Rehearsing Revolutions:
Labor Drama Experiments in Workers' Colleges, 1920-1940

By

Mary McAvoy

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

(Theatre and Drama)

at the

University of Wisconsin- Madison

2013

Date of final oral examination: 5/17/2013

This dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:
Manon van de Water, Professor, Theatre and Drama
Michael Vanden Heuvel, Professor, Theatre and Drama
Mary Trotter, Professor, Theatre and Drama
Adam Nelson, Professor, Education Policy Studies
Andrea Harris, Professor, Dance

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the generous support I have received throughout the research and writing of this dissertation. I would like to extend special thanks to my mentor and advisor, Professor Manon van de Water, for her careful reading, insightful questions, sustaining feedback, and encouragement through the process. I would also like to extend additional thanks to Professor Adam Nelson. This dissertation was borne out of research and conversations with Professor Nelson, and my research would not have been possible without his investment in my project. I would also like to express appreciation for my dissertation committee, Professor Michael Vanden Heuvel, Professor Mary Trotter, and Professor Andrea Harris, whose suggestions helped steer my research and focus my analysis. I am grateful for their insights and inquiries.

I would also like to thank the many staff members of the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at M.P. Catherwood Library (Cornell University), the Center for Urban and Labor Affairs at Walter Reuther Library (Wayne State University), the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, the University of Arkansas Special Collections (University of Arkansas), the Tennessee Historical Society, the Rauner Special Collections Library (Dartmouth College); and the Wisconsin Historical Society and Memorial Library (University of Wisconsin-Madison). The project would not have been possible without these individuals' help and guidance.

Financial support from several institutions assisted with the research and completion of this study, including the Mellon-Wisconsin Summer Fellowship, which enabled me to complete the final draft of this dissertation. The American Theatre and Drama Society's Graduate Student

Award, the Helen Krich Chinoy Dissertation Research Fellowship from the American Society for Theatre Research, and the Vilas Travel Grant from the University of Wisconsin-Madison supported travel to numerous archives.

I also extend thanks to my graduate school colleagues, who have inspired, challenged, and supported me through this process and to my parents, brother, grandparents, and friends for their support. Finally, thank you to KMH.

Abstract

In this dissertation project, I examine pedagogic drama programs in United States labor colleges and residential labor education programs between 1920 and 1940, tracing their impact on left-leaning socialist and communist theatre artists and theatre movements during the twentieth century. In these labor drama programs, working-class young people departed their jobs in mills, factories, and on farms to engage in intensive study of labor education. Through their courses, students deeply engaged not only with the needs of workers, but also with experimental, democratic, anti-authoritarian, and progressive pedagogies as a reflection of the leftist and radical philosophies at the foundation of the schools' curricula. Most importantly for this study, practically all of the programs included course offerings in labor drama. Through extensive archival research of pedagogic drama programs at Brookwood Labor College, Commonwealth College, summer programs at Bryn Mawr and Southern Summer School, I produce a historical narrative that looks at the evolution of labor dramatics in pedagogical settings. Looking at dramatics programs in US labor colleges reveals new lines of analysis about United States theatre history during the first half of the twentieth century and points to new time periods and geographical regions worthy of examination for reassessments of the field. Likewise, by looking for alternate histories of theatre in educational contexts, I add nuance to ideas about where the field originates and who the field serves in order through my inclusion theatrical experiences of people across political, ideological, and economic spectrums including workers and labor activists.

Chapter One: Setting the Stage for Labor Drama in Workers' College

"It is the movement that marches and sings and flings banners to the breeze, that knows how to dramatize itself, that gets work done and wins battles." – Chairman A. J. Muste, "Dramatizing" Brookwood Labor College

In the aftermath of World War I, the labor movement found itself in unexpectedly dire straits. A post-war recession, which had galvanized labor activism in the late 1920s, finally lifted, and the Roaring Twenties' widespread economic prosperity put many disgruntled laborers happily back to work at jobs with better wages and working conditions—no thanks to their unions. Simultaneously, pro-business alliances, aided by sympathetic Harding and Coolidge administrations, waged an aggressive campaign conflating labor activism with un-Americanness. Union membership rapidly declined, labor leadership was gutted and demoralized, and the United States' peacetime economy had little use for the once-powerful labor agenda. In the midst of this downturn, a group of visionary politicians, thinkers, teachers, and artists with sympathies toward radical labor activism forged plans for new workers' education initiatives in hopes of reinvigorating the movement. Labor drama, the topic of this study, came out of these experiments. However, given the labor movement's sudden irrelevancy to workers' lives, these new programs faced uphill battles: workers had increasingly little use for the labor movement, society turned a hostile eye toward the leftist and anticapitalist ideologies at these programs' core, and resources for these initiatives were limited. Consequently, this study does not end happily. Instead, this is a study of lingering questions: Why drama? Even more, why rural Arkansas? Why did these artists not stick with it? Why didn't their organizations believe in

them? And where did they go once they finished with labor drama? By and large, this is a study defined by too little money, too few resources, and too little time. It is a study delimited by World Wars and shaped by the Great Depression. An FBI investigation even makes an appearance toward the end. It is a study rife with defeat, failure, naïveté, abandonment, misunderstandings, injunctions, criminal investigations, and a host of relatively awful plays.

Nonetheless, this dissertation, even with its sad endings and lingering what-ifs, marks the important work and messy nature of artistic experimentation. It speaks to the possibilities of interdisciplinarity and of pushing oneself beyond a comfort zone. It serves as a testament to the belief that drama, when tailored to the needs of a specific population, can transform consciousness. It also reminds us that performance possesses the potential to teach people about their lives and about their world in ways that other forms of teaching simply cannot, and more importantly, this transformation can be traced through the archive. This is also a humbling study. It demonstrates how committed groups of individuals, regardless of their background or training, made theatre that was special and important to the audiences and participants who engaged with it. My study documents the processes, occasionally good and often bad, by which people created risky art. It is the story of students and teachers, of workers and intellectuals, of amateurs and professionals, of artists and skeptics, and also of radicalism and legitimation. This study demonstrates the possible challenges and rewards of a few people making a go at something new with drama, and above all, it points to a lineage for activist performance in the United States that has long been silenced.

My dissertation examines pedagogic drama programs in United States (US) labor colleges and residential labor education programs between 1920 and 1940. Within these programs, fascinating pedagogic drama experiments took place, and examining these programs

during the interwar period points to new lines of analysis about both educational drama and left-leaning theatre practices before New Deal-era programs like the Federal Theatre Project. I consider labor drama programs at three disparate workers' education institutions during different chronological intervals between the early 1920s and the late 1930s, tracing the evolution of labor drama at each institution. As these programs changed over time, from experimental educational initiatives designed to teach leaders of a new class of industrial workers in the 1920s to radically politicized projects designed to inspire labor activism by the late 1930s, they revealed the rapidity with which art, activism, and education evolved during the period between World War I (WWI) and World War II (WWII). The programs I consider— Brookwood Labor College, the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry, and Commonwealth College— despite their differences, all used drama as part of their curriculum for worker/students. In my investigation of each school, I incorporate original archival research to detail the experiences of young adult workers and their influential instructors as they engaged with drama as pedagogy to explore political, ideological, and economic ideas associated with the labor movement. Together, these teachers and students defined drama's usefulness as tool for imagining and enacting emancipatory alternatives to the oppressive status quo found in US industry during the interwar period.

I begin by contextualizing labor drama within residential labor programs at Brookwood Labor College (Brookwood) in Katonah, New York. Brookwood was a pioneering and influential institution and was among the most noted in the hundreds of workers' education programs that appeared in the 1920s and 1930s. The school's programs in labor drama influenced practically all other schools. The school's touring company, the Brookwood Labor Players, performed new works about labor issues throughout the northeast, and Brookwood also

led the charge for labor drama by including it as part of the core curriculum from early in the school's existence. My analysis of Brookwood's early dramatics programs subsequently informs my investigations of residential summer programs at the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in western North Carolina, a residential summer college program specifically for women, and Commonwealth College, a rural residential labor college in Arkansas.

I selected these institutions due to their diversity regarding students, foundational philosophies, geography, and format of programs. These schools also have rich and under-examined archival records that I examined as my primary research methodology. The schools' geography, underlying philosophies, target student populations, connections to larger labor organizations, and relationship to surrounding communities support my analysis of their drama courses by providing a contextualizing frame by which to consider how and why dramatics appeared in each of these very different programs. As each school developed unique pedagogical approaches to meet the needs of their students, they incorporated dramatics. At Brookwood, the advent of dramatics was a happy accident, but the decision to pursue it as a curricular component was not. The school's relationship to labor unions in the northeast attracted the attention of New York theatre makers, Progressive educators, and radical intellectuals, and intense conversations regarding labor drama's role in workers' education occurred amongst these figures, helping to define the early movement. In the Southern Summer School's early years, curriculum included drama mostly because leaders borrowed Bryn Mawr College's approach whole cloth as paradigm for their program. Bryn Mawr included drama, so the Southern Summer School also included it. However, Southern Summer School labor drama evolved, securing a place as a pioneering program by developing performance about issues specific to Southern laborers. At Commonwealth, drama was a deradicalizing force and a pedagogical component of

school curriculum. As the school came under attack for harboring radicals, plays generated by students and offered to the local community helped mend relationships and quell fears about the school. I consider each program within its unique cultural, social, and political milieu to contextualize discussion of drama as tool for teaching diverse workers, including skilled and unskilled workers, women workers, immigrant workers, and workers in the south, about labor activism.

This study also pays homage to the risks taken by instructors and students, shedding light on the dangers inherent to their work. In order to attend a labor college, working-class young people, often with only an elementary education, departed their jobs in mills and factories and on farms; many of them lost their jobs. Upon arrival on campuses, which were often located in geographically and/or culturally foreign regions, they committed themselves to a period of intensive study in the hopes of becoming leaders in the labor movement. By participating, they engaged with new and unfamiliar academic subject matter including labor history, economics, English, public speaking, and labor problems. In many instances, administration also required physical education and hygiene classes. As part of their participation on campus, students also committed to manual labor, working the school farm and cooking meals for students and staff, and earning their keep even after seeking out scholarships for their tuition. Dramatics were recreational, even when considered included as a course of study, and they provided a welcome respite for the students. They were a dedicated group who endured great sacrifice in the pursuit of an education.

Even though the students' experiences studying labor economics in between harvesting crops or attending nutrition classes were challenging in their own right, labor college students simultaneously served as pedagogical guinea pigs for their instructors. These teachers, a

pioneering group who committed themselves to experimental, democratic, anti-authoritarian, and Progressive pedagogies, set off on the labor college experiment with little in the way of a road map. Progress and success came about through trial and error. They often worked for little or no money, without appropriate resources, and with groups of students whose life experiences they were just beginning to understand. They, perhaps even more than the students, also found themselves in unfamiliar regions of the country, and they too had to earn their keep by working the school farm or cleaning the school grounds alongside students as part of the egalitarian philosophies grounding the schools' missions. Even more, students and instructors' participation in these schools exposed them to great risk due to the aura of mystery that surrounded these programs, particularly as US society increasingly conflated labor activism with dangerous radical Left politics. Many teachers and students ended up the subject of criminal investigations, blacklisting, or ostracization by labor organizations that once supported them. Nevertheless, their risky experimentation created an opportunity for messy, creative, and path breaking work— not only in dramatics, but also more broadly for adult education.

Given the complicated and, at times, turbulent relationship between labor colleges, workers' theatre, workers' education, and labor activism, a series of important question guide my study:

- Why are dramatics courses such an important artistic and pedagogical mainstay in these colleges?
- How did dramatics programs mitigate and/or complicate the perpetual scrutiny faced by these schools regarding their real or imagined anticapitalist, radical, or otherwise subversive tendencies?

