintendence cost and operating cost.<sup>47</sup>

She goes on to write that this questionnaire scared off most individuals who merely wanted a handout or to gripe over the use of federal funds for theatre. After these questions were answered and surveys done, a WPA Form 320 (Request for Project Approval) had to be submitted which, after approval, could be submitted to the WPA for disbursement of funds. The forms had to be signed by WPA officials from the district and state levels and a co-operating sponsor. The forms described the project, the number of individuals involved with respective classifications, and a statement of costs as well as other pertinent information.

As can be seen from Flanagan's questions, there were many steps for any city under consideration for an FTP unit. According to Koch, "This verification process began with the installation of a re-classification board comprised of theatre professionals who reviewed those on the W.P.A. unemployment rosters and determined which individuals qualified for the project and

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<sup>46</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 88.

<sup>47</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 30.

on what pay level their competence would place them.”<sup>48</sup> Each city had to prove that there were enough people on their relief rolls who were unemployed theatre professionals. Many individuals who signed up for relief before the FTP was created never listed theatre experience as it was useless to them in finding a job with the WPA. Therefore, when it came time to locate theatre professionals on relief rolls, many were bypassed because no one even knew they had experience. Often times, directors of regional projects had to wait until news of a theatre project hit the ground for theatre workers to come to them.

By November of 1935, Mabie had planned for Missouri to be one of the spokes in the Midwestern wheel circuit, based on his preliminary investigations.<sup>49</sup> In December, Flanagan appointed Strickland to handle the reclassification in St. Louis. W.C. Troutman, the theatre professor from the University of Kansas City, was appointed to reclassify workers on relief who might be eligible for a Kansas City FTP unit. Although Mabie had initially reported two hundred twenty-nine unemployed theatre personnel in Missouri, Davis learned that Kansas City had only nineteen eligible and qualified individuals and St. Louis had twenty-six. According to Koch’s evidence, “It was decided that a thirty-one member drama unit should be formed in Kansas City. St. Louis was to have a vaudeville unit and a teaching unit employing twenty-six” for a total of fifty-seven Missouri employees.<sup>50</sup> The Kansas City FTP officially began January 8, 1936.<sup>51</sup>

Once a state was reclassified, an FTP director was assigned to handle the administration of its FTP unit. As Missouri had two cities on opposite ends of the state, Ward Perry was selected as the FTP director of the Kansas City unit, and Charles H. Moran organized the St.

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<sup>48</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 9.

<sup>49</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 173.

<sup>50</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 88 – 89

<sup>51</sup> Perry, Ward. *Kansas City Federal Theatre Project Semi-Monthly Reports: May 1936 through October 1936*, National Archives Record Administration (NARA), RG-69, Box 89.

Louis unit with a vaudeville troupe. Perry reported to William B. Stone, assistant district director for the Kansas City WPA.

Ward Perry was born in Kansas City on March 12, 1888. He was married at one time but later divorced. Perry's obituary from the *Kansas City Star* stated, "Mr. Perry, who lived most of his life here, was a veteran musician at the Garden theater, Orpheum theater, Main Street Theater, Plaza Royale, Putsch's 210 and many other amusement places."<sup>52</sup> Perry was apparently a regular in the music scene in Kansas City and even composed at times. Moran also had previous experience, having formerly been a New York stage director for Al Jolson and David Belasco, according to the *Missouri Democratic Digest*.<sup>53</sup>

Once these assignments were in place, the Missouri FTP was granted an initial allotment of \$50,000 on December 16, 1935. By October of 1936 (the end of the Missouri FTP), the state had employed its fifty-seven theatre workers at a cost of \$41,684 and spent \$4,433 on non-labor costs (or \$3,883 under budget).<sup>54</sup> By December of 1935, forty productions had opened across the nation, and by the end of January of 1936, that number had increased to eighty-two openings. The number of productions rose substantially each month. By the end of 1936, approximately one thousand shows had opened in thirty states across the country.<sup>55</sup> Eventually, the Missouri units came to represent 0.1 percent of the total labor and non-labor cost of the national FTP and 0.4 percent of the national attendance for productions.<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately, Mabie resigned his regional position on January 6, 1936 because he grew frustrated by the lack of support from state officials and bureaucratic red tape.<sup>57</sup> After his

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<sup>52</sup> *Kansas City Star*, "Ward Perry: Pianist and Organist Dies After Heart Attack," February 10, 1957.

<sup>53</sup> Hazel Blair, "Cultural Projects in Missouri," *Missouri Democratic Digest*, (NARA, RG-69, Box 38) 1, no 4, (April 1936), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 89 and Flanagan, *Arena*, 435.

<sup>55</sup> Staff of Fenwick Library, *Catalog-Calendar*, 300-302 and Flanagan, *Arena*, 435.

<sup>56</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 435.

<sup>57</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 11.

resignation, the Prairie Region and Central Region merged to become the Midwest Region. Davis was then given the job of supervising Nebraska and Missouri theatres along with Howard Miller. John McGee, dramatist-director and Regional Director of the South, also assisted Missouri at times.<sup>58</sup> While projects in Illinois and Michigan lasted through the end of the Federal Theatre in June of 1939, Midwest Region projects would be discontinued in Missouri and Wisconsin in October of 1936, Nebraska and Indiana in June and July of 1937, and Iowa in January of 1938.<sup>59</sup>

Before his resignation, Mabie provided a report to Flanagan with his finding for the Prairie Region in which he noted that “all of the smaller projects would need Chicago talent to supplement the types of professionals on relief. He pointed out that this outside direction would be difficult to bring in because administrators either wanted no theatre at all or a recreation program directed by their friends or political appointees.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Matthew Murray, Missouri’s WPA Director, had different views from Flanagan on the role of the FTP in his state. According to Koch’s research, in January of 1936, Murray refused to sign a request from Kansas City for an increase in the ten percent non-relief exemption fund, forcing the unit to continue with three non-relief personnel.<sup>61</sup> Murray also insisted on no admission charges, as advocated by Hopkins.<sup>62</sup>

### **Kansas City FTP Unit: January to October, 1936**

According to *The Federal Theatre Project: Catalog-Calendar of Productions* compiled by the staff of the Fenwick Library at George Mason University, the Kansas City FTP unit produced five plays over seven months in 1936 as follows: *Ladies of the Jury*, *St. Louis Vaudeville*, *Whistling in the Dark*, *The Mayor and the Manicure*, and *The Royal Family*. These

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>59</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 435-36.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>61</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 90.

<sup>62</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 35.

play choices appeared to meet Flanagan’s artistic criteria and budgetary limits of no more than \$50 a week for royalties.

Following the FTP’s Manual of Instructions, Kansas City initially relied on the Resident Theatre, its existing, non-profit, community theatre with a record of “proven excellence,” as its FTP sponsor.<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, in the only written history of the Resident, author Richard Piland makes no mention of FTP performances in connection with this organization, nor was he even aware of the Resident’s involvement.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, his existing documentation provides some information regarding its director, actors, production staff, and performances in 1936.

Despite the intricate web of administrators involved, Kansas City broke the record for organization. According to the *Federal Theatre* bulletin, “The Kansas City Federal Theatre completed organization routine and opened the doors for its first play within three weeks, making a record for getting started. During this short period, ‘Ladies of the Jury’ was completely rehearsed, sets and costumes were designed and built, and bookings were made for an initial tour of the company.”<sup>65</sup> The Kansas City unit managed this feat because *Ladies of the Jury* had been previously produced at the Resident Theatre in 1934. Its director, W. Zolley Lerner, had previously completed a run of *Othello* on January 12. Immediately after the closing run of *Ladies of the Jury* in Kansas City, he would go on to open *Louder Please* at the Resident on March 2.<sup>66</sup>

### *Ladies of the Jury*

*Ladies of the Jury* originally premiered in New York City in 1929 at the Erlanger Theatre starring Mrs. Fiske (Minnie Maddern Fiske) and staged by her husband, Harrison Grey Fiske.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Flanagan, “Instructions for Federal Theatre Project,” 2.

<sup>64</sup> Richard Piland, “email to author,” March 13, 2012.

<sup>65</sup> “Kansas City Breaks All Speed Records”, *Federal Theatre*, Volume 2, Number 2, 1936:32.

<sup>66</sup> Stephanie Ann Kelman, *Arthur Wayland Ellison: A Kansas City Actor* (Kansas City: University of Missouri – Kansas City, 2006), 75.

<sup>67</sup> Fred Ballard, *Ladies of the Jury* (New York: Samuel French, 1929).