- Does theatre help these programs resist accusations of subversion, and thus act as a legitimizing force in these labor colleges? Or does it instead embrace, inspire, or reflect subversive and radical practices within the schools?
- Are school leaders chiefly motivated to employ theatre for aesthetic or political gains? Or for practical or theoretical objectives? Is the reality a synthesis of all of these components?

In all, I found that most labor colleges asked themselves these same questions as they began experiments in labor drama. Few schools had any concrete understanding or guiding philosophies regarding drama as pedagogy beyond general Progressive Education philosophies. More often than not, school leadership saw drama as a delightful and popular form of recreation and included it as an evening activity after other classes ended for the day. Instructors drove the effort to evolve labor drama's role on campus, and they did so with fervor. In addition to directing and producing a lot of plays, instructors spent a great deal of time developing objectives, writing course plans, creating lessons, and articulating larger program goals. Once they established a purpose and flow for their programs they advocated for increasingly visible and integral roles for labor drama on campus. Labor drama was a labor of love, and instructors worked very hard to carve out a space for their programs within campus communities.

These schools also frequently used labor drama as a publicity tool. Students presented performances at fundraising events, community meet-and-greets, and Workers' Conferences held on campus. Instructor turnover was also high; once a program gathered steam, the instructor would leave, and a new instructor with different ideas took the reigns. These conditions resulted in perpetual debates between instructors, students, and leadership about appropriateness of material, the value of process over product, the role of drama as a academic course versus a

recreational club, the manner by which students should study labor drama, the ultimate program goals, and beyond. In all, these programs were wholly experimental, a point to which I will return time and time again. The participants tested methods for teaching about drama, for making performance, and for generating dramatic material. Sometimes they were successful, and many times they were not. Failure and defeat are refrains in all of these programs, but so are moments of empowerment and triumph. The programs all reveal how challenging these processes of innovation can be and point to the power of resiliency in the face of difficulty.

Contextualizing Labor Drama: Definitions, Methodologies, and Review of Literature

First and foremost, I offer a working definition of labor drama. Since this dissertation deals with a time period in which labor drama was coming into being as a genre of performance and as a pedagogical approach, no succinct definition exists. Throughout my archival research, a myriad of terms based on similar themes appear: labor dramatics, workers' theatre, workers' dramatics, social dramatics, dramatics for all, etcetera. The specific usage depends on the group, the instructor, and the time period in which they worked. Almost all programs started out unsure of their focus and attempted to define their programs as they enacted them. Sometimes instructors or schools used terms like workers' theatre and labor dramatics synonymously. In other moments, distinctions between the terms appear, particularly in regards to theatre as a product and drama as a process. Some groups had no idea how they were using the term since they were in the process of defining a program. For example, practically all instructors published numerous lengthy essays in the school papers explaining, revising, and re-explaining their approaches. Many of these essays start with questions as basic as "What is labor drama?" (e.g. Hays "Dramatics at Commonwealth"). Others used a progression of terms from year to year to

reflect the rapidity with which the genre morphed and new literature from organizations like the Workers' Education Bureau or the Affiliated Schools for Workers became available. Despite the form's nascence, these programs share some unifying characteristics. First, all schools focused on drama as a tool to teach about labor activism. No institution introduced labor drama as only recreation or entertainment— labor drama's potential pedagogical dimension was key to its inclusion in curriculum. Also, none of the programs aspired to train workers for virtuosity on the stage or in advance stagecraft techniques; they simply wanted students the opportunity to experience creation of theatre with a labor bent. Finally, all programs included process-based experiential learning opportunities for students that involved discussion and reflection. All formal productions involved an ancillary process whereby worker/students incorporated their real-life experiences into the work. These examples represent a few similarities between programs, and I will discuss them in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

While the term's murkiness leads me to include all variations as used by the different institutions, in my discussion and analysis, I primarily use "labor drama." My use of "labor," as opposed to "workers" encompasses the diverse experience of labor activism that extended beyond experiences of workers. This distinction takes into account groups of allied activists, like many of the intellectuals who took up teaching labor drama, as central to the labor drama experiment even though workers' experiences were central to the work. My use of "drama" or "dramatics" as opposed to "theatre," reinforces my focus on process in tandem with product, a point with which I will engage later in this chapter. In total, "labor drama" speaks to the varied experimental initiatives that attempted to synthesize labor activism, dramatics, and education. Some of these programs, like Brookwood's, were more product-focused and generated touring

productions and performance initiatives.[1] Other programs, like those at the Southern Summer School's and later programs at Commonwealth, were more explicitly pedagogical, less concerned about final performances and focused on classroom experiences. In each case study, I analyze the ways in which the specific instructor and institution generated their approach, how they created their pedagogical objectives for the programs, and how they evaluated their work in effort to clarify their specific definition labor drama.

The lack of labor drama studies presents another challenge in defining the genre. As theatre historian Jonathan Chambers noted in 1999, "few periods in theatre history have been as maligned as the theatre in the US in the 1930s. In particular, the theatre of the political and cultural left in this era was for many years cavalierly dismissed or, as was most often the case, conveniently and purposefully forgotten" (201). Labor drama, as a part of "theatre of the political and cultural left," falls into this category. Chambers's reference to scholars' "convenient forgetting" alludes to several dimensions of selective remembering, including US theatre historians' tentativeness regarding studies of theatre grounded in overtly communist and socialist ideologies. The persecution of artists during the First and Second Red Scares resulted in a generation of radical theatremakers being silenced, blacklisted, prosecuted, deported, or worse. Historians have only recently found the necessary historical distance to safely "out" other artists for their Left-leaning sympathies.[2]

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[1] I do not look at programs, like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union dramatics program and other programs that appear later in the 1930s, that set out to make theatre for workers' entertainment, but I acknowledge that even that distinction becomes murky as the movement develops.

[2] And some still have not. I sat in on a working group at the American Society for Theatre Research entitled "Experiments in Democracy" in 2012. In the discussion, several presenters expressed serious reservations about talking about these artists in 2012 and discussed their trying experiences attempting to interview blacklisted artists, the few still living, who still expressed great fear about discussing their work.

In a similar vein, labor drama exposes complexities inherent to new historiographical approaches regarding marginalized forms. The act of documenting and analyzing aesthetically and ideologically questionable art, from vaudeville to minstrelsy to theatre for youth to the didactic agit-prop dramas of the labor movement, is a challenging process. Theatre historian David Savran outlines some of these challenges in his important reconceptualization of musical theatre histories, "Toward a Historiography of the Popular." In the 2004 essay, Savran charges contemporary theatre scholars to look beyond dominant histories and begin the "reconstructive labor" of "interrogating and setting aside our Eurocentrism and cultural elitism" (211). His specific focus centers on a case study of *Oklahoma!,* in which he demonstrates a process by which theatre historians might "reconsider the kinds of theatrical practice that have held millions spellbound but have been routinely dismissed by scholars" ("Toward" 212).

Savran's study, an important entry in an ongoing historiographical dialogue about the importance of historicizing popular theatre, also highlights challenges in these kinds of research projects that relate to this study of labor drama. He emphasizes popular theatre's role as "throwaway entertainment," a reality that results in a dearth of archival material, an uncomfortable connection with economic commodification, and a theoretically cloudy relationship between performance and text ("Toward" 214).[3] He also warns of "the snobbism" that "almost inevitably finds a way of reconfiguring and reasserting itself" as rehabilitative studies make available new performance genres for critique in regards to their aesthetic, economic, or theoretical qualities. He notes that reconstructive histories of genre- and binary-blurring performance—especially if primarily designed for pleasure— often generate even greater suspicion (217). My study of labor drama falls into all the categories outlined in Savran's

[3] See Lawrence Levine's *Lowbrow/Highbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* for additional discussion.

essay; it blurs boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow, between pleasure and pedagogy, between amateur and professional, and between art and utility. Thus, labor drama's enduring artifacts are ripe for controversy.

Savran's charge to create histories that "overrule long-standing, class based prejudices" pitting art against entertainment provides my guiding historiographical frame for this dissertation. I approach my investigation as a study that reconstructs histories of labor college dramatics by acknowledging and including popular culture, politics, labor agendas, and educational innovation in tandem with programs. Since my project focuses on drama as a form of pedagogy within residential labor college curricula, I consider the class plans, director's reports, course material, and other process-oriented documentation alongside performances, playscripts, reviews, and other formal product-oriented documentation produced by these programs. Most of the information presented in this study is previously unpublished, the result of many archival trips, numerous conversations with librarians and archivists, and countless letters and phone calls to students, friends, and associates tangentially related to the subjects of my study. I utilized the following collections for my research: the Brookwood Labor College Collection at the Archives for Urban and Labor Affairs at Walter Reuther Library (Wayne State University); several collections held at the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at M.P. Catherwood Library (Cornell University); the Lee Hays Collection at the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage; the Commonwealth College Files (University of Arkansas- Fayettville), the MacKaye Family papers held at the Rauner Special Collections Library (Dartmouth College); and the collections held at the Wisconsin Historical Society (University of Wisconsin-Madison). I weave together my original archival research with extant studies, also noting when the archival record has not survived. Unfortunately, missing documents

and incomplete archives come into play in every chapter. Accordingly, I speculate about the reasons why scripts, school records, reviews, or other documentation have disappeared or been destroyed, and I seek out ancillary materials from news outlets, labor histories, and educational histories to inform my analysis.

Attending to both process- and product-related documents helps to reconstruct, but not fully rehabilitate, these programs, particularly in regards to their artistic and aesthetic quality. In fact, I do not set out to illuminate these productions' unsung artistic brilliance. As theatre history theorists and historians like David Savran, along with Joseph Roach and others, have noted, attending to this kind of theatrical failure is a complicated task. In one regard, theatrical failures represent, as Joseph Roach describes, "the torments and pleasures of incomplete forgetting" (7). Historical records surrounding the often-failed labor drama experiments function as artifacts of incompletely forgotten theatre. They tease historians to suss out inferiorities, to locate the root of rejection, and to comment on the reasoning behind the flop. By examining failures like those featured in these labor drama programs, researchers might recover the significance of what has been left out and generate a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which artists, critics, and audiences assigned value to theatrical performance.

In another regard, acknowledging failure, a concept that that includes manifestations of less-than-ideal commercial, artistic, political, or ideological outcomes, potentially runs counter to rehabilitative projects designed to support legitimacy for an area of study outside dominant discourses. In seeking out important genre-bending and -blurring performances that push boundaries regarding what counts as historically significant theatre or performance, as in the example of Savran's Broadway musicals or in the case of labor drama experiments, rehabilitative readings often elide the histories' complexities by imbuing marginalized theatrical forms with

heightened political, aesthetic, or ideological significance in an effort to articulate larger cultural relevance, what Bruce McConachie calls "heroic views" (141). While this heightened significance inspires important legitimizing discourses for marginalized forms, it also presents concerns since heroic views result in historians generating an important, but flawed "discourse of apparently progressive theater" that "make (s) few adjustments when read(ing) present concerns back into past theatrical events" (141-2).

McConachie's discussion of heroic views directly relates to the temptation of taking on a full rehabilitation of labor drama as a misunderstood and path-breaking theatrical form. While politically, culturally, and artistically significant and worthy of study, many metrics employed by theatregoers and theatre researchers to assess productions rightly suggest labor drama was bad—very bad. From melodramatically tragic narratives poorly devised and influenced by popular cultural forms like vaudeville, Frank Capra movies, and Tin Pan Alley music to simplistic low-budget and low-talent production values of performances, labor drama's lasting artifacts, from scripts to production photos to reviews, imply that labor drama was too poorly crafted to warrant much attention from an aesthetic perspective. These plays are not lost gems of theatrical brilliance despite their importance to other political-engaged US theatre initiatives and Progressive education histories during the interwar period, and I have worked vigilantly to avoid apotheosizing these artists and students and their work. Still, looking at the process by which these workers and instructors, practically all of whom were new to drama, engaged with dramatics pedagogy and connected it to studies of the labor movement helps to contextualize both the genre within its many competing influences and its reputation as bad theatre. By providing contextualizing discussions in each chapter regarding what happened within the process of creation, I draw attention to the meaningful experiences for participants in both

learning and in theatre-making as much as I acknowledge the response of audiences forced to endure their often dismal final products.

Another murky and complicated concept that reverberates through this dissertation is "radicalism." A basic understanding of radicalism is necessary for this dissertation, especially in regards to making sense of how these artists, workers, and educators conceived of their work in relation to who radicals were and what they stood for during the interwar period. In order to give a working definition of the term, I borrow from Egon Bittner's seminal work, "Radicalism and the Organization of Radical Movements," and define the term as a "sociological and psychological" phenomenon that relies on both thought *and* action that "differ from the normal, ordinary, traditionally sanctioned world-view prevalent in any society" that are also "not a difference of degree but a juxtaposition of opposites" (928-9) .[4] In effect, radicalism is not simply a straying to the left or right on the path of cultural appropriateness or culturally sanctioned belief, but instead, a entire rejection of the path and everything it might represents. Further complicating conceptions of radicalism rest with the concept's tendency to rapidly change. Radical spaces constantly mutate as participants negotiate their position relative to and often against both dominant codes and others in the movement. In effect, radicalism resists codification due to the relative subjectivities of the participants drawn to radical movements who desire to reject dominance. Thus, understanding codes of radicalism rests with the markers of opposition, or for lack of a better descriptor, the enactment of anti-ness.

In enacting anti-ness, larger cultural theories and ideologies like, as in the case of many labor drama participants discussed in this study, Marxism or Christian Socialism might guide radicalism, but the cultivation of radicalism relies upon the participants' commitment to anti-ness

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[4] In addition to Bittner's work, I also recommend Mark Irving Lichbach's *The Rebel's Dilemma* and Donald Egbert's work including *Social Radicalism and The Arts: Western Europe.*

revealed through ideas, action, and spirit. Given this definition, even though their more conservative critics would disagree, many workers and artists considered in this study were not inherently radical because they supported communist or socialist political philosophies, even though these political philosophies were often conflated with radicalism in the US during the first half of the twentieth century. They do not qualify as radicals because most hoped to fuse together socialist principles with capitalism in order to evolve US cultural and economic landscape into what they saw as a more fair playing ground, especially for workers. They infrequently set out to up-end societally sanctioned political, economic, artistic, or education systems.

Each institution considered in this dissertation negotiated their connection to radicalism. Even more, each group navigated the differences in political radicalism, artistic radicalism, and educational radicalism as they developed their work. For example, a group might express undeniably radical ideas about politics, but enacting a very rigidly conformist style of artistic production to explore these ideas through performance, like at Commonwealth College. Another institution, like the Southern Summer School, might allow for a kind of radical experimentation in the act of producing labor drama, but it ultimately supported a non-radical political philosophy espoused in the plays' messages. Each of these examples provided moments of tension ripe for analysis, and I work to uncover and explain how different groups conceived of different radical forms and their relationship to them.

The issue of radicalism also brought about scandal and strife for each of the schools. Some groups, like the women workers of the Southern Summer School, vehemently rejected ideas that they harbored any radicals or supported radical thought. Contrastingly, a few of these subjects of study, like Commonwealth's Lucien Koch, *were* radical; the believed in overturning

the current state of affairs and generating a new world order aligned with different principles associated with radical communism. As a result, the more moderate forces in the Commonwealth College community constantly battled to manage radicals and radicalism on their campus. In another instance, Brookwood dramatics instructor Hazel MacKaye the subject of chapter one and a Suffragette, likely considered herself quite radical in the late 1910s while working on women's right to vote. However, as I will demonstrate, the Suffragists' radicalism quickly morphed into a legitimate and socially sanctioned form of activism, leaving behind MacKaye as an old-school relic less than a decade after she was on the vanguard of political engagement. As these examples demonstrate, nuancing understandings of how radicalism manifested throughout the programs is an important task in each of my chapters since the nebulous and rapid evolution of radical practices were a perpetual source of consternation for these programs.

This study also functions as a progression and extension of the few investigations of labor drama. Clyde Barrow, Collette Hyman, and Richard Altenbaugh offer the three most significant investigations of the subject.[5] Hyman's 1997 book, *Staging Strikes: Workers' Theatre and the American Labor Movement*, looks closely at the evolution of the labor drama movement by examining large-scale productions produced in conjunction with labor organizations. While Hyman crafts a sophisticated genealogy of labor drama, she gives little attention to the process-oriented dramatic learning that occurred in labor colleges in her discussion of the advent of labor drama a performance genre (*Staging Strikes* 19-22; 32-3). Instead, she directs her analysis

[5] For additional studies of labor drama from a variety of historiographical and theoretical perspectives, see "Workers' Theatre in America: A Survey 1913-1978" by Harry Goldman and Mel Gordon (1978), "Playing Workers: Proletarian Drama in the Curriculum of American Labor Colleges, 1921-37." by Clyde Barrow (1993), *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* by Daniel Aaron (1992), *American Labor on Stage: Dramatic Interpretations of the Steel and Textile Industries in the 1930s* by Susan Duffy (1996), *The American Stage and the Great Depression: A Cultural History of the Grotesque* by Mark Fearnow (1997), and *Striking Performances: Performing Strikes* by Kirk Fuoss (1997).

toward more commercially significant large-scale productions like *Waiting for Lefty*, *Pins and Needles*, *Let Freedom Ring*, *This World Fair,* and other productions by labor unions and labor drama organizations with particular attention given to productions after 1930.[6]

Likewise, Altenbaugh's 1982 article about the Brookwood Labor Players and his 1990 book *Education for Struggle: The American Labor Colleges of the 1920s and 1930s* both briefly examine dramatics programs in the context of his larger study of labor colleges and their educational objectives ("Proletarian" 196-210; *Education* 102-16). While an excellent start, his examination of dramatics programs in labor colleges focuses almost exclusively upon Brookwood's labor dramatics productions during the period in which the Brookwood Labor Players toured between 1929 and 1934. This important analysis is very thoughtful and engaging, but it neither addresses the program's evolution on the Brookwood campus, nor speaks to the dramatics programs at other schools. Additionally, his discussion leaves out any analysis of the Southern Summer School and only skims the surface of Commonwealth College's dramatics program. Finally, Clyde Barrow's articles, the only other published research that specifically examine dramatics in labor colleges, provide a thorough overview of each program and how drama featured within the curricula, but they are surveys and do not go into great detail about each program. Aside from the aforementioned studies by Altenbaugh, Hyman, and Barrow, studies of dramatic programs in other labor colleges or even during other periods of schools' dramatics programs are scant and incomplete. Although studies of each of the colleges I consider in this dissertation exist, they offer brief examinations of labor drama as part of larger discussions about the colleges (Altenbaugh and Paulston 239; Cobb 131-2; Hollis 93-110; Koch 200-10).

[6] *I Hear America Sing* was produced by Louis Schaffer in Madison Square Garden and included a cast of roughly a thousand performers as part of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union's national convention.

These limited studies provide cursory documentation about the unique function of labor drama within the curriculum of different labor colleges, but they also draw attention to incomplete narratives surrounding work in labor colleges, particularly from theatre history perspectives. For example, Brookwood dramatics instructor Hazel MacKaye, the subject of chapter two, was also part of a theatrical dynasty as a daughter of famous actor, playwright, and theatrical innovator Steele MacKaye and sister to actor, playwright, and pageant producer, Percy MacKaye. Despite this illustrious lineage, the extant studies of Brookwood's early dramatics programs neither give attention to MacKaye's work at Brookwood nor connect MacKaye's significance as a theatre personality to her work at the college. (Blair 45; Barrow "Playing" 36-7; Hyman *Staging Strikes* 10; Altenbaugh "Proletarian" 201-4; *Education* 108-9).[7] The omission of MacKaye's theatrical upbringing in connection with studies of Brookwood dramatics programs speaks to the importance of looking closely at archival materials associated with these labor drama programs from a theatre history perspective.

Labor Drama: The Crossroads of Drama, Education, and the Labor Movement

This study requires a contextualizing conversation to define and clarify several disparate threads of influence that contributed to the labor dramatics phenomenon in the areas of labor, education, and theatre. In regards to labor, a diversity of competing values and political goals of labor organizations associated with each labor college institution, as well as each labor organization's negotiation of artistic and cultural products' importance within their union platforms, affected each labor drama program. Simultaneously, new educational theories and ideologies influenced each labor college's approach to learning and teaching. Most importantly,

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[7] See the introduction and Part I in Altenbaugh's *Education for Struggle* for additional discussion of the diversity of labor institutions (3-58).

the new experiments in Deweyean Progressive education exerted influence and led to significant challenges and meaningful innovation in teaching complex curricula in labor theory, economics, organizing, and advocacy to workers who often had little education beyond elementary school. The influence of professional theatre, amateur dramatics, the Little Theatre movement, and other forms of drama and theatre during the period also exerted influence on the labor drama experiment. I will discuss each of these areas in greater detail later in the chapter.

Finally, rapid global changes during the interwar period exerted profound pressure on these programs. In addition to the multitudinous influences that directly contributed to the practical and theoretical approaches of these programs, domestic and geopolitical events also exerted influence on labor colleges. During the twenty-year interwar period, these small institutions navigated the end of World War I; the Roaring Twenties; the rise and spread of communism; the Great Depression; relief programs of the Federal Emergency Relief Act and the Works Progress Administration; the rise of fascism; and the lead up to World War II. Unsurprisingly, these larger developments challenged even the most well-managed labor organizations like the AFL and, by proxy, the goals of labor education and labor drama. As I work to both untangle and weave together these different threads of influence in the subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I acknowledge the challenge that exists in giving proper attention to each of the aforementioned influences while not bogging down in the minutiae of competing lines of inquiry.

One of the most significant forces exerting influence on labor drama centered on the rapid evolution of the US labor movement during 1920 and 1940.[8] Issues surrounding labor in

[8] Some of the following labor historians engage in expanded studies of US labor histories are: Phillip Dray, Melvyn Dubofsky, David Brody, David Montgomery, Herbert Gutman, Leon Fink, Alice Kessler-Harris, to only scratch the surface. Additionally, see Maurice Neufeld, Daniel Leab, and Dorothy Swanson's *American Working Class History: A Representative*

the US have troubled workers since industry entered the republic, and revolt against poor working conditions, against joblessness, and against poor pay feature heavily in narratives of the young United States. Given the trend of revolt and protest in the early histories of US labor, I follow Philip Dray and others' lead and contextualize my discussion of labor around the moments where workers started to organize and negotiate in the mid-nineteenth century. By the 1880s, these organizational initiatives, coupled with rapid industrial expansion, resulted in significant developments on the labor front. For example, one of the most influential US labor federations, the American Federation of Labor (AFL), was founded in 1886 under the leadership of Samuel Gompers. Gompers led the organization until his death in 1924, firmly establishing the AFL as the home of "plain-and simple" trade and business unionism in the US. The AFL agenda primarily focused on rights in the workplace including working conditions, pay, and safety. It also targeted skilled workers with a trade like bakers, shipbuilders, and carpenters. The federation eschewed industrial unionization, which organized workers, skilled or unskilled, into one organizing body. In essence, the AFL was steadfastly conservative, carefully choosing its agenda in order to maintain its legitimacy and longevity and to avoid controversy. The AFL's conservative influence on labor college programs is a constant refrain in my study. As the industrial age churned forward during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the labor movement likewise grew as it diversified, expanded, and perpetually redefined itself. Part of this evolution included the incorporated new workers—unskilled laborers, women, immigrants, workers of color— and it incorporated new organizations with different philosophical foundations and practical agendas, many who maintained tense relationships with the AFL.