Mrs. Fiske had been a favorite of Kansas City audiences since she first came in 1885.<sup>68</sup> The play was a huge success for Mrs. Fiske and, according to author Archie Binns, the opening night created a parade of motor cars that lasted for forty-five minutes and was “the last glamorous cavalcade of the 1920’s.”<sup>69</sup>

According to Flanagan’s records, Kansas City was the first unit to produce this play in the FTP. It opened on February 15 at the Resident and ran for five performances before touring much of Missouri. Subsequent performances of *Ladies of the Jury* appeared in Los Angeles, Omaha, San Diego, Denver, San Bernardino, and Detroit.<sup>70</sup> *The East Echo* stated, “This play was selected because a large number of characters are needed for its production. Each of the parts has about equal importance except that of Mrs. Livingston Baldwin Crane.”<sup>71</sup> Mrs. Fiske played this leading role of a high society woman. In the Kansas City FTP production, this role went to Margaret Hillias who also played the role at the Resident’s production in 1934.

This light, three-act comedy by Fred Ballard, set in 1929, opens with a young and beautiful woman, Mrs. Yvette Gordon, who is accused of murdering her older and wealthy husband. Her maid swears she caught Mrs. Gordon in the act. For the trial, there are six men and six women on the jury. Mrs. Crane is the last to be selected after making a rather memorable entrance. She continually questions the judge and witnesses as the trial progresses.

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<sup>68</sup> Londré, *The Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 146.

<sup>69</sup> Archie Binns, *Mrs. Fiske and the American Theatre*, (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc. 1955), 372.

<sup>70</sup> Staff of Fenwick Library, *Catalog – Calendar*, 87. There is an important discrepancy that must be noted here. The *George Mason Catalog-Calendar* lists the opening night as February 8, 1936, but a brief announcement about the opening appears in the *Kansas City Star* on February 15, 1936. The story explained that the show would be premiering that evening at the Resident Theatre, but the audience for the night would be limited to a previously invited audience which included government officials from the city, county, and WPA. The very next day, February 16, the *Star* printed the review of the performance. Flanagan’s Arena also lists the opening as February 15, 1936. Based on these facts, I believe the actual opening was on February 15.

<sup>71</sup> *The East Echo*, “Government Provides Employment For Persons Connected With Stage,” (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, May 13, 1936).

Act II opens with the jurors confined to the jury room. Mr. Pressley, the foreman, immediately calls for a vote. All the jurors except Mrs. Crane vote guilty. Her dissent irritates most of the jurors who just want to go home. Throughout the remainder of the act, Mrs. Crane tries to make her case by appealing to any vice necessary. She buys food for several jurors, compliments others, has clothes delivered for the ladies (because they will be staying overnight), and offers jobs to others. By the end of Act II, she changes the majority vote to not guilty.

Act III dawns on the third day in the jury room. The jurors are beginning to wake and everyone looks disheveled and uncomfortable. All jurors have changed their vote to not guilty except for Miss Pratt, the old spinster, and Mr. Pressley. Mrs. Crane stages a rather elaborate fight and accident that renders Mr. Pressley unconscious. When he wakes up, he is led to believe he attempted to murder a female juror in the room during his rage. The victim exclaims she will tell the bailiff what happened unless another vote is taken. Mr. Pressley calls another vote and changes his own, which in turn encourages Miss Pratt to change hers. The play ends rather abruptly with a speech from Mrs. Crane extolling the patience and virtue of the other jurors.

The 1936 FTP production originally included twenty-one actors and nine technical workers. All but one of the cast members were unemployed prior the FTP.<sup>72</sup> According to various newspaper clippings from all over Missouri, this number fluctuated over the next several months, with actors doubling on parts when needed. *The Sedalia Times* review of March 20<sup>th</sup> provides the most complete cast and crew list:

Mrs. Livingston Baldwin Crane – Margaret Hillias  
 Lilly Pratt – Alice Ellis  
 Cynthia Tate/Evelyn Snow/Susanne – Mary K. Hand  
 Mayme Mixter/Mrs. Gordon – Evalina H. Sloan  
 Mrs. Dace - Lulie W. Davis  
 Mrs. Maguire – Florence Willyard  
 Jay J. Pressley – Sherridan Davidson [sic]

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<sup>72</sup> *Kansas City Star*, “‘Ladies of the Jury’ by WPA,” February 16, 1936.



Spencer B. Dazey/Judge Fish – Her[s]chel Weiss  
 Alonzo Beal – Albert H. Spaght  
 Tonny Theodophulus – Bradford Crandall  
 Steve Bromm – Fred C. Vance  
 Andrew Mackaig – Don Melrose  
 Halsey Van Style – Clark B. Felgar  
 Rutherford Dale – Fred C. Vance  
 Dr. Quincy Adams James/Officer of the Court – Harry Hamlin  
 Clerk of the Court – Wilbert Dawson  
 Stage Director - G.A. McNabb  
 Scenic Designer - Mr. Fogg  
 Mistress of wardrobe – Opal O’Donnohue  
 Master of Properties – George McCullough  
 Electricians – Joseph J. Lamble, George Pence  
 Carpenters – Charles Renne, Charles M. Hahn, Al K. White  
 Stagehands – Charles Hahn, Joseph Lawrence  
 Usher – Frank Walker<sup>73</sup>

The article (along with others) reiterates Lerner as the director in charge of casting and rehearsals. The show also included two orchestras--an all-white orchestra under the direction of H.O.Wheeler and a Negro orchestra directed by Dan Blackburn. Several musical selections were played for thirty minutes before the show began and during intermission.<sup>74</sup> Brief biographies of the production’s creative team suggest most were experienced and well-respected members of the Kansas City theatre community.

Zolley Lerner, originally from Kansas City, attended Westport High School and the University of Nebraska where he received a Masters of Arts in 1932. Upon replacing Jerome Mayer at the Resident Theatre in 1933, he brought new ideas and his understanding of community theatre to the Resident which in turn bolstered support. Lerner frequently performed and directed productions at the Resident for seven years until 1940, when “he was invited to be the first pupil in a new Twentieth Century Fox ‘directorial school’ program designed to develop full fledged [sic] film directors from among directors recruited at little theatre groups around the

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<sup>73</sup> *Sedalia Times*, “WPA Play Draws Praise,” (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, March 20, 1936).

<sup>74</sup> *Kansas City Star*, “Ladies of the Jury’ by WPA.”

country. After an eighteen month program, Lerner would begin his film directing career with a new studio decreed name: Thomas Z. Loring."<sup>75</sup> Lerner did return to Kansas City to guest direct a few productions over the ensuing years.

Harry O. (H.O.) Wheeler, the director of the white orchestra, was born on March 24, 1861 in Germany. He was married to Marie Wheeler and wrote many marches such as *Ararat March* and others over the years while performing with his band throughout Kansas City for a variety of events. Before his time with the WPA, he was the conductor of the Third Regimental Band of Kansas City.<sup>76</sup> Wheeler presented one of his new marches at the opening of *Ladies of the Jury* entitled, "The WPA March," which had only been heard once before.<sup>77</sup>

Dan Blackburn, the director of the "Negro" orchestra, was born on July 10, 1887 in St. Joseph, Louisiana and married Hazel Bryant. Before moving to Kansas City in 1894, this African American musician apprenticed with a band in Illinois. In 1915 he organized the Knights Templar Band and led the Municipal Band in Parade Park for a Sunday night concert series during the summer months by 1919. He eventually helped create the Colored Musicians' Union Local 627.<sup>78</sup> Blackburn died on August 25, 1956.

Margaret Hillias, who played the title role, was born June 24, 1910 in Council Bluffs, Iowa to Anna and Marmaduke Hillias. At some point the family moved to Nevada, Missouri and then again to the Kansas City area where she began acting. Hillias married an actor, Owen Mullinax, in 1931 and took one year off from the theatre to raise an infant daughter, Carole Lee, born January 31, 1932. Mullinax and Hillias divorced two years into their marriage. She

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<sup>75</sup> Piland, *Resident Theatre*, 30.

<sup>76</sup> *East Echo*, "Government Provides Employment For Persons Connected With Stage."

<sup>77</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post*, "WPA Players to Present Comedy Saturday Night," (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, February 15, 1936).

<sup>78</sup> *Musicians Local 627 and the Mutual Musicians Foundation: The Cradle of Kansas City Jazz*, 2003, <http://library.umkc.edu/spec-col/local627/text/introduction/bands.htm> (accessed March 18, 2012).

appeared in every Resident Theatre production from January of 1933 through November of 1934 when she decided to leave for New York. She eventually returned to Kansas City and to the Resident appearing in more productions and even teaching. Nevada's first opportunity to see Hillias after she had been acting for some time in the city was during her tour with the FTP.