Bibliography and the *Labor and Working Class History Guide* at Catherwood Library at Cornell University for a host of resources related to the history of labor in this period.

Organizations interested in communism, socialism, neo-socialism, new unionism, and other labor-related –isms rose to prominence in the first decades of the twentieth century. One of the most noted was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW set out industrial- and social-unionization agendas, allied itself with several of the US socialist parties and was widely regarded by opponents—including the AFL—as a radical force. The IWW organized hundreds of strikes, some of them massive, including the Bread and Roses strike in 1912 and the Paterson Silk Strike in 1913 ("Chronology"). By the mid-1910s, the IWW's radical agenda was so influential on the labor movement that a reactionary crackdown began, leading to assassinations, executions, and deportations of members and leadership. These events culminated in the Palmer raids in 1921, during which government officials and law enforcement rounded up and deported radical IWW members, along with other perceived radicals, just after the end of World War I. This period is now known as the first Red Scare (Dray 354-75; "Chronology").[9]

In the fallout from union busting during the 1910s and early 1920s, labor organizations initiated education programs as part of a larger interest in rehabilitating the workers' movement's legitimacy. These programs focused on the pedagogic goal of teaching workers about issues pertinent to the labor movement. By workers' education leaders' logic, teaching workers about economics and exploitation was tantamount to equipping them to advocate for themselves and for their respective labor organizations. If they understood economic disparity in both practical and academic senses, they would be drawn back into the issues of labor. Despite the contraction of labor unions as a whole, labor education was most popular between 1920 and 1940—

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[9] The Palmer Raids take their name from A. Mitchell Palmer, Woodrow Wilson's Attorney General, who led a witch-hunt against radicals, leftists, anticapitalists, and organizations who sympathized with these individuals. See chapters one and two of Christopher Finan's *From the Palmer Raids to the Patriot Act: A History of the Fight for Free Speech in America* (1-72).

particularly after the stock market crash in 1929—and took on a variety of forms including night, weekend, and evening programs, retreats, workshops, and institutes. At the phenomenon's zenith, hundreds of different workers' education programs appeared from coast to coast.

All shared similar pedagogical approaches deriving from developments in Progressive education pioneered by intellectuals like John Dewey. I would be remiss to continue this study without some discussion of Dewey's undeniable influence on workers' education and labor drama programs' connection to Progressive education. As one of the preeminent US philosophers writing in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, Dewey's ideas about education have transformed the ways in which US teachers and students teach and learn—especially in arts education fields. These ideas, synthesized and modified with and against other thinkers, result in the field of Progressive education, a complex educational philosophy effectively summarized by Norman Dale Norris: "If we were to gather 100 of the brightest educational minds in this country and ask the question, 'What is Progressive education?' we might very likely get more than 100 different definitions, probably none of which could be considered necessarily right or wrong" (9). Despite the term's ambiguity, education Progressivists generally believe that education should be a tool for societal progress.

For my particular discussion about Progressive education and its connection to labor drama in workers' colleges, I focus on philosophical ideas Dewey introduced into US education. Dewey's focus on pragmatism in both philosophical and practical terms was one defining influence on these programs. As Dewey scholar Raymond Boisvert notes, "Dewey sought above all else to be a productive, constructive philosopher…[he] unapologetically wrote from his own time and for it" (4-5). Dewey's philosophical commitment to the here-and-now, in contrast to contemporary European theorists and philosophers who aspired to a kind of ahistoricity and

atemporality in their writings, was a path-breaking approach in the US philosophical tradition. Additionally, Dewey's innovative writings opened a space for US philosophers and a US school of philosophy within international communities of thinkers.[10] These ideas about how education might immediately and practically change the world was an important value of all workers' programs discussed in this dissertation.

Most importantly for this study were Dewey's ideas about the act of *doing* in the processes of both education and art-making. Dewey believed that learning relied upon specific life relevancy, an act of doing or practicing doing. These principles extended to aesthetic experiences as well, whereby learners practiced skills in aesthetics as part of an education in real-life application scenarios in order to prepare for and cultivate an aesthetic dimension of real life after school. These ideas are best laid out in Dewey's seminal work, *Art as Experience*, in which he critiques the tendency to "set Art upon a remote pedestal" and states:

> "In order to *understand* the esthetic[sic] in its ultimate and approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw; in the events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens: the sights that hold the crowd… The sources of art in human experience will be learned by him who sees how the tense grace of the ball-player infects the onlooking crowd; who notes the delight of the housewife in tending her plants…" (2-3).

[10] In addition to Raymond Boisvert's work, see work by Jo Ann Boydston, Steven Fesmire's *John Dewey and Moral Imagination,* the resources available through The Center for Dewey Studies at Southern Illinois University and the John Dewey Society, and the many and varied works by Dewey himself, including *How We Think*, *Experience and Education*, *The Child and Curriculum*, *Art as Experience*, and *Democracy and Education* to name only a few.

As outlined in the above quote, Dewey believed that an authentic experience with art rested with an individual's personal connection to the aesthetic dimension of everyday life. These ideas provided the foundation for art and creativity, particularly drama, as a modality for learning in many labor drama classrooms. As will be shown, this philosophical approach echoes through each chapter and each labor drama experiment discussed in this study.

Several other important ideas emergent from the Deweyean school of thought about education also influence the schools' approach to teaching workers. For one, the idea that schools were communities instead of simply sites for knowledge acquisition was central to many programs. For example, Commonwealth Labor College supported a working farm where teachers and students worked alongside one another in the fields to help fund their education. This example also demonstrates Progressive educators' pioneering use of experiential learning practices, curricular development that focused on students' needs and desires, and reconceptualization of school's social dimension as site where learners could acquire knowledge about being a citizen in a community in the hopes of moving forward the whole. Educational Progressives also viewed school as an important site for developing social reform, and all workers' programs studied here focused on how their educational programs would inspire worker/students in attendance not only to learn about the labor movement, but also to prepare for an role in the labor activism. As each of these examples demonstrates, Progressive education philosophies were undeniably important component of labor colleges' programs.

As the previous conversation about different approaches to Progressive education suggests, the small, but significant collection of residential programs considered here represents only a small portion of these programs. Collette Hyman correctly notes in *Staging Strikes*, "During the 1920s, nearly every large and medium-sized city in the country boasted a labor

college" (20), and labor education took on a variety of forms including night, weekend, and evening programs in addition to retreats and institutes. These programs rose to prominence between 1920 and 1940. Scholars often credit the Rand School of Social Science, formed in 1906, as the first version of this type of residential worker-focused school in the US.[11] The Rand School pioneered curricula and influenced many other US-based programs. By and large, these schools targeted future leaders within the labor movement, preparing them to create programs for parent labor organizations once they completed their intensive courses of study. The prevalence of labor drama programs, a strikingly consistent element within the schools' curricula despite disparate values and pedagogical aims, is best understood by examining how labor organizations viewed their responsibilities to the workers they represented. As exemplified in my earlier discussion of the IWW, determining where the union's influence started and stopped was a source of continuous debate amongst unions, labor federations, and political groups.

The history of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1935 helps further illustrate these debates. As a response to the AFL's commitment to a conservative business unionism agenda, the CIO formed as an alternative for members interested in a more wide-reaching approach to labor advocacy. An emerging faction of the AFL believed labor organizations had a responsibility to industrial unionization efforts that would help organize the masses of unskilled workers in the US. Still others thought the AFL should involve itself in social justice causes germane to the workers' lives, like women's suffrage or the right for workers of color to sit at the bargaining table. Still other members felt the AFL had a responsibility to support workers' cultural lives; they felt the AFL should support agendas for

[11] See Frederic Cornell's unpublished 1976 dissertation, "A History of the Rand School, 1906-1956" and John L. Recchiuti's 1995 article "The Rand school of social science during the progressive era: Will to power of a stratum of the American intellectual class" for additional discussion.

workers' arts, entertainment, and recreation in addition to securing better working conditions, especially given the new development of leisure time in response to the union achievement of shorter work days. Members supporting both industrial unionization and engagement in workers' political, social, and cultural life, otherwise known as a social unionization agenda, incited a rift within the organization and founded the CIO as an alternative labor federation within the AFL.[12] However, the IWW's influence was not far from memory, and AFL leadership saw the CIO's formation as a threat and possible attempt at a coup. It responded to this perceived danger by booting all unions affiliated with the CIO in 1935.[13]

These negotiations directly relate to labor education that incorporated labor drama. By virtue of the interest in Progressive education, labor colleges committed themselves to an ideology aligned with social unionization ideas. Labor drama, as a cultural product for workers, was a natural outgrowth. However, histories of the CIO and the IWW demonstrate, conservative labor leaders conflated an interest in social unionization with radical left politics.[14] International developments in relation to communism and socialism in places like Russia and Germany did not help the cause. These assumed affiliations with radical politics help frame the dangerous

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[12] This assessment is an oversimplification of the issues that also involved industrial versus craft trades, the issues of race and ethnicity, and the tolerance of anticapitalist influences in the organization. Please see Robert H. Zieger's book, *The CIO, 1935-1955* for additional discussion about the AFL-CIO history.

[13] After twenty years and a series of controversial negotiations, the two federations reunited into the contemporary AFL-CIO.

[14] This social unionization slant resulted from leaders' interest Marxist and Communist philosophies found in international movement, including Great Britain's labour college movement and Plebs' League; the Proletkult movement via the writings of Bogdanov as part of the Soviet revolution; and/or the influence of figures like Walter Vrooman regarding the importance of educating the worker both in and beyond the issues of the workplace.

dimension often assigned to the schools, whether real or imagined, particularly in connection with the role of radicalism in art, politics, and education in the early twentieth century.

Every labor drama program discussed in this dissertation faced struggles regarding the role of labor activism in the political and cultural lives of workers. Presumptions regarding these schools' left-leaning tendencies led to opposition from more mainstream organizations like the AFL, as well as from religious institutions, political groups, law enforcement, and communities surrounding the school. For example, in 1928, the AFL's new president, William Green, denounced Brookwood as "communistic, atheistic and anti-A. F. of L," and demanded that all affiliated labor organizations sever all ties with the institution (qtd. in Muste "Worker's" 738). Similarly, Commonwealth College was subject to a formal FBI investigation after reports emerged in local papers suggesting that the school harbored and trained communists. Even Bryn Mawr College booted its Summer School for Women Workers from the school's grounds after seventeen incident-free years when program leaders were falsely accused of supporting a strike and generating scandal for the alumnae and administration.[15] These examples directly relate to the aforementioned discussion regarding the many and varied ways in which radicalism manifested itself throughout these programs.

The backlash towards these schools led other programs, like the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry, to take extreme measures to assure supporters of their mainstream anti-radical approach. They launched aggressive publicity campaigns, going so far as to include a statement on all published literature indicating programs were "non-sectarian, non-political experiment in Workers' education sponsored by an independent committee" to reinforce their political neutrality and rejection of radical groups ("Southern Summer" 1). The political and organizational backlash directed toward each of the schools, coupled with fallout from the Great

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[15] See Chapter Three.