In a 1935 article in a local Kansas City magazine, the author writes, "The story of Margaret Hillias is practically synonymous with the story of the Little Theater in Kansas City, at least from the days of the Missouri Theatre. The Blackfriars, the Provincials, the Resident, as well as some lesser organizations, counted on her with a consistency that was almost pathetic."<sup>79</sup> Hillias travelled with a road company and performed with local stock companies as well as ventured into radio work all before the FTP. Her first production on the Resident stage was *Hotel Universe* by Philip Barry in January of 1933 as Hope Ames. After appearing in nine more productions there through 1935, a reviewer of the FTP version of *Ladies of the Jury* wrote, "Margaret Hillias, whose portrayal of Mrs. Livingston Baldwin Crane of the 'very, very' Cranes was entirely up to her standard."<sup>80</sup> Hillias obviously had a good reputation in the area.

Hillias did not appear in Resident shows in 1936, which fits with her tenure in the FTP. In March of 1937, she directed at the community theater in Hutchinson, Kansas.<sup>81</sup> Yet in April of 1937, she appeared at the Resident Theatre as Julia Blake in *Bury the Dead* by Irwin Shaw and then again in October of that year in *Excursion* by Victor Wolfson as Martha. (Her five-year-old daughter, Carole Lee, also appeared in the production as Pauline Winch.)

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<sup>79</sup> "May We Present Margaret Hillias," *Future*, February 15, 1935, 5.

<sup>80</sup> *Kansas City Star*, "'Ladies of the Jury' by WPA."

<sup>81</sup> *Hutchinson Kansas News*, "Margaret Hillias To Direct," March 3, 1937, <http://newspaperarchive.com/hutchinson-news/1937-03-03/page12> (accessed March 17, 2012)

During the 1940s, Hillias was an announcer and news commentator on KCMO.<sup>82</sup> She also directed *Guest in the House* by Hagar Wilde and Dale Eunson and *The Bishop Misbehaves* by Frederick Jackson and taught classes at the Resident drama school at night. In 1947, “Peg” Hillias (a name change) played Eunice Hubbell in *Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams with Marlon Brando for approximately two years, a role she reprised in the 1951 movie version. She also appeared as Mrs. Darling in the 1950 Broadway revival of *Peter Pan* for about nine months. Hillias passed away on March 18, 1960 in Kansas City from complications of heart surgery.

Sheridan Davidson appeared in *Ladies of the Jury* with the FTP as the prosecuting attorney, Halsey Van Styne. Of his performance, the *Star* reviewer wrote, “Sherriden [sic] Davidson, whose prosecuting attorney was a revelation of shysterism, bellowed his opponent down and ultimately came to blows in the courtroom.”<sup>83</sup> Born July 29, 1888 in Chicago Illinois, Davidson lived in the Kansas City area for ten years before his death from cancer of the larynx in 1941 after serving as a WPA recreational supervisor. In 1937 after his FTP tenure, he played the Editor in *Bury the Dead* by Irwin Shaw and the Honorable Sir Arthur Tottington in *Libel* by Edward Wood at the Resident.<sup>84</sup>

Alice Ellis, a successful British actress in the FTP production, received rave reviews for her portrayal of Mrs. Pratt. A reviewer stated, “honors of the evening were stolen by ... Alice Ellis, the doughty juror who held out to the last, showed a fine portrayal of the part.”<sup>85</sup> After her FTP appearance, she performed in several Resident Theatre productions as Mrs. Geasling in

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<sup>82</sup> Leon Fitch, “Finch Enjoyed Paul Letters; Wants More of Same Kind,” *The Billboard*, January 29, 1944, 45, <http://books.google.com>, (accessed March 17, 2012).

<sup>83</sup> *Kansas City Star*, “Ladies of the Jury' by WPA.” Davidson’s first name is presumably spelled incorrectly in the *Kansas City Star* review. Most programs at the Resident bill him as Sheridan Davidson. His death certificate also uses Sheridan Davidson.

<sup>84</sup> “Kansas City Local Fine Arts Program Collection”, *Resident Theatre Programs*, Missouri Valley Special Collections, compiler.

<sup>85</sup> *Kansas City Star*, “Ladies of the Jury' by WPA.”

*Excursion* (1937), Mrs. Rockett in the one-act play, *Fumed Oak*, by Noel Coward (1939), Mrs. Northrup in *When We Are Married* by J.B. Priestly (1940), and as Mrs. Kennedy in *Jason* by Samson Raphaelson (1942) under the married name Alice Ellis Bail.

Little is known regarding other actors' careers before or after this production. The *Star* reviewer believed Evalina H. Sloan's part as Mrs. Gordon, the accused woman, "was over-acted, but Miss Sloan after the first act went into the jury room as an ex-chorine juror and did a fine job of it. In a first act portrayal that swayed between the serious and the ridiculous, Miss Sloan lost control of her voice and spent most of the act screaming at various witnesses."<sup>86</sup> Herschel Weiss, who played the Judge and a juror, appeared in the original cast of *White Cargo* by Leon Gordon on Broadway. Weiss had previously performed in the St. Joseph area the year before in *Christ Before Pilate*, a play he had written and directed that won a state-wide Sunday School contest. Weiss also wrote *Sleepy Valley*. The prosecuting attorney, played by Clark Felgar, recounted his history in St. Joseph, Missouri: "I made my first public appearance here forty years ago in Streickbein Gardens...with the Boston Opera Company."<sup>87</sup> Crandall Bradford (or Bradford Crandall), who played Tony Theodophulus, had previously performed on show boats and in cities around the country.

According to most reviews, the audience appreciated the hard work of these actors, directors, and musicians. After opening night, the *Kansas City Star* reviewer wrote that *Ladies of the Jury* was presented "ably" and "In the biting satire on our Anglo-Saxon system of trial by peers, the hilarious progress of righteousness moved in its unswerving path."<sup>88</sup> While Midwest audiences seemed to enjoy the production, it did not question social and cultural hegemony or

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. Chorine is another term for chorus girl.

<sup>87</sup> *St. Joseph News-Press*, "Ex-Stage Stars Appear Happy in WPA Comedy," (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, March 26, 1936).

<sup>88</sup> *Kansas City Star*, "'Ladies of the Jury' by WPA."

reflect the region's history; both aims of Flanagan for the FTP. She wrote that the production was "favorably though somewhat mildly reviewed by the press."<sup>89</sup>

### **Touring *Ladies of the Jury***

Touring FTP productions was in line with Hallie Flanagan's desire for the FTP to provide entertainment to nearby cities and smaller, rural communities:

While the primary aim of the Federal Theatre Project is to return theatre workers to their profession, bound up with that aim are others equally important, one of which is affording theatre entertainment to people who for the past few years have been unable to afford such entertainment. Any estimate of the numbers affected by the Federal Theatre Project must include not only the people actually employed on the stage, but the hundreds of thousands watching such performances.<sup>90</sup>

Flanagan continually emphasized that many rural audiences saw live theatre for the first time, often in small towns that did not have a theatre venue.

So, after its brief February run in Kansas City, *Ladies of the Jury* toured for seven months across Missouri (and Kansas) through September. The actors worked approximately forty-eight hours a week rehearsing at the Resident and travelled outside of Kansas City at least twice a week via Greyhound bus and a truck that carried the scenery.<sup>91</sup> As Koch wrote, in an effort to save money, "Performances were usually limited to communities within one hundred miles of Kansas City in order to allow the company to return home each evening, a practice that eliminated the necessity of paying a three dollar subsistence [sic] wage to each worker."<sup>92</sup> The *Kansas City Star* reported that *Ladies of the Jury* would provide performances "at CCC camps at Butler, Warrensburg, Liberty, Carrollton, and Savannah, MO.; the veteran's hospital at Excelsior Springs, the soldiers [sic] home at Leavenworth [KS], and elsewhere according to William B.

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<sup>89</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 178.

<sup>90</sup> Hallie Flanagan, "First Six Months-Report; Third Year-Report," Federal Theatre Project Administrative Documents Box 1, n.d. *Library of Congress Online*, <http://rs5.loc.gov/ammem/fedtp/fthome.html>, 31 (accessed December 14, 2010).

<sup>91</sup> *Maryville Daily Forum*, "Federal Theatre Project Explained," (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, March 24, 1936) and "Stage Attraction Please Audience At H.S. Auditorium," (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, May 28, 1936).

<sup>92</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 91.

Stone, assistant director.”<sup>93</sup> Despite this announcement, Perry does not report any performances at Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps in his reports, and no written record exists regarding boys’ responses at camps. Perry does report four performances at institutions.<sup>94</sup> Performances were usually given in high school and junior college auditoriums with free admission. (See Appendix B for known touring itinerary.)

Given Flanagan’s commitment to the national audience, audience reactions recorded in local newspapers and *Federal Theatre* publications were very important to the success of the FTP.<sup>95</sup> The Kansas City unit received excellent reviews from other areas, particularly from rural areas. After a performance in Nevada, Missouri, the local paper reported the following:

In spite of the storm, a large crowd witnessed the performance which was given by an excellent cast. There was no admission charge. The troupe arrived from Kansas City by bus Friday afternoon and left after the performance. The troupe, recognized as one of the outstanding units in the WPA theatrical project, carries its own technical staff.<sup>96</sup>

Jane DeHart Mathews relates a story regarding the audience reaction outside of Kansas City stated in a letter written to W.B. Stone:

In Missouri, where a traveling [sic] troupe was performing *Ladies of the Jury*, a small-town barber wrote to the Federal Theatre officials expressing his approval of the entire Project, while a local doctor noted that the players had conducted themselves like ladies and gentleman and people coming from twenty miles around had stood to see the performance.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> *Kansas City Star*, “Theater Project in Bow: First Production of WPA Group to Be Given Tonight,” February 13, 1936.

<sup>94</sup> Perry, *Semi-Monthly Reports*.

<sup>95</sup> She featured letters from audience members in the *Federal Theatre* publications. At first the publication was just a bulletin but it eventually grew in circulation being sold in bookstores and newsstands. It acquired a name change to *Federal Theatre Magazine*. In a document entitled “Excerpts From Recent Letters,” over fifty quotes from different individuals all over the country expressed their opinions of the *Federal Theatre Magazine*. Two university officials from Kansas; Allen Crafton of the University of Kansas and Alice Wrigley of the University of Wichita and one from Missouri; Donald Rhynsberger of the University of Missouri Workshop, are featured. Crafton, said, “FEDERAL THEATRE MAGAZINE gives me the information I want about the project, and that I can get in no other way. May you all continue with the good work begun by Mrs. Flanagan.” Date Unknown.

<sup>96</sup> *Nevada Daily Mail*, “Miss Margaret Hillias in Leading Role of ‘Ladies of the Jury,’” June 6, 1936, <http://news.google.com/newspapers> (accessed March 11, 2012).

<sup>97</sup> Jane DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre, 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 85.

At another unnamed town, an FTP report noted: “President George W. Stone, of the Appleton County Fair Association, writes of their three performances: ‘Although the hot weather and the effects of the drought kept our crowds small each day and night, we could not take care of the crowds around the Federal Theatre shows.’”<sup>98</sup> William B. Stone, assistant district director of the project, went on to explain that the administration had been receiving a good response from the rural audiences and claimed, “By witnessing these Federal Theatre plays, many agricultural people here are becoming convinced that the charge of boondoggling is without foundation; and they say they could never have appreciated the splendid work of the WPA without having seen a manifestation such as our little theatre project provides.”<sup>99</sup>

In a letter from Robert N. Jennings of Hamilton, Missouri, he wrote:

Of all the relief measures fostered by the government, the Federal Theatre strikes me as the one not only paying the greatest temporary dividend, but one destined to be most prolific of good and permanent results. Am I too optimistic in hoping that day is not far off when the units of the project will be greatly augmented and the plan established as a permanent policy of our educational system?

If the renaissance [sic] of an ancient institution that once contributed so much to our country’s welfare, if the revival of an art that was good enough for Abraham Lincoln to enjoy, if granting employment to professional performers for giving entertainment and enlightenment and wholesome mental stimulation to all who desire to partake of it – if all this be boondoggling, then give me more boondoggling. I crave it, as I know must do millions of others.

Will you convey my congratulations to the cast of ‘Ladies of the Jury’ as well as to the instrumentalists, vocalists and technicians who afforded us in this little town of Hamilton the unusual privilege of witnessing a highly professional performance?<sup>100</sup>

These audience responses suggest that the Kansas City tours of *Ladies of the Jury* were successful among rural and urban audiences. After a total of seventy-two performances, the

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<sup>98</sup> *Federal Theatre*, “Kansas City Breaks All Speed Records,” October, 1936, 32.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Pierre de Rohan, “Curtain Calls by Mail,” *Federal Theatre* 2 (1936): 35.



production closed in September.<sup>101</sup> Despite this and other successes across the United States, the FTP continued to be a controversial program that drew plenty of attention; good and bad.

### *St. Louis Vaudeville*

St. Louis Vaudeville, produced by its FTP unit, opened in St. Louis on March 12, 1936 at the Municipal Auditorium in St. Louis. The show was composed of eight acts and a dramatic sketch which was presented to city and state institutions, hospitals, and CCC camps in the St. Louis area. According to a St. Louis newspaper, they were to tour each institution once a month, changing their acts each month for a new show, with enough money to keep them employed through May.<sup>102</sup> However there is no evidence showing that the St. Louis FTP ever performed in Kansas City, despite its listing under the Kansas City FTP in the *Catalog-Calendar of Productions*.

The following list indicates the acts billed as of February 19. Bill Shores, stage name: Chief Buffalo Mohawk did fire-eating and an Indian war dance; Agnes Alton, the original Sis Hopkins of vaudeville, performed comedic singing and dancing, with her most well-known number being, “Ma, He’s Makin’ Eyes at Me.” Juggler, Fred Pero, was a former Ringling Brothers clown and vaudevillian. James O’Leary was a sixty-five-year-old ventriloquist. Tumbler Henry Franz and magician Archie Skidmore performed a comedic act, “The Two Chinks.” The remaining acts were a bull-whip feature performed by “Big Jim” Jenkins, a comedic act from “Smiles” Rogers, a blues-singer by the name of Agnes Willard, and Bertie Bierman, female impersonator. Kurt Keene was the master of ceremonies and performed in the

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<sup>101</sup> According to Flanagan, *Ladies of the Jury* finally closed September 4, 1936. This fits with Koch’s findings as well. He states that the show was on tour for seven months which would put it closing in September. While Perry’s reports state the show continues performances after September 15 with a total of seventy-two performances in all, the evidence between the three different sources indicates the show ended in September.

<sup>102</sup> *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “Veteran Stage Performers Perparing for WPA Show,” (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, February 19, 1936).

dramatic sketch, “My Boy Jim - Story of a Prodigal Son” with three others. Keene had played bit parts in movies for years in Los Angeles. All of these actors were under the direction of Charles Moran with Jack Boyer on piano.<sup>103</sup>

The St. Louis FTP was well-received by its audience. After a performance in St. Louis, Estelle Hobein with the Girls Home of St. Mary’s expressed her gratitude and appreciation of it by saying, “The little drama was particularly interesting. The accordion player was a great favorite with the girls, as most of them love music. We enjoyed all the other numbers also.”<sup>104</sup> A Boy Scout Council director stated, “You could not have picked a better program for us and every performer seemed to throw himself into the spirit of the affair in a very fine way.”<sup>105</sup>

Despite these praises, the St. Louis FTP did not have the same impression on its superiors. FTP administrators did not believe the St. Louis FTP was capable of more than vaudeville.<sup>106</sup> As Hall discovered, “In 1936, The Federal Theatre Project cut funding to St. Louis’ traveling vaudeville units for not charging even a ‘nominal’ admission and because the shows were ‘of mediocre quality.’”<sup>107</sup>

### **Dramatics Program**

According to *Kansan*, a dramatics program was launched by the recreational division of the WPA in March 1936. This program was on the Kansas side of Kansas City, which did not have an official FTP unit. The courses included “puppetry, charades, pantomimic plays, and lessons in grace, poise, diction and correct speaking. For the young and intermediate groups

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<sup>103</sup> An article written January 31<sup>st</sup> gave background information on some of the performers and acts, but an article on February 19<sup>th</sup> stated that there would be eight acts and some of the acts from the first story are not mentioned. It is possible they were cut or the performers found other jobs. The acts that are not mentioned in the later story are The Clark duo, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Clark who performed fancy bag-punching and Paul Gehring, former German stock company actor.

<sup>104</sup> Estelle Hobein, “Curtain Calls By Mail,” *Federal Theatre*, Vol. 2 No. 4, April/May 1936, 29.

<sup>105</sup> Charles H. Mills, “Curtain Calls By Mail,” *Federal Theatre*, Vol. 2 No. 2, 1936, 35.

<sup>106</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 96.

<sup>107</sup> Elizabeth Armstrong Hall, “Hiding In Plain Sight,” *St. Louis Magazine*, May 2006, <http://www.stlmag.com/St-Louis-Magazine/May-2006/Hiding-In> (accessed March 12, 2012).

there will be minstrel shows and special programs. The oldsters will be given courses both in formal and informal dramatics and in the business of directing, setting stages, designing scenery, arranging costumes, stage lighting, and handling properties.”<sup>108</sup>

### *Whistling in the Dark*

*Whistling in the Dark* was a fairly common piece for FTP units, including Kansas City. Written in 1930 under the title *Melodrama* by Laurence Gross and Edward Childs Carpenter and then again published as *The Perfect Crime* in 1931, it was eventually published as *Whistling in the Dark* in 1933. The play originally premiered at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City on January 19, 1932 and ran through February, 1933.<sup>109</sup>

The KC FTP unit began rehearsals around March 23 and opened the play on May 28 for thirteen performances at the Ararat Temple for approximately one thousand people. The opening audience included guests of the Kansas City WPA staff, city hall, and the courthouse, but no reviews of Kansas City performances were published.<sup>110</sup> Per Perry’s reports, the play was performed a total of thirteen times: one performance on May 28 (per June 1 report), one performance (per June 15 report), two performances (per August 1 report), eight performances (per August 31 report), and one performance (per September 15 report).<sup>111</sup> This play was performed by five other FTP units in Connecticut, San Diego, Salem, Massachusetts, New York, and New Orleans.