Depression and lead up to World War II, contributed to the demise of every labor college considered in this study. Contextualizing these programs within their unstable, often hostile, environments demonstrates the trials instructors and worker/students faced as they attempted educational and artistic experimentation. The participants' careful negotiation of external pressures within relative safety and openness of their school campuses becomes as an important theme in each case study.

The Inherently Political Stage

In regards to evolution of labor drama as both a political and pedagogical performance genre, the value of theatre and drama as a pedagogical tool also requires discussion. While important to acknowledge the influence of figures like German theatre artists like Piscator and Brecht, as well as the Russian proletkultists Eisenstein, Meyerhold and others, relying on these thinkers and artists' ideas presented many challenges to the US theatre artists interested in workers' theatre. As Herbert Kline, editor of *New Theatre* magazine from 1934-7 noted in a 1934 article, "the difficulty in writing a revolutionary play that encompasses not only the lives of individuals, but also the manifold ramifications and interlacings of class relationships and conflicts, are great…" (22-3). Kline's quote exemplifies anxieties and ambivalence experienced by many US theatre artists interested in political theatre, at least in part due to the imperfect transfer of techniques and forms from places like Russia and Germany to the US capitalist landscape.

However, drawing on theories and approaches from international workers' theatre movements was necessary for these US artists because, as Bruce McConachie noted in a 1985 review of several books about workers' theatre in English-speaking communities, "there was

very little dramatic theory in the U.S., left-wing or otherwise, between 1900 and 1940 (502-3). Thus, I draw on some of the different educational leaders who theorized the political function of drama specifically in the US during the interwar period, even if they do not have the reputation of their international contemporaries. In 1926, Arthur Calhoun, an Economics teacher who served as Director of Academics at Brookwood Labor College working alongside Brookwood Dramatics instructor Hazel MacKaye on labor drama experiments at the college, offered a lecture entitled, "The Place of Dramatics in the Promotion and Maintenance of Workers' Education." In the lecture, Calhoun commented on the social significance of drama, identifying several values of drama specifically in US workers' education. Values cited by Calhoun included drama's role as "a release from the tension and strains of the workday world… it takes us out of ourselves… and enables us to forget for the moment so many things," and its role as "a rehearsal of projected exploits" (35-6). More importantly for theorizing the political dimension of labor drama in workers' education, Calhoun offers the following values:

> Dramatics provide a review of experience, individual and collective, and thereby constitute a prime educational agency, selecting outstanding types of action and feeling and revivifying and reinforcing them in such a way as to make them available and functional in the individual and group life to a larger degree than would have been possible. A social group may in this way so live over its history as to be equipped anew for future struggles. (35-6)

Calhoun's discussion, disseminated to labor education leaders from schools throughout the US, presents foundational ideas about the simultaneous roles drama plays as "a release" and escape and as "a review of experience" and "rehearsal for the future." In effect, drama is an embodied thought exercise that presents images of imagined possibilities for changing the world even it as

allows participants a moment of escape and reinforcement of the past. Calhoun's ideas help explain why so many different programs looked to drama, more than other artistic pursuits, as a compelling vehicle for learning about labor. As an embodied "review of experience" drama is inherently pedagogic; as "rehearsal for future exploits" it also points toward action.

Calhoun's theoretical approach to drama in US labor education initiatives also provides a concrete methodology for leading uneducated laborers through schools' complex curricula. Through the act of embodiment required by dramatics pedagogy, reading and writing become less important. For example, Southern workers may not have easily conceptualized the academic nuances behind carpetbagging, but they could act out a moment from their lives where northern companies established new businesses in their town and exploited their family or friends. They could also imagine what they might do in response to this situation and act out those solutions as well. They could discuss these different solutions with their fellow students and teachers, assessing their effectiveness. They could try out fantastic ideas, like singing and dancing around the Boss until he acquiesced to demands, or realistic solutions where they attempted to negotiate.[16] Through these experiments, students could represent stories from their lives that dealt with power, exploitation, and agency, and make a plan for changing their immediate worlds.

This description, while hypothetical, closely aligns with many class plans and performance processes I uncovered. Through corporeal experimentation via dramatics, students and teachers fused practical ideas and skills for organizing and advocacy with theoretical knowledge that supported the labor movement's philosophical foundation. They also had fun, escaping reality for a short time as they generated new communities based around the creation of

[16] This example follows the plot of a dramatic text discussed in Chapter Two.

performance. These programs brought together students, teachers, and communities around the school, as students produced dramatic performances for audiences. Moreover, dramatics helped teachers find a way for students to engage with abstract, complex, and otherwise inaccessible ideas about labor history, economics, and other subjects included in curriculum. Students found a way to make personal connections to abstract concepts, not only creating moments for contemplation, but also generating opportunities for practicing action for change.

These simultaneously pedagogical and recreational dimensions of drama helped protect its role on campus. Given theatre's controversial past and the impending blacklisting that occurred during McCarthyism, I expected to find much more scandal in these programs. Instead, more often than not, labor drama helped programs through difficult times, with performances serving as public relations tools. The danger associated with representing the imagined on stage has troubled thinkers since Plato, but the role of theatre as dangerous art was particularly important to these institutions. For one, many of the people involved in these experiments did not have dramatics training, and they were just beginning important theoretical conversations to explain their work. Accordingly, they were not sure what would come out of their experimentation, and worse, they did not have a vocabulary to explain its political, ideological, or pedagogical function— especially if the product was controversial. Also, drama's role as the performance genre *de rigueur* of radical workers' movements in Russia and Germany at this time further complicated these matters.[17] Therefore, drama was consistently employed to demonstrate

[17] One of the most noted artistic initiatives from the Russian Left was *proletarskaya kultura or* the Proletkult movement, an important manifestation of the increasingly complex international workers' movement based in Russian communist philosophies. Proletkult, an association of politically minded radical intellectuals and artists, set out to organize Russian cultural and education organizations and institutions and develop an collective approach to a "steady and more methodical recasting of the entire society" via the development of a proletarian culture (Brovkin. *Russia after Lenin*: p. 21). Through the Proletkult movement and its guiding philosophies' suggestions that cultural forms might provide an avenue for creating a proletarian

the lack of radicalism at each of the college, especially when accusations arose about politically transgressive work supposedly occurring on campus. Still, drama's role as the school's public face also challenged instructors as they balanced their programs' roles within larger plans for advocacy. Sometimes, tensions arose between dramatics instructors and leadership, and one instructor, Hazel MacKaye, was likely excused from her position for not being mindful of her responsibility to present a positive, polished face of the school with her productions, a point to which I will return in the following chapter.

The public face of these experimental initiatives resulted in many programs becoming artistic incubators for students who developed more prominent and well-documented theatre of the US political left. For example, the dramatic, political, pedagogical experimentation that occurred in labor college classrooms link to more well-known performance initiatives and political endeavors like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union's *Pins and Needles,* the founding of the Hedgerow Theatre, the Group Theatre's production of *Waiting for Lefty,* and the left-leaning productions of the Federal Theatre Project. By looking closely at how some figures in these groups explored their political and artistic ideologies through experiences in labor drama classes in this dissertation, I aim to generate complementary narratives regarding theatre's evolution as left-leaning institution in the US, further supporting the reconstructive project of documenting and analyzing the otherwise marginalized theatre of the artistic and cultural Left during this period.

In the same vein, labor drama classrooms serve as compelling examples of experimental performance. They demonstrate the possibilities and limitations associated with synthesizing disparate subjects under an arts education umbrella in order to help groups of learners engage

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culture, it simultaneously suggested that art functioned as manifestation of revolution by virtue of its association with the rising popularity of Marxist-Leninism, a reality reinforced by the formation of the Third International in 1919.

with issues and subject matter relevant to their lives. Moreover, these experiments occurred contemporaneously with developments with educational drama for children. These labor drama classes also offer another narrative about theatre's role in educating young US citizens. The two developing trajectories of drama in educational contexts during this period— one toward Winifred Ward's creative dramatics and the Junior League's booming children's theatre programs and another toward communist drama, the Federal Theatre Project, and artist blacklisting— share common roots. By connecting educational trends, political movements, and performance innovations, this dissertation demonstrates the value of looking to marginalized voices in order to develop more interconnected, more nuanced, and more democratic histories of US theatre.

Moving Forward

In their labor dramatics programs, instructors and worker/students explored process-oriented devising techniques, represented the narratives of real people in real-life situations, and engaged with collective approaches to art-making. Thinking of these classrooms as spaces of theatrical and educational experimentation offers new ideas about those on the margins, amateur worker-students and beyond, who created performances that mattered to their communities even if failing to find resonance elsewhere. By studying the archival records surrounding labor drama classrooms, a process not unlike like attending to a church basement play or elementary school pageant rehearsal or a nineteenth century parlor drama, I reconstruct a few examples demonstrating the importance of drama in the lives of people who have been systematically silenced. Giving voice to these histories leads not only to more complex and complete narratives US theatre histories, but it also shows how drama moved beyond the stage to make a difference

in the lives of worker/students and teachers. Their experiences making drama, changed many individuals’ life trajectories, and their stories, even without a happy ending, are worth telling.

Chapter Two: The Variegated Shoots: Hazel MacKaye and the Advent of Labor Dramatics at Brookwood Labor College, 1925-6

*"Every cemetery has a number of Shakespeares buried in it for want of opportunity to develop their talent." (*Hazel MacKaye,"Drama" 1)

"'Say, if I have to die many more times tonight, I'll be black and blue all over!" (A "Very Dead Corpse" that "suffered in the process of falling dead six times in succession" as quoted by Helen Norton in "Drama at Brookwood")

1925, Brookwood Labor College's (Brookwood) student-run newspaper published an article about the school's new dramatics program. In the essay, the new director, Hazel MacKaye, a well-heeled New York City Suffragette with roots in political pageantry, included the above assertion as a glimpse into the philosophies guiding her new course. This provocative evocation of cemeteries filled with would-be Shakespeares highlighted MacKaye's strident belief that all students, regardless of aptitude or experience in the performing arts, needed only an "opportunity to develop their talent" in order to liberate their potential for creating art. The egalitarian ideas at the core of MacKaye's quote speak to her thoughtful engagement with labor drama as a synthesizing medium that would combine suffragist performance traditions with labor activism. She arrived at Brookwood ready to combine her expertise in political mass spectacle performance with the experimental curriculum in worker's education.

Soon after her essay appeared in the school paper, MacKaye arrived at Brookwood and hatched a plan for her new program. Her ideas and leadership led to one of the first and most influential labor drama programs in the workers' education movement. However, this new

program was also a challenge for the former suffragist. As MacKaye attempted to synthesize her newfound interest in labor dramatics with her experience in suffragist pageantry, she wrestled with approaches that would provide a pedagogically sound experience for her students within the larger Brookwood curriculum. She experimented with different methodologies, evolved her ideas, and settled on a process-based, student focused approach. Her ideas would guide other instructors that followed her, both at Brookwood and beyond. Despite her performance expertise and path-breaking work, MacKaye had no pedagogical training and figured out how her ideas about suffragist art would evolve to meet the needs of her worker/students. However, MacKaye's reputation as high-class pageant director set up expectations that she would focus on polished labor pageants designed as publicity tools for the new school, and her evolving ideas about labor drama presented challenges for her artistic reputation, and she slipped into obscurity shortly after she departed Brookwood in 1926.

Given MacKaye's early experimentation with labor dramatics at Brookwood, her time at the school between 1925 and 1926 serves as an appropriate starting point for my study of labor drama's evolution. When Brookwood, a small residential workers' college in Katonah, New York, opened in 1921, it was ground-breaking institution in the workers' education movement. Brookwood was the first residential workers' education program in the country and the first workers' education program to receive widespread support from unions throughout the country. For years, it "remained the leading residential co-educational school for persons preparing for a labour movement career in the United States" (Robinson 64). In its early years, it maintained connections with the AFL's Workers' Education Bureau, the federation's educational arm,

securing its place as a legitimate institution for studying issues of labor.[18] The school was even governed by representatives from AFL- affiliated unions. [19] The school also engaged in aggressive fundraising campaigns, soliciting monies from unions, wealthy donors, and the Garland fund.[20] These fundraising efforts drew attention from other influential organizations due to their financial investment in the school. A post-WWI recession and series of labor setbacks, like the influx of immigrant workers and the recently elected pro-business Harding administration that ran on the campaign slogan, "Less government in business and more business in government," further magnified interest in the school as training ground for pioneering new strategies organizing workers. Everyone seemed curious to see what would come out of this new workers' education laboratory.

Under the leadership of Christian Socialist A.J. Muste, an alliance of pacifist and Socialist leaders founded Brookwood as a response to criticisms regarding public schooling's inability to educate workers.[21,22] Brookwood was a small institution, with an average student

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[18] See James Robinson's 1968 article, "The Expulsion of Brookwood Labor College from the Worker' Education Bureau for additional discussion of the school's connection the AFL and Workers' Education Bureau (64-9)

[19] See opening chapter of the dissertation for additional discussion of the American Federation of Labor's value in relation to the values of many labor college and workers' education initiatives during this period.

[20] According to the archival resources, The Garland Fund, better known as the The American Fund for Public Service, "was created in 1922 by Charles Garland to support radical social and economic causes…from 1922 to 1941 the Fund gave nearly two million dollars to a variety of left-wing organizations and enterprises, such as labor unions, cooperatives, schools for workers, radical publications, bail and legal defense funds, and civil liberties, penal reform, and minority rights groups." ("American Fund")

[21] Points of critique and discussion included the lack of opportunity for basic education for immigrants and unskilled workers, the unique educational needs of the working class in areas around New York City, and the political and social climate that increasingly pointed toward a less comprehensive, more practical approach to labor activism courtesy of organizations like the AFL's increasingly salient business unionism agendas after 1919.

body of forty students. Only 186 students graduate in its first ten years. The average age of students was twenty-six, and most had only a basic education, having left high school to start work in their mid-teens (Norton “A Survey” 1).[23] Students came from a variety of trades, with the garment industry, mining, and “metal, building, and transportation” trades representing the largest portion of the student body (Norton “Survey” 1). Ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity was a central value at the school, and students from over twenty different ethnic and immigrant groups, including African-American and international students, attended Brookwood in its first ten years. Most students came from highly industrialized areas in the northeast. The school’s curriculum, a mix of offerings in labor theory, labor histories, economics, and other courses that directly related to the Labor movement, set out to prepare workers to lead in the movement. The school came under attack by the AFL, a former ally, between 1927 and 1928 for its sympathies with communism, and the organization urged affiliate unions to defund the program and sever ties. The school was expelled from the Workers’ Education Bureau in 1929 under accusations of “disloyalty” (Robinson 66). After expulsion, the Brookwood attracted an increasingly radical student population, and due to financial and political difficulties, it closed for good in 1937.[24]

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[22] See Richard Altenbaugh’s “‘The Children and the Instruments of a Militant Labor Progressivism’: Brookwood Labor College and the American Labor College Movement of the 1920s and 1930s,” and *Education for Struggle* for additional discussions about the formation of Brookwood Labor College.

[23] Students as young as 18 and as old as 50 studied at the school, but as Helen Norton points out in her analysis of the student body during the first ten years. (Norton “Brookwood”18-9.

[24] See James Robinson’s 1968 article, “The Expulsion of Brookwood Labor College from the Workers’ Education Bureau;” Richard Altenbaugh’s book and article, “Proletarian Drama: An Educational Tool of the American Labor College Movement;” Charles Howlett’s entry in the *Encyclopedia of Peace Education*; and the documents published by the Workers’ Education Bureau and Brookwood for additional discussion of this history.

Developments during the early 1920s did not help Brookwood's first years. An unprecedented confluence of events, including worldwide anxiety and a domestic recession associated with World War I's end; unification of republics into the Soviet Union (1922); a subsequent power vacuum left in the wake of Lenin's death (1924); women's suffrage (1920); prohibition (1920); and increasingly volatile race relations exemplified by riots, lynchings and burgeoning Ku Klux Klan membership, resulted in a period of instability, innovation, and increasing radicalism and reactionary anti-radicalism in the US. The labor movement found itself caught in the middle of these issues, with business leaders and conservative government officials accusing the labor movement— as a whole— of rampant radicalism that threatened to destroy US society.[25] A fierce campaign to break up the radical dimension of labor ensued— the first Red scare. Labor's influence dwindled during the remainder of the 1920s due this demoralization. The economic prosperity associated with the Roaring Twenties did not help matters. These events profoundly impacted the ways artists and activists engaged with labor issues, including those interested in workers' education.

Labor organizations pursued new initiatives in the hopes of once again finding relevancy. As groups took on new struggles— for racial equality, for the right to work safely at livable wages, for new models of government influenced by anticapitalist philosophies, for strategizing responses to the Right's conflation of labor organizations and dangerous radical Left politics— new techniques and strategies became increasingly necessary. During this period of experimentation and innovation, drama arrived on the scene as an arts-based strategy for

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[25] Labor leaders and organizations also instigated events justifying these concerns. For example, labor federations, from the AFL to the IWW, organized thousands of strikes between 1917 and 1921, resulting in food and coal shortages throughout the country.

activism, and Brookwood evolved into a training ground for learning and disseminating knowledge about labor dramatics.[26]

While the advent of labor dramatics at the school was somewhat haphazard, the program gathered steam under the leadership of Hazel MacKaye. MacKaye, an attendee of George Pierce Baker's dramatics programs at Radcliffe College and a radical Suffragist whose woman's rights pageants prominently featured in the movement's activist art, served as the first instructor during the fall of 1925 and Spring 1926.[27] While MacKaye's tenure was brief, her experimental and innovative approaches to drama as a teaching tool paved the way for subsequent dramatics instructors to continue her programs. As a result of these efforts, Brookwood dramatics programs flourished after MacKaye's departure. Jasper Deeter, a theatre artist best known for his founding of the politically progressive Hedgerow Theatre and for his work with the Provincetown Players, replaced MacKaye, bolstering dramatic production through Brookwood's performance ensemble, the Brookwood Labor Players (BLP). The labor drama pedagogies and dramatic production paradigms, scripts, and philosophies pioneered at Brookwood inspired practically all similar courses both in labor colleges and in other forms of workers' education programs.[28]

Examining MacKaye's time at the school helps trace these programs' early genealogies, framing labor drama's propagation throughout residential labor colleges who looked to

[26] Portland Labor College, which also held dramatics classes, also formed in 1921, but it was not a residential program. See Jerry Lembcke's 1984 article about Portland Labor College as well as E.E. Schwartztrauber's 1923 report. "Labor Drama in Worker's Colleges."

[27] Clyde Barrow suggests that MacKaye arrived at Brookwood in 1923, but documentation associated with MacKaye's hiring suggests this assertion is incorrect.

[28] See Clyde W. Barrow's article "Playing Workers: Proletarian Drama in the Curriculum of American Labor Colleges, 1921-37" and Richard Altenbaugh's article "Proletarian Drama: An Educational Tool of the American Labor College Movement" for additional discussions regarding the negotiations of the role of cultural and arts education, specifically dramatics, in workers' colleges.

Brookwood as a guide. Hazel MacKaye's Brookwood tenure also illuminates the rapid evolution of arts-based activism during the tumult between 1920 and 1926, showcasing how one artist, once at the theatrical and political vanguard with her women's suffrage pageants, quickly became irrelevant. As she negotiated her place within the increasingly polarized and often schizophrenic labor movement, she unexpectedly drifted into obscurity shortly after her departure as dramatics instructor. Tensions over what labor drama should be, both to the Brookwood community and to the larger labor movement, proved a constant struggle for the participants in labor dramatics programs, and many artists, students, and instructors simply fell to the wayside as the movement rapidly changed. Given these realities, MacKaye might be read as kind of canary in the increasingly organized and politicized coal mine of labor activism during the period. Her work at Brookwood exemplifies not only the rapidly changing forms incorporated into propagandistic and politically-minded performance during the early 1920s, but also the leaving behind of artists, once at the vanguard of radical art practice, who could not keep pace.

From Pageants to Proletariats: Hazel MacKaye's Theatrical Upbringing

Although documentation of MacKaye's time at Brookwood has largely drifted into obscurity within studies of US theatre history, her family's significance as theatrical innovators and her theatrical production in the women's suffrage movement are still well-known. As the youngest child of famous actor, playwright, and theatrical artist Steele MacKaye, Hazel was part of a theatrical dynasty. The youngest child and only daughter in family of five boys, Hazel's birth was "the happiest moment" of Steele MacKaye's life, and he considered his only daughter "his mascot of high fortune" (MacKaye *Epoch* 357). She was named for the protagonist in her father's famous play, *Hazel Kirke,* and she grew up participating in a variety of her family's

theatrical endeavors, acting in and assisting with her brother, Percy MacKaye's pageants and plays. Her relationship with her father, brother, and mother directly influenced her work in theatre (Blair 32; MacKaye *Epoch*).[29]

As a young woman, MacKaye synthesized her theatrical upbringing with her interest in political causes, committing a large portion of her life to the creation of theatre that dismantled barriers for women in a politically complicated time for feminist causes. MacKaye's work in suffragist performance carefully balanced the need for activist art within the movement's ideologies. These foundational beliefs supported a view that, as Jean H. Baker writes, "appreciated the need for a 'galaxy' of grassroots female supporters" but that also "understood the necessity of an unassailable hierarchy in the early stages of the women's movement" (5). MacKaye understood the pressure associated with a visible role in the movement, and she carefully crafted her pageants to reflect the moral upstanding and well-heeled femininity utilized by Suffragettes to prove their worthiness of enfranchisement. For example, in addition to pageantry, she was quoted in articles on the subject, including "Prohibition to Bring the Community Playhouse" in which she advocated for turning a defunct corner saloon into a community performance space (3). She was a very successful figure in the movement because of her commitment to toeing the party line, particularly in the high-stakes period leading up to ratification of the nineteenth amendment. Nonetheless, Hazel's position as the youngest and only female MacKaye children situated her in the shadows of her highly accomplished older brothers despite her prolific theatrical career and prominent political activism.[30]

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[29] Her mother was amateur dramatist and actress Mary Keith Medbury MacKaye.

[30] Percy MacKaye was a noted pageant director and playwright, Benton was a conservationist who steered the creation of the Appalachian Trail, and James MacKaye was a pioneering engineer.

MacKaye pursued college education at Harvard's women's coordinate school, Radcliffe, where she studied theatre with George Pierce Baker. [31] She left the program after a short time to gain experience in the field, seeking out a plethora of opportunities to expand her knowledge and develop skills in all facets of theatrical production. In documenting MacKaye's early work in theatre, Karen Blair, scholar of women's volunteer organizations, notes the diversity of MacKaye's apprenticeships during this period, from assistant director of several political pageant productions to a charter member of the American Pageant Association in 1913 (33).[32] MacKaye also worked as a professional actress, including performing in and assisting with several of her brother's productions, such as the *Caliban* and *Sanctuary* pageants.[33] She also honed her child drama skills via her work as drama instructor and director at the Children's Educational Theatre founded by Alice Minnie Hertz, where she connected with pioneers in children's theatre and educational drama like Constance D'Arcy MacKay (Blair 33; van de Water "Constance" 81). These diverse experiences facilitated MacKaye's involvement with a network of women interested in the pedagogical and political potential found in amateur dramatics.[34]

MacKaye's participation in her brother's pageantry work and her experimentation with amateur dramatic forms in her late teens and early twenties directly influenced her work in political pageantry between 1915-1924. A mass spectacle documented throughout histories of

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[31] Her brothers attended the all-male Harvard.