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<sup>108</sup> *Kansan*, “Dramatics Program for All Ages Being Launched Here by WPA,” (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, March 18, 1936).

<sup>109</sup> Laurence Gross and Edward Childs Carpenter, *Whistling In the Dark* (New York: Samuel French, 1933) and [www.ibdb.com](http://www.ibdb.com), (accessed November 3, 2012).

<sup>110</sup> *Kansas City Times*, “WPA Play to 1,000,” (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, May 28, 1936). The March 24 *Maryville Daily Forum* reported that the KC FTP play was in rehearsal and Perry expected it to be ready by April 15. Perry’s semi-monthly reports to his superiors confirm this with a stated first rehearsal date of March 23, but an expected opening date of May 25. The *Catalog-Calendar of Productions* lists the opening as April 16, 1936, but Perry’s reports state May 28, 1936. Most of Perry’s reports state May 28 as the opening, but the August 31 report states April 16. This may be where the discrepancy occurred for the *Catalog-Calendar*. Based on newspaper evidence and report evidence, I feel the May 28 opening date is accurate.

<sup>111</sup> Perry, *Semi-Monthly Reports*.

This melodramatic mystery in three acts dramatizes a young murder mystery writer, Wallace Porter, who stumbles into a nest of gangsters intent on taking out a cop. After a few drinks, Porter brags about his ability to write the perfect murder. The gangsters seize on this and hold him and his fiancée, Toby Van Buren, hostage, forcing him to come up with a full-proof plan to take out the cop. Once he finally does, he tries to fool the gang by switching a packet of cyanide with a packet of powdered sugar to no avail. In an act of desperation he rewires a radio to be used as a telephone and tricks the gangsters into revealing their plan, where they are holding him, and how to save the cop. The cops show up just as the boss is about to shoot Mr. Porter. The writer ends up saving everyone as well as bringing down the boss of the gang.

### *The Mayor and the Manicure*

Kansas City was reportedly the only FTP unit to produce this twenty-minute, one-act farce written by George Ade in 1907 and published in 1923. This vaudeville-inspired sketch originally opened at the Colonial Theatre in New York in January of 1908 and spotlighted Eugene Jepson as the mayor in his first starring role. The remaining actors in the original cast included Perdita Hudspeth as Genevieve Le Clair, the manicure; George Stuart Christie as the mayor's son, Wallie; and, Elise Dean, as Wallie's fiancée, Ruth.<sup>112</sup>

Although the *Catalog Calendar of Productions* lists the *Mayor and the Manicure* with an opening date of July 5, 1935, Perry's semi-monthly reports tell a different story by suggesting that the play was never actually performed in Kansas City.<sup>113</sup> No reviews of Kansas City performances were published. In *Arena*, Flanagan mentions that "Incidentally, the George Ade

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<sup>112</sup> *New York Dramatic Mirror*, "The Vaudeville Stage," January 4, 1908, <https://docs.google.com/fultonhistory.com/Newspaper/NewYorkDramaticMirror>, (accessed October 2012).

<sup>113</sup> The play's first rehearsal date is listed as May 1<sup>st</sup> with an approximate opening date of June 15<sup>th</sup>. As the reports continue, the opening date gets pushed back several times with the last one stating September 3<sup>rd</sup> on the August 15<sup>th</sup> report. The report dated August 31<sup>st</sup> does not list the play in rehearsal nor does it list it as performed. It appears as though the play was never actually put into performance.

farce, about which church and school authorities wrote that it brought enjoyment to desolate people, was one later criticized for its title on the floor of Congress.”<sup>114</sup>

In Springfield, a small-to-average town, the Honorable Otis Milford “owns the street railway, and the telephone company, and the evening paper, and the box factory, and about half the buildings on Main Street.”<sup>115</sup> Just before the mayor’s son returns home from college, Genevieve goes to see the mayor to claim that his son Wallie pursued, made love, and promised to marry her while living in Atwater (the college town). She knows he is about to be married and is clearly looking for money to keep the situation quiet. As the mayor questions his son, Wallie finally confesses to an affair with Genevieve. The mayor dismisses him and tricks Genevieve into revealing her secrets and then gives her \$1,000 as a payment to keep her quiet. When Wallie’s fiancée comes in to the office, she accidentally reveals how the mayor tricked Genevieve. The play ends with both the mayor and Genevieve happy with their outcomes and impressed with each other’s abilities.

### ***The Royal Family***

*The Royal Family*, a three-act comedy written in 1927 by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, parodies the Barrymores, the great acting family. The play premiered at the Selwyn Theatre in New York City on December 28, 1927.<sup>116</sup> The show required sixteen actors and one set. According to Perry’s 1936 reports, the show began rehearsals in Kansas City on July 15 and was scheduled to open on September 15, a date in agreement with the *Catalog-Calendar of Productions*. However, Perry’s subsequent reports indicate no performances by September 30 and his October 15 report drops the show entirely. In addition to no published reviews of Kansas

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<sup>114</sup>Flanagan, *Arena*, 174.

<sup>115</sup> George Ade, “Mayor and the Manicure,” *One Act Plays for Stage and Study*, Vol. 1 (New York: Samuel French, 1923), 30.

<sup>116</sup> George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, *The Royal Family* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company: 1927).

City performances, this evidence suggests that the play apparently never opened. Nevertheless, *The Royal Family* was produced by two other FTP units in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Waterloo, Iowa.

The action revolves around the three women of the Cavendish family; the matriarch, Fanny Cavendish, her daughter, Julie, and Julie's daughter, Gwen. Fanny was a great actress in her day and Julie is the current star. Gwen, eschewing acting, marries and has a baby. Seeing her joy, Julie decides to give up her acting career to marry a former fiancé. Just as she is ready to leave, her brother arrives with a new play the entire family begins to get very excited about. Even Gwen hints that she might want to give it a try. In all the commotion over the new play and Gwen's baby, the family does not immediately notice Fanny's lack of participation in the festivities. Once her absence is noted, they discover that she has silently passed away in her chair.

According to Flanagan and FTP records, there was another production in the works and several other projects in discussion in September of 1936. The Kansas City FTP looked as though it was on the path to long-term success. Unfortunately, events would transpire that led to the closing of these projects as well as the Kansas City FTP unit as a whole.

## Chapter Three

### The End of the Kansas City Federal Theatre Project

The Kansas City FTP production of *Ladies of the Jury* stopped touring in mid-September. According to Perry's reports, actors began rehearsal on a new play, *It Can't Happen Here* on September 14, 1936, an ambitious, nation-wide FTP project scheduled to open simultaneously on October 27 at twenty-one theatres in seventeen states.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, communication between Flanagan and W.B. Stone, Jackson County's Assistant WPA director, indicated additional interests in some new productions or projects for the Kansas City unit.<sup>118</sup> Flanagan thought *Triple A Plowed Under* might be a good choice for the unit in the heart of the agricultural region. Stone liked the idea and also suggested a potential production regarding the Santa Fe Trail. In July, Stone described a showboat he found for possible performances as having "unusually comfortable sleeping quarters, a completely equipped kitchen and dining room, refrigeration, an electric light plant, equipment for purifying drinking water, bed linen, blankets, and in fact everything that is required for comfortably housing the people employed on the project."<sup>119</sup> Exciting plans were in the works for the unit.

*It Can't Happen Here* was scheduled to run for three weeks in Kansas City and then go on tour throughout Missouri. While the *Federal Theatre* bulletin listed J.C. Moffitt, a Hollywood screenwriter who had collaborated with Sinclair Lewis in dramatizing his novel for the FTP, as the director for Kansas City, the *Kansas City Star* announced a plan to present the show in the new Municipal Auditorium, listing Lerner as director of the play.<sup>120</sup> The show had been cast, and

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<sup>117</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 115.

<sup>118</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 96-97.

<sup>119</sup> Quoted in Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 97.

<sup>120</sup> Rohan, Pierre de, "It IS Happening Here--And Everywhere!," *Federal Theatre*, 1936, 7 and *Kansas City Star*, "Lewis Novel WPA Play: A Kansas City Cast to Produce 'It Can't Happen Here'," (NARA, RG-69, Box 38, 1936). Perry's reports also state Lerner as director beginning with September 15 report.