[32] For contextualization regarding pageantry's wide-reaching influence, 1913 was the same year of the infamous Paterson Pageant performed in Madison Square Garden.

[33] In his 1916 text of *Caliban*, Percy cites Hazel's contribution to the field, lists her as staff assistant, and includes her "community organization chart" (158; 220).

[34] MacKaye and MacKay's relationship was so close that MacKay offers commentary on Hazel's theatrical work in Percy's biography about their father, stating, "The debut of American pageantry owes to Hazel MacKaye can never be fully evaluated in its true significance because the results of her work have been so wide-spread, and [are] so far-reaching" (Epoch lxv)

performance, pageantry was once again taken up as a theatrical genre in the US, particularly in amateur dramatics circles, during the first half of the twentieth century.[35] In his study of early twentieth century pageants, scholar David Glassberg notes that communities and artists employed pageantry to synthesize traditional performance forms with US histories in order to create a new and uniquely US-based folk art performance that envisioned “a new American civilization as it was being born” (284). The pageant’s accessibility, large-scale production values and historical significance as an art for the masses positioned it as an ideal genre for representing a new, unified American identity, particularly amongst groups who looked for increasingly visible inclusion in the cultural narratives of US society.

Women’s groups were central to the development and propagation of this particular brand of pageantry. The phenomenon of mass spectacle performances that included women’s bodies, women’s perspectives, and women’s histories functioned as an important innovation of this genre. From the inaugural Miss America pageant in 1921 to activist pageantry associated with radical suffragist organization the Congressional Union, pageants with, by, for, and about women added invaluable complexity to the ways in which women secured visibility in male-dominated cultural and political landscapes during the early twentieth century.[36] Specific to the discussion of MacKaye’s political art, artist/activists involved in suffrage also sought out reclamation of these new and uniquely American pageant forms as artistic vehicles to engage in political discourse through performative means. The inclusion of performance within the

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[35] See David Glassberg’s *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century.*

[36] See work by Rebecca Coleman Hewett.

Suffragists' activist agendas was a necessary strategy given their exclusion from dominant avenues of political dialogue and enfranchisement.

MacKaye's work in this avenue of pageantry led her to a distinguished career, and her expertise in the discipline directly contributed to her employment at Brookwood. Before arriving at the labor college in 1925, MacKaye developed pageants for a host of organizations and community groups focused on women's issues, including *A Masque of Industry*, produced in Buffalo, New York in 1911;[37] *Pageant of Education* for the US Education Bureau in 1913; the *Pageant of Athena* about great women in history that involved over 400 college students and performed at Vassar College's fiftieth anniversary in 1915; and a collection of pageant productions for the Congressional Union including *The Allegory* (1913) performed on the steps of the US Treasury, *The American Woman: Six Periods of American Life* (1914), *Susan B. Anthony* (1915), and the post-nineteenth-amendment *Equal Rights Pageant* (1923) (Blair 24-6; Bordelon 123; "Miss" 9). Each of these pageants reflected performance innovation whereby MacKaye utilized mass spectacle techniques including large numbers of women performers, music, historical reenactment, tableaux, dance, and choral speaking to represent and rehabilitate histories of women as part of Suffragist propaganda. By representing uniquely female contributions to US history, McKaye's early pageants set out to demonstrate, on a massive scale, the travesty of women being disallowed to vote since they directly contributed to the fabric of the US cultural narrative.[38] MacKaye's pageants set out to represent often-silenced histories of women, reframing history in order to enter women into the larger narrative of the US's past,

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[37] *A Masque of Industry* was supported by Buffalo's Arts and Festivals committee, which included Alice Minnie Hertz, a pioneer in Theatre for Youth, further demonstrating the connection between MacKaye and the well-known child drama pioneers of the time (*The Playground* 406).

[38] See Karen Blair's article for an in-depth discussion of MacKaye's early work in pageantry.

present, and future. MacKaye's work during this period was so significant that Blair asserts that the young theatre artist "was singular in pushing the pageant form still harder, seizing it to voice controversial questions about the depth of sexism in American society. Her work represents an ambitious endeavor to invest mainstream rituals with social change messages" (23). To this day, MacKaye's pageants are among the few documented instances of US performance specifically about women's histories written and performed by women for largely female audiences, and they exemplify the innovative, arguably radical, political motivations and artistic ideologies at the core of her work.

MacKaye at Brookwood: Fall 1925

MacKaye's pageantry career directly influenced the decision to hire her as dramatics instructor at Brookwood, and her arrival at the college marked a shifting focus toward drama as an integral component of the school's larger pedagogical goals. While no mention of dramatics appeared in school literature before 1924, the *Brookwood Review*, the school paper's December edition announced the formation of the "Brookwood Workers' College Players" and described an upcoming production of scenes from Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*. Student, campus secretary Lillian Schachat, and English instructor Josephine "Polly" Colby facilitated the production, and it toured to the Workers' Education Bureau Convention and the Manumit School, a boarding school for workers' children best known for its Summer programs with the Pioneer Youth, in the spring of 1925 ("Faculty Minutes 21 Apr;" Schachat 2). In conjunction with the production, Schachat published an article about the process, illustrating nascent ideas about labor dramatics bubbling at the school after *The Weavers'* success. Schachat discusses possibilities present in synthesizing the workers' movement's political agenda with amateur dramatics, stating: "The work of play-acting at Brookwood will more than stand the students in good stead

when they return to the task of organizing their fellows, attracting them to union meetings, and implanting the germ of class consciousness" (3).

First, Schachat's suggestion that "play-acting" would "stand students in good stead" for attracting workers to union meetings reveals a bias toward dramatics' chief value as a tool of recreation designed to hook otherwise disengaged workers. This view of dramatics' value reflects both larger dialogues about how unions might best support the workers they represented, particularly in regards to their cultural lives, and the growing interest in training workers in propaganda techniques for the purposes of organizing membership. Schachat's articulation of drama's main value as propagandistic entertainment designed to "implant a germ of class consciousness" hints toward some tensions that later appear between different parties interested in labor drama programs, including those between MacKaye and the Brookwood administration. Given the ideas presented in this article, the school's leadership likely thought of drama as a way to equip workers to develop the cultural lives of their respective workers' organizations. Still, the artist they employed to help with this new initiative thought more critically about its political significance to both worker/artists creating the productions and to the audiences who witnessed their performances.

By spring of 1925, *The Weavers* run had proven so successful that faculty leadership moved to consult with other experts in the field in order to grow the program. Hazel MacKaye was among the first experts to whom the school reached out. While records do not clearly indicate how Brookwood faculty knew of MacKaye, Faculty Meeting Minutes from April state that plans were made to "consult with Miss McKye [sic]" on "pageantry work" at the school ("Faculty Minutes 30 Apr), and by the sixth of May, school president AJ Muste reported on "conference with Miss McKye [sic]" that included a motion to "engage her for pageantry work at

Brookwood and in other centers located near Brookwood" ("Faculty Minutes 6 May"). Soon after, the school's executive committee moved to request a "statement of what her work would consist of" and her salary requirements ("Faculty Minutes 6 May").). This request was submitted shortly thereafter, and MacKaye began preparing for her new role as Dramatics Instructor and Pageantry Director at the college. As part of this preparation, MacKaye visited Brookwood Labor College later in the month of May as a "noted expert in pageantry and general dramatics" and "conferred with the Brookwood faculty on the subject of dramatization of labor interests." ("Of Interest" 5), Afterwards, Brookwood faculty moved to retain MacKaye at a rate of $2,450 dollars for the academic year, $450 more than any other Brookwood faculty outside school administration ("Faculty Memorandum"). She immediately formed a committee on Dramatics with Josephine "Polly" Colby, the school's English instructor; A.J. Muste, the school's president; and Howard Young, a student interested in technical side of dramatics at the school who was hired as "Student Tutor" to assist her. As this set of developments indicates, Brookwood leadership rapidly set in motion the necessary step to bring MacKaye to campus for the 1925/6 academic year, and she immediately committed herself to her new role.

As part of her preparation for arrival at Brookwood, MacKaye wrote a lengthy essay to explain her theoretical and practical approaches to labor drama for the Labor Dramatics committee. She opens by asserting that the document serves only as a "skeleton" and a "crude skimming" to which the rest of the committee would issue "various statements or bulleting or whatever you wish to call them, off occasionally during the summer" (MacKaye "Letter 10 July"). Despite the caveat, the essay documents an extremely comprehensive analysis of the pedagogical, social, and political goals and challenges of labor drama. She opens by posing an important question: "We who are interested in the Drama and the Labor Movement have in mind

what ultimate goal? (MacKaye "The Drama" 1) This question about the ultimate purpose for synthesizing drama and labor activism in an educational setting was an important inquiry to make, particularly from teacher/artist facing a new environment where the chief motivation for drama seemed to be its draw as entertainment and potential to support community-building efforts. She continues with her thoughts on the answer:

> Is it not the quickening of the spirit animating the labor Movement by the interpreting and illuminating of the ideals back of the movement through the means of great and beautiful plays, greatly and beautifully interpreted?
>
> And have we not a very distinct picture of the form this quickening process would take throughout the Movements? Do we not picture countless groups of people absorbed in the creation of increasingly beautiful and noble works of art-- in their own theatres with their own leaders and actors and onlookers? In brief, is not the ultimate goal of the Drama and the Labor Movement "a labor theatre in every community?" (MacKaye "The Drama" 1)

Her suggestion that theatre might serve as vehicle for bringing to life "grand, beautiful, and noble" narratives that absorb "countless groups of people" speaks to the ambition of her approach, especially when contrasted with Schachat's earlier suggestion that labor dramatics primary value rested with its ability to attract workers to union meetings. This ambition springs from MacKaye's experience in theatrical production. Unlike Schachat, who had not worked professionally in the theatre and very likely first participated in dramatics at Brookwood, MacKaye had already spent decades thinking about the political dimension of art in tandem with her consideration of its aesthetic, poetic, and rhetorical function.

Nevertheless, MacKaye's sophisticated engagement with the principles guiding her art practice also presented problems in regards to her transition from Suffrage to labor. For example, her theoretical discussion of labor drama's potential to open up "noble" and "beautiful" plays points to some inherent incompatibilities of MacKaye's approach to drama within the context of the much more practical-skills oriented curriculum at Brookwood. By focusing on the noble and beautiful, MacKaye's essay indicates a certain naiveté regarding the grit and grime associated with the ugly, small-scale struggles inherent to the workers movement, a reality that other Brookwood faculty felt vitally important to illuminate and examine as part of the school's curriculum. Finally, by asserting a goal of "a labor theatre in every community" as the ultimate goal of this new initiative, MacKaye establishes extremely high expectations for Brookwood's fledgling theatre program and, by proxy, her leadership. The goals outlined by MacKaye would be a tall order for any new theatre program, let alone one made up of amateur worker/performers who maintained interests in drama mostly in association with the practical issues of labor organizing, as indicated in Schachat's articulation of drama's chief value as a way to attract workers to union meetings. Nevertheless, this opening essay, complete with its aspirational, somewhat grandiose, discussion, serves as a testament to both MacKaye's enthusiasm for her new program and to the excitement about labor dramatics' possibilities in the early 1920s.