Alice Ellis, a previous lead in *Ladies of the Jury*, was to play Lorinda, another lead role.<sup>121</sup> This provocative play offered Kansas City, and other FTP units across the country, a chance to produce a bold work rather than rely on safe material as the Kansas City unit had done.<sup>122</sup>

A brief summary of the play is necessary to understand the effects it could have caused in Kansas City. A backwoods-type character gains political power and eventually the presidency. He puts young men to work by recruiting them to his militia. An observant newspaper editor and his fellow writer begin to see the violence wrought by this militia to anyone who opposes it or is not in full support of the president. Eventually, the militia murders the editor's son-in-law and the editor joins an underground rebellion. He is discovered and sent to a concentration camp, but attempts an escape to Canada with close friends and family. His daughter ends up sacrificing her life while the editor and the remaining group escape to freedom.

Receiving the rights to the play was a huge stride for the FTP as getting Lewis on board was critical to its nation-wide success. The screen rights had been sold already but the studios were afraid of the problems that could arise from the subject matter. Lewis said of the play, "I prefer to give it to the Federal Theatre for two reasons: first because of my tremendous enthusiasm for its work and, second, because I know I can depend on the Federal Theatre for a non-partisan point of view."<sup>123</sup> This statement helped bolster positive support as the FTP was beginning to come under fire for alleged communist associations. Press coverage of the show's simultaneous openings helped create more interest beyond New York City, as Flanagan noted,

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<sup>121</sup> Rohan, Pierre de, "It IS Happening Here," 17. Alice Ellis's picture is even featured prior to opening.

<sup>122</sup> Susan Quinn, *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times*, (New York: Walker & Company, 2008), 118.

<sup>123</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 120.



“Up to the opening night the newspapers of the country had given 78,000 lines of pro and con comment to *It Can't Happen Here*.”<sup>124</sup>

According to the *Federal Theatre* bulletin, Kansas City “got a late start because of delayed authorization,” therefore unable to participate in the simultaneous openings across the country.<sup>125</sup> No additional detail is given regarding the delay. However, plans for all Kansas City projects were put on hold in August when John McGee, the Regional FTP Director for Missouri at the time, withheld approval. In his August 1 letter to Anita K. Hynes, State director of Women’s and Professional Projects, McGee laid out the changes he felt needed to be made before he would approve moving forward. One of the proposed changes was his perceived need for an FTP state director for Missouri (in addition to Perry and Moran as respective city unit directors). McGee also wanted twenty-five percent non-relief exemptions as well as a chance to re-examine the relief rolls for more qualified individuals. Lastly, he wanted to charge admission for performances.<sup>126</sup>

As no immediate answer to this proposal came, McGee allowed the units to continue over the next three months but only under semi-monthly approval. By October 14 McGee had met with Missouri WPA administration and had received adequate confirmation of the changes to be made. He worked with Hynes who felt it was worth giving the Kansas City unit another six or eight weeks attempting to institute McGee’s changes. She indicated that if after that time, things were not in better shape, the Kansas City unit would be discontinued. As for St. Louis, she intimated that it would be closed.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>125</sup> Rohan, “It IS Happening Here,” 15-16.

<sup>126</sup> Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 97-98.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 99.

Lois Fletcher, a field agent for the FTP, visited the Missouri projects approximately a week after McGee's meeting with Missouri WPA officials and encountered difficulty from State WPA Director, Murray and from Hynes. Murray did not want to allow actors from any other project to participate in the Missouri project nor did he want an outside director for *It Can't Happen Here*. He also would not budge on his prior policy of ten percent non-relief exemption and not charging admissions. Murray's refusal to implement McGee's suggestions was frustrating, but Ms. Hynes saw to it that the Kansas City unit would not perform at all.

When Fletcher met with Hynes, she discovered Hynes had ordered rehearsals of *It Can't Happen Here* to be canceled and refused to affiliate with the Resident Theatre.<sup>128</sup> (Instead the Resident Theatre opened *Winterset* by Maxwell Anderson on October 26).<sup>129</sup> After the meeting with Hynes, Fletcher contacted Hallie Flanagan about the issues she encountered. In a memo to Ellen Woodward, Assistant Administrator in charge of Women's and Professional Projects of the WPA (Hynes's superior), Flanagan recorded details of her conversation with Ms. Hynes. Hynes wanted complete control of the project and to have it run through her office. She felt that the FTP project was under her jurisdiction and she wanted six to eight weeks to bring it in line. Flanagan stated:

I told her that in that case it seemed to me it should be paid for by state funds, and I asked her whether the people could be taken care of under recreation. She said they could be transferred at once to a state recreation project, and that she would prefer this arrangement. I therefore sent Lois Fletcher a wire empowering her to transfer all people in Kansas City and St. Louis now on the Theatre Project, to the state payroll.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Quoted from letter from Lois Fletcher to John McGee on October 30, 1936 in Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 100.

<sup>129</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, "Prize Drama On Resident Stage In 7-Night Run," October 23, 1936. The original opening of *Winterset* was scheduled for October 18 but was pushed back to October 26 to allow for further rehearsal and building of trick stage settings. "Set Back *Winterset* Date," *Kansas City Star*, October 11, 1936.

<sup>130</sup> Quoted from Memo to Ellen Woodward, October 27, 1936 in Koch, *Federal Theatre Project*, 100.

In *Arena*, Flanagan states it a bit differently. She explains that the projects had secured enough support that they were taken over by the state recreation department.<sup>131</sup>

There are no official records to determine if Hynes was true to her word and whether actors were moved to the recreation department, other than the fact that former FTP actor, Sheridan Davidson, became Missouri's WPA Recreation Supervisor.<sup>132</sup> Although the Kansas City unit would have been ready to open *It Can't Happen Here* in just a few weeks, no more shows were presented. Thus ended the Kansas City and St. Louis Federal Theatre Projects.

The question of why the sudden cancellation rises. There are several possible explanations. The possible appointment of Moffitt as director likely caused issues for the Kansas City unit as Flanagan wrote, "Midwest state administrators, for the most part, refused to allow people from our talent sources, Chicago and New York, to be brought into their states, even when expenses, plus return fare, were guaranteed out of federal funds."<sup>133</sup> This is evident in Murray's refusal to allow outside actors and directors. His refusal would have forced the KC unit to rely on Lerner again or find a new director. The *Kansas City Star* announcement on September 16 does not list Moffitt as the director, only as a former member of the *Kansas City Star* staff and collaborator on the play, but does mention Lerner as the unit's director.<sup>134</sup>

The content of the play itself was another likely reason for cancellation of the play. Flanagan writes in *Arena* that Missouri officials wanted to change the script beyond places and names.<sup>135</sup> For those in the administration part of Pendergast's machine, there was good reason for this. Sinclair Lewis's novel closely paralleled events in Germany involving Hitler's rise to

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<sup>131</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 175.

<sup>132</sup> Davidson, Sheridan. *Missouri State Board of Health Standard Certificate of Death*, July 14, 1941, ([http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1941/1941\\_00024110.PDF](http://www.sos.mo.gov/images/archives/deathcerts/1941/1941_00024110.PDF)), accessed March 15, 2012.

<sup>133</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 132.

<sup>134</sup> *Kansas City Star*, "Lewis Novel WPA Play."

<sup>135</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 121.

power as well as events at home regarding Huey Long and Father Coughlin. Pendergast ran Kansas City in a comparable way to the president in the play. He had men, whom were called “goats,” who would enforce his mandates. Those who got in his way often met with violence. The election in 1934 which later turned up much voter fraud from Pendergast’s schemes found four individuals dead at one polling center. The events were eerily similar to those in the play.

The refusal to work with The Resident Theatre also raises questions. *Whistling in the Dark* opened at the Ararat Temple rather than the Resident so the move away from the Resident was already in place. This could have been due in part to the redecoration that occurred during the summer months to the theatre.<sup>136</sup> It is also possible that the Resident’s affiliation with the Jewish Community Center was part of the problem. Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg, who was affiliated with the center, often hosting book reviews and lectures, was an outspoken opponent of Pendergast. While W.B. Stone was excited about the prospects for the KC unit, others above him were not.

The attitude of Hynes and even Murray are similar to other state and city directors. Their positions in the chain of command created issues for the Missouri FTP. Osborne argues, “While the FTP’s central locations in New York City and Washington, DC were a critical factor in many urban successes, the structural deficiencies created an intricate web of tensions and disconnects in smaller FTP communities throughout the country... As such, these units-particularly those relying on the ‘flying squadron’ method to staff major roles in productions – were vulnerable to the whims of state WPA officials, newspapers, local politicians, and funding shortages.”<sup>137</sup> The “structural deficiencies” in Missouri can be seen in Hynes’s and Murray’s desire to control the state units directly without the national FTP’s involvement.

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<sup>136</sup> *Jewish Chronicle*, “Resident Theatre Hold First Auditions Monday In Redecoration Center Playhouse,” September 11, 1936.

<sup>137</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 86-87.

The national FTP outlasted the Kansas City unit by two and half years. The national FTP battled different issues from the Kansas City unit, but both faced political administrations that wanted the FTP either under different control or discontinued altogether. Flanagan summed it up nicely when she wrote, “The Federal Theatre was a microcosm reflecting changes in American attitudes. The reaction developing throughout the country from the summer of 1937 against many aspects of the Washington administration, notably the spending policy, the liberal attitude toward labor, aliens, and members of minority parties, affected all work projects but perhaps most conspicuously one which by the very nature of its medium was before the public.”<sup>138</sup>

Kansas City was a small unit mainly known for producing one very well-received play, *Ladies of the Jury*. Perry’s reports only state one other production (*Whistling in the Dark*) was produced and on a much smaller scale. The plays were a comedy and a melodrama that did not cause any documented stir with the public. Due to these factors, they were largely unnoticed by the national press.<sup>139</sup> This oversight kept them from gaining greater attention that may have saved them from the state administration.

Despite the unfortunate and abrupt end of the Kansas City FTP, the timing may have been in the workers’ favor. According to Flanagan and Hynes, the KC unit was transferred to state recreation projects, but when the same recommendation was given after the end of the FTP nationwide in 1939, FTP workers did not fare as well. In a letter to State WPA Administrators from Assistant Commissioner of the WPA, Florence Kerr, stated, “...it is felt that any general transfer of personnel [personnel released from units of Federal Theatre] to such activities would

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<sup>138</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 347.

<sup>139</sup> The NARA Federal Theatre newspaper clippings for Missouri contained no national papers reporting any performances for the Kansas City or St. Louis unit. The only national coverage of the units is in the *Federal Theatre* bulletins.

be subject to question as an evasion of the intent of Congress in prohibiting theatre projects.”<sup>140</sup> Kerr was referring to community drama ventures within state recreation projects. This made it almost impossible for actors and technicians that had been working for the FTP to get a job in any other WPA project remotely related to theatre. Very few were able to get private contracts and thus returned to relief rolls or whatever job they could find. Because the KC FTP disbanded before this mandate, the workers presumably were transferred to state recreation projects without the same difficulties.

According to Perry’s reports, thousands saw the performances given by the FTP units in Missouri. Many of these individuals saw live theatre for the first time. This was true nationally as well. Osborne writes, “When the FTP ended on June 30, 1939, it left behind hundreds of thousands of people and communities who clamored for its return and strove to continue their own local theatre movements.”<sup>141</sup>

### **Theatre after the Federal Theatre Project**

Despite the end of the FTP in Missouri, existing theatres, such as the Resident Theatre, continued to receive “acclaim and respect” from the drama critics.<sup>142</sup> By 1938, the Resident Theatre School of Drama was established and the theatre itself was beginning to bring in guest stars who had performed on Broadway. It grew from an audience of approximately six hundred in its first season to nearly six thousand by the 1938-1939 season and was gaining national attention.<sup>143</sup>

The remaining theatres presenting exclusively live entertainment all operated into the 1930s, but each had a different ending. The Gilliss Opera House continued to present burlesque

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<sup>140</sup> Quoted from Professional and Service Letter No. 34, dated August 31, 1939 in Flanagan, *Arena*, 368.

<sup>141</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 6.

<sup>142</sup> Piland, *Resident Theatre*, 11 and Stanley Ackerman, “The Resident Theatre of Kansas City, Missouri,” *Theatre Arts*, December 1950, 55.

<sup>143</sup> Piland, *Resident Theatre*, 30.

throughout the 1930s, but eventually closed during World War II while the Orpheum Theatre converted solely to motion pictures by 1938. The Shubert's Missouri Theatre (Folly) "remained dark throughout most of the 1930s when the depression left people with little discretionary income for entertainment," but reopened in 1941 with more risqué shows for soldiers who were looking for something to do during their stop in Kansas City.<sup>144</sup> Finally, Municipal Auditorium, featuring the Little Theatre and the Music Hall, managed to weather the Depression offering legitimate live theatre in the city. Road shows presenting musicals and plays made stops at the Municipal Auditorium throughout the 1930s and beyond.

After the Depression and World War II, several new community, university, and professional theatres arose. After negotiations for a new outdoor theatre began in 1932, the Starlight Theatre eventually opened in 1950 as a major professional theatre in the area. During the 1950s, more community theatres, such as the Bell Road Barn Players (1954) and the Barn Players (1955) were founded. In 1964, Patricia McIlrath, a theatre professor at UMKC, founded the Missouri (Kansas City) Repertory Theatre to integrate professional and educational theatre. More professional theatres, started by individuals who came out of McIlrath's training, followed in the 1960s through the 90s, such as the Coterie (1979), the New Theatre (1992), and Heart of America Shakespeare Festival (1993). These theatres continue to foster Kansas City's cultural reputation as a theatre city.

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<sup>144</sup> Londré, *Enchanted Years of the Stage*, 250.

## Conclusion

The Federal Theatre Project has generated a wide degree of scholarly analysis. The arts projects, according to Sporn, “are unprecedented in the history of modern civil society. There are not ventures of the same kind in Western Euro-American cultures under capitalism to rival them. No ventures of governmental patronage of any kind approach them, not in scope, esthetic aims, or collective methods of creative activity, and particularly not in populism – the attempt to relate the arts to an esthetically ignored section of the social order.”<sup>145</sup> For this reason, scholars have gravitated toward analyzing the project as a whole. As the breadth of the research widens, the need for in-depth analysis of the smaller units which made up the greater whole has surfaced.

While theatre was a vibrant scene in the early 1900s in Kansas City, its waning popularity by the 1930s created a ripe environment for motion pictures, which widened the gap between the two genres. Kansas City was merely an indicator of the national trend in theatre. The city itself was evolving from a small, remote city to a bustling, industrialized metropolis.

Kansas City was also one of several cities run by a “big boss.” Tom Pendergast created a political machine that reached into almost every aspect of Kansas City life. He positioned himself with enough power and connections to shield him from the law for quite some time. As he created jobs and took care of the needy in the city, he had many supporters who were unaware of his illegal activities.

The Great Depression served as an opportunity to strengthen Pendergast’s power. The government began taking control of more humanitarian endeavors which allowed bosses like Pendergast to have access to more money and more jobs. The FTP was one of numerous governmental projects created during the time. Kansas City found its place among others as one of the cities entrusted with an FTP unit.

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<sup>145</sup> Sporn, *Against Itself*, 15.



In the final analysis, the Kansas City FTP unit employed at most, thirty-one actors and workers with a wide variety of theatre backgrounds. For many, the opportunity was a blessing as they were unemployed and on relief rolls. The unit travelled to cities all over Missouri and Kansas receiving much praise for their performances. The administrators directly involved with the day-to-day activities worked hard to see the unit grow and provide even more opportunities, but others along the winding road of bureaucracy saw things differently.

As rehearsals were underway for *It Can't Happen Here*, the unit was abruptly shut down and members transferred to state recreation projects. The reasons for the closure are unclear, although links between the show's plot and the real-life drama being played in Kansas City suggest possibilities. Pendergast's control certainly extended to the state level of the WPA and likely influenced decisions in the city's WPA.<sup>146</sup> Sporn confirms this in his writing, "Appointments [referring to government] were made by the party machines in control at each level of the network. For the most part, the appointments were drawn from party-machine regulars. The arts projects therefore, had a double set of guardians, professionals and politicians, and they were not compatible."<sup>147</sup>

The final numbers according to Perry's reports, account for a total of thirty-one workers at the highest point in the unit. This included six women and twenty-five men, twenty-seven of which were on relief and five on non-relief. There were two supervisory positions (likely Perry and Lerner), twenty professional and technical positions, four skilled positions, five intermediate positions, and two unskilled positions. Four workers were returned to private employment. A total of eighty-five performances were given over the course of seven months. *Ladies of the Jury*

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<sup>146</sup> One of the members of the audition committee was the daughter of a Pendergast machine member; Mary McElroy, daughter of the city manager, Henry McElroy. *Kansas City Journal*, "WPA Players to Present Comedy Saturday Night" and Larsen, *Pendergast!*, 68.

<sup>147</sup> Sporn, *Against Itself*, 66.

was produced seventy-two times while *Whistling in the Dark* was produced thirteen. Of the eighty-five performances, forty-five were in urban centers with a total audience attendance of 21,075, thirty-five in rural areas with an attendance of 40,515, and four in institutions with an attendance of 600. The total attendance of all shows totals 62, 190. The project expenses totaled \$25,139.91, with \$18,947.29 used toward Project 1261 (presumably *Ladies of the Jury*, *Whistling in the Dark*, and *Mayor and the Manicure*) and \$6,192.62 for Project 2407 (presumably *Royal Family* and *It Can't Happen Here*).<sup>148</sup> Per Flanagan's totals for the Missouri FTP project, the above numbers reflect that St. Louis performed the remaining 189 performances to an estimated 80,752 spectators.<sup>149</sup>

All of these moments and statistics are a part of the history of the Kansas City FTP; a history that has been neglected until now. Osborne states in her book that studying the smaller, decentralized units of the FTP is vitally important due to these units ability to reach smaller communities that would be the basis for the community theatre movement.<sup>150</sup> These performances are difficult to research, but are the next level of FTP study. While this paper has provided the basic groundwork of the Kansas City FTP, the productions in these small towns are an area for further research. What did the FTP performances inspire in the rural communities? Did these areas take a cue from the national program to create their own community theatres? Were there individuals who witnessed these plays who were inspired to pursue acting? If so, this information is crucial to understanding the full impact of not only the Kansas City FTP, but the national FTP. One would need to investigate several small towns intimately to discover the

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<sup>148</sup> Perry, *Semi-Monthly Reports*.

<sup>149</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 435.

<sup>150</sup> Osborne, *Staging the People*, 104.

theatres, if any, existing prior to the FTP visit(s) and after, as well as study actors who came from the area.

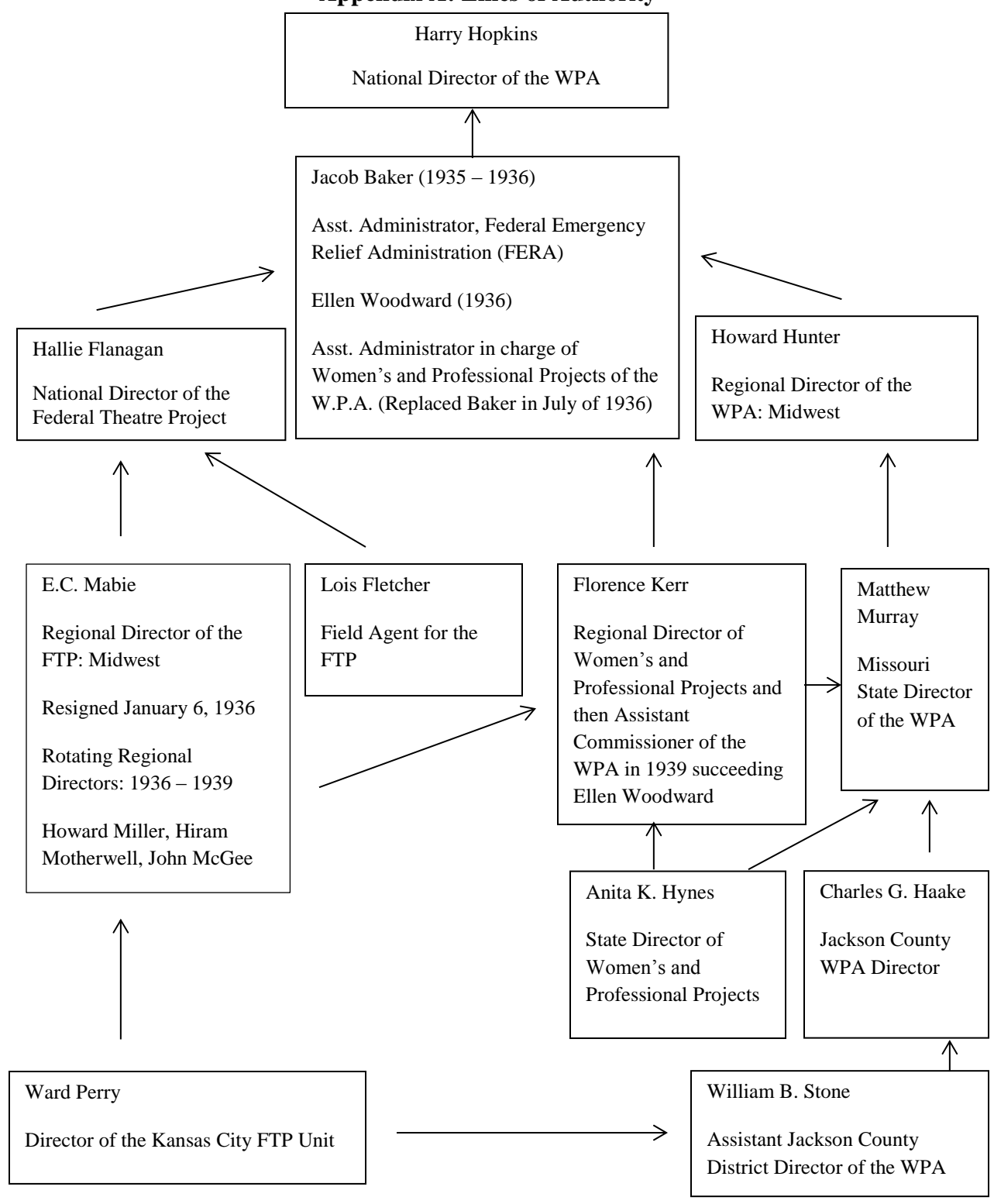
The cultural repercussion of the FTP in small towns is as important as the repercussions the FTP faced in its current time. The Kansas City FTP existed during a time of racial and ethnic prejudices. African-American and Jewish populations were prevalent in certain areas within Kansas City and the choice of the Resident Theatre and Zolley Lerner as director most likely created concerns for some involved. Questions abound regarding the ethnic and racial issues created by the FTP. FDR had mandated the inclusion of all races and ethnicities, yet it was still segregated, as can be seen from the two separate orchestras in Kansas City. Did the “Negro” orchestra travel with the theatre unit and the white orchestra? Were any members of the theatre unit of a different race or ethnicity? If either of these questions can be answered yes, then how did that play out in the towns and within the unit? Also, did the inclusion of the Jewish Community Center’s Resident Theatre and a Jewish director contribute to the demise of the KC FTP? If so, did other units across the nation suffer a similar fate? These questions create space for further inquiry into the Kansas City FTP and other small units within the national program.

By researching answers to the above questions regarding the FTP in Kansas City and other similar cities, scholars can discover the influence of the FTP beyond a moment in history. The possible trends that were created and the broken racial barriers of the FTP could contribute to the historical progression of the theatre in the United States. A cultural studies approach to the Kansas City FTP would provide valuable findings regarding life in Kansas City and the overall impact of the FTP. Finding evidence to support any answer to the questions presented above could prove difficult due to the nature of small town culture and the insidiousness of racial prejudice.

Despite this difficulty, it is important to continue telling the story of the FTP, especially through the smaller units like Kansas City. Discrepancies do exist, records are gone, and some questions are left unanswered, but my hope is that this project will allow Kansas City to take its place among other cities involved in the national FTP. I also hope that this project will open the door for further research into other small FTP units in other cities in order to understand the full impact of the FTP.

Regardless of Kansas City's location or reputation, Kansas City is a theatre city. The FTP may have been merely a ten-month experiment for the state, but it kept actors working for a paycheck and, most importantly, spread theatre to those outside of Kansas City who had never seen theatre before. In that regard, it accomplished one of Flanagan's main goals for the program. Kansas City can be proud it was part of this national organization if only for a brief time.

### Appendix A: Lines of Authority



**Appendix B: Touring *Ladies of the Jury*<sup>151</sup>**

<b>Date</b>	<b>City (all in Missouri)</b>	<b>Venue</b>
February 15	Kansas City	Resident Theatre
February...	Jefferson City	Junior College Auditorium
February 26	Excelsior Springs	Recreational Hall
March 2	Independence	Independence Memorial Building
March 10	Warrensburg	Hendricks Hall
March 17	Sedalia	Convention Hall, Liberty Park
March 20	Kansas City	Central High School
March 21	Clinton	High school auditorium
March 23	Maryville	State Teachers College Auditorium
March 25	St. Joseph	Junior College
April 3	Lexington	...
April 16, 17	Jefferson City	Junior College Auditorium
April 21	Kansas City	East High School
May 15, 16	Kansas City	Thomas A. Edison Hall
May 21	Richmond	Woodson Auditorium
May 22	Platte City	School auditorium
May ...	Kansas City	Northeast High School
May 27	Brookfield	High school auditorium
May 29	Kansas City	Ararat Temple
June 1	Chillicothe	High school auditorium
June 3	Linneus	High school auditorium
June 5	Nevada	Nevada High School
June 8	Milan	High school auditorium
June 9	Bethany	High school auditorium
June 10	Albany	High school auditorium
June 11	Trenton	High school auditorium
June 12	Marshall	Marshall High School
June 19	Cameron	Goodrich Auditorium
June 30	Buckner	High school auditorium

*Sources:* Data from newspaper clippings contained in National Archives Record Administration, RG-69, Box 38; *Chillicothe-Constitution Tribune*, June 1, 1936; *Nevada Daily Mail*, June 6, 1936.

*Note:* ... indicates data unavailable

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