While this essay foreshadowed some of the challenges MacKaye would ultimately face in marrying Brookwood's expectations with her unique artistic and ideological proclivities, it also demonstrates her competency in developing a new program. Unlike many other theatre artists mentioned in this dissertation, MacKaye was not naive in her approach to theatre. She had extensive production experience and publications about the topic of drama with a social purpose, and even if her ideas initially appear cavalier and discordant with Brookwood's larger values,

she most certainly felt them to be achievable at the school under her leadership. This fact is clearly supported by the detailed analysis she makes of the program in her "skeletal" outline for the program. For example, in discussing challenges associated with promoting labor drama, she asks the following progression of questions concerning the present role of dramatics in the larger workers' movement:

- Can it be said that there exists among workers any conscious interest in the Drama as a means of interpreting the Labor Movement?
- If so, how widespread is this interest?
- If not, what policy should be pursued in arousing an interest?
- Should an earnest demand be created before an adequate "supply" exists to satisfy this demand?
- And when we say supply, what do we mean?
- Do we mean plays, etc. on social questions, directors and actors who understand existing limitations in resources among the workers or audiences receptive to this 'Proletarian" drama?
- Would it be the part of wisdom to agitate the question of the Drama and Labor before adequate experiments had been made which might serve to guide the workers as a while in this intricate problem?

- Could experimentation and "promotion" of some aspects, at least, of the problem, go on at the same time?

  (MacKaye "The Drama" 3)

Here, MacKaye, an experienced artist, albeit new to this particular niche, asks astute questions about what exactly labor dramatics should look like, what goals it should privilege, how experimental theatre practice would augment existing programs, and how to best manage experimentation and promotion of the work. This list exemplifies the thoroughness with which MacKaye approached her new appointment. She further demonstrates her competency by addressing the practical aspects of program's design and equating the members of the committee to architects who "must see the design as a whole, in its essentials, at any rate, before we can decide what step is best to take at first." In this discussion of essentials, she articulates the following hierarchy:

1. a play
2. a director
3. actors
4. a stage and auditorium
5. setting- scenery, costumes, lights, etc.
6. an audience (MacKaye "The Drama" 2)

This fairly rigid, top-down structure for dramatic production reflects the zeitgeist of theatrical circles in which MacKaye worked prior to Brookwood, but it appeared alongside her discussions of possible experimentation in student-centered dramatic production. She asserts that "no honest effort should be discouraged in the very beginnings of our experiment" and creating new

material should be given “earnest consideration” ((MacKaye “The Drama” 3).[39] This open-minded attitude toward devising new material signaled MacKaye’s interest in innovation and experimentation. Instead of stridently maintaining her pageantry roots and relying on extant dramatic scripts, she opened her mind to the possibilities that her labor dramatics programs might attempt new strategies to support student ownership of the work. MacKaye’s willingness to consider student-centered artistic production as part of her curricular design was an important development in the life of Brookwood dramatics because it marked the first moment where original work was considered alongside extant dramatic texts in labor drama. This first step contributed to an intense period of experimentation in which student playwriting, directing, and performance shaped the success of the Brookwood Labor Players in the late 1920s and 1930s.

In addition to discussing possibilities for student-centered production, the program’s ultimate goals, and the intricacies of course design, MacKaye’s also included thorough analysis of all aspects of the new dramatics program, including the “Spirit Back,” or metaphysical/spiritual dimension (“Though the moans of the drama, i.e., plays and other dramatic forms, this Great Wish to Live can be interpreted better than in any other way.”). (MacKaye “The Drama” 1) She also offered considerations for selecting dramatic material for production, stating, “Evidently an audience will accept any illusion of setting, from the crassest realism to the most post-impressionist symbolism, provided the performance as a whole be consistent and dramatically moving” (MacKaye “The Drama” 2). Possible play titles she suggested were O’Neill’s expressionist drama, *The Hairy Ape*, Shaw’s obscure one-act, *Annajanska, The Bolshevik Princess*, and *The Little Women of the Slums*, a lost title with unknown authorship. In addition to these discussions, she also recommends potential avenues for

[39] Her poetics of performance reflect structures now considered conservative and somewhat antiquated, particularly in contemporary circles that examine the evolution of radical performance.

additional research for new labor drama titles, and even offers a warning against the committee bogging down in too much theoretical discussion: “Unless the committee starts thinking together from the first on the reasons for undertaking a piece of work, a great deal of confusion arises and much time is wasted by the necessity for repeating many points which should have been established in the beginning” ((MacKaye “The Drama” 4). Her final question asks for her new colleagues to reply with additional discussion of the material (MacKaye “The Drama” 4). This request for feedback reinforces MacKaye’s desire for her essay to provide entrée for the committee members to discuss labor dramatics within the context of Brookwood’s larger goals, but the thoroughness of the essay, paired with the complex theoretical and poetic sophistication which outlined her approach to theatre, made it read more like a definitive guide. Given MacKaye’s detailed thoughts on labor drama, perhaps the rest of the committee had little else to contribute in terms of a formal response. Despite her request for additional input, no members of the Dramatics committee responded to MacKaye’s essay.

Determined, MacKaye pushed against the silence from her new colleagues. In early August, she again wrote to president Muste under the guise of updating him on a potential collaboration with Harry Dana, a former Columbia University comparative literature professor and socialist sympathizer with ties to labor drama (MacKaye “Letter to Muste 4 Aug.”).[40] In addition to describing her recent meeting with Dana, she also articulated a hope to have a clear outline for the dramatics program by early October, the start of the semester. This subtle nudge for feedback on her earlier document finally solicited a response. A few days later, Chairman Muste wrote to MacKaye, stating that he had “read over with much interest” her suggestions for

[40] Dana was ousted from his professorship along with professor James Cattel for associations with anti-war organization the People’s Council of America for Democracy and Peace. The resulting outcry solicited “public resent” from Charles Beard and John Dewey, and Charles Beard resigned from Columbia in response (“Quits Columbia”).

the course, but wrote, "I believe I have no specific comments" (Muste "Letter to MacKaye 10 Aug."). He also suggests that Colby and Young would send her a response, but it does not appear either of them wrote to her. Nonetheless, Muste seemed excited about the program despite his laissez-faire response. He cited his enthusiasm about the partnership with Harry Dana and suggested a possible collaboration with miners groups in Central Pennsylvania. He also promised to more thoroughly read MacKaye's course outline and essay, stating, "I may write you after that," but, again, it does not appear he had any other comments. (Muste "Letter to MacKaye 10 Aug."). In a September letter, a seemingly frustrated MacKaye wrote again to Muste, asserting, "practical details are only a part of making a 'go' of a dramatic venture, as you know" (MacKaye "Letter to Muste 12 Sept.). MacKaye's suggestion that "One has to have a keen sense of what is wanted and what is possible within any given group" reinforces the tone in this series of letters. MacKaye diligently communicated with Brookwood faculty about her program and received little in return. In all, these exchanges suggest that the early drama programs were not a central concern of the school's administration (Mackaye "Letter to Muste" 12 Sept.). Brookwood leadership's lackadaisical response to MacKaye's extensive planning very likely came as a surprise to the celebrated and clearly dedicated MacKaye. Nevertheless, MacKaye pressed on with her program.

Despite the communication difficulties during the planning process, MacKaye arrived at Brookwood for the fall semester and a prolific period of labor dramatics began. In October, just after the start of the fall academic term, the *Brookwood Review* announced "Miss Hazel MacKaye will be in residence at Brookwood at intervals throughout the year, to stimulate the study and the production of labor plays and pageants and to help develop the whole field of dramatizing the labor movement." ("Brookwood Opening" 4). MacKaye's class notes reveal an

ambitious plan for her first year at the school, and the first-year program demonstrates her expertise in developing an appropriate progression of dramatics pedagogy that would best meet the needs of students new to drama. The plan included:

Possible "Booking" of Programs (Scheduling)

1. Late November or early December: 3 or 4 one-act plays
2. Late January- 3 scenes from labor plays
3. Middle of March- 1 long labor or socially significant play
4. Late May- Workers' Dramatics Festival (This to be written by the Brookwood players and performed …. of the Dramatic Conference / Workers Players (MacKaye "Notes")

While ambitious, this blueprint indicates thoughtful consideration of opportunities and limitations associated with a new amateur dramatics program. MacKaye planned an appropriate progression of curricula for strengthening her students' skills, taking into account their existing abilities and previous experiences with drama. For example, instead of tackling a full-length production from the outset and very likely encountering some degree of morale-busting too-much-too-soon failure or exhaustion, in an appropriate extension of the previous year's work on *The Weavers*, she started her program with lower-stakes scene studies. Then, she progressed to short one-act plays and a subsequent full-length production, closing the year with a student-led Dramatics Festival that would travel to the conference for workers' theatres. This schedule also positioned MacKaye for success by ensuring that the first visible products of her new program, the touring show and dramatics festival, would have a full year to develop. Overall, MacKaye had a plan that supported a successful trajectory.

While MacKaye was not alone in her ability to *plan* an extensive dramatics program, she was one of the few instructors considered in this study who managed to *execute* the plan largely as designed. This ability to execute her programs likely has to do with her extensive practical experience making theatre and sets her apart from practically all other teacher/artists discussed in this dissertation who were mostly energetic, but inexperienced amateurs. Right on schedule, *The Brookwood Review's* December edition announced, "Three One-Act Plays To Be Given Dec. 12" and introduced the newly formed "Brookwood Labor Players," a subtle name shift from the previous "Brookwood Workers' College Players" that would last throughout the group's existence until the late 1930s ("Labor Drama has" 1-2). The new BLP opened with two works from Little Theatre pioneers The Provincetown Players' inaugural New York City season. Titles included *A Dollar*,[41] a symbolist allegory of capitalism written by noted Yiddish dramatist David Pinski, and *The People*, a satirical comedy about a labor press by feminist writer and Provincetown Players co-founder Susan Glaspell.[42] The third play was *Peggy*, a drama about southern tenant farmers written by the Carolina Playmakers out of the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill under the direction of Friedrich Koch.[43] All three included casts described as "truly representative of the people" with students from "English, Hebrew, Finnish, American, Negro, and Italian" backgrounds representing "seven trades--textile workers, Finnish cooperatives, teachers, plumbers, miners, clerks, and garment workers," a testament to Brookwood's commitment to inclusivity and diversity in its student body ("Labor Drama Has" 1-2) An article by MacKaye entitled "To Dramatize Workers Lives" accompanied the

[41] The play is more commonly titled *The Dollar*, but MacKaye and Brookwood both list it as *A Dollar* in their writings and publications.

[42] See Brenda Murphy's *The Provincetown Players and the Culture of Modernity* for additional information about this influential production company.

[43] Koch would later be the South's regional director for the Federal Theatre Project.

performance announcement. Here, many of the same questions and concerns raised by MacKaye in her initial course outline appear. The article asks:

> "Can the most dramatic movement in the world, the Labor Movement, be dramatized? And by dramatized, not by professional playwright who see suffering and injustice as stage effects and properties mere, but by the workers themselves?... Can they, in effect create a form of drama characteristic of the new proletarian spirit in production?" (MacKaye, "To Dramatize"1).

MacKaye once again demonstrates her commitment to experimentation, but she also exposes her precarious position as a director, producer and playwright in this nascent field. If the answers to these questions are yes, and labor drama evolves to value authentic experiences of workers over theatrical expertise of those who might lead, then MacKaye has little role to play in the work. This analysis foreshadows MacKaye's departure from Brookwood, demonstrating how she inevitably excluded the role she was most comfortable playing within the pedagogical approaches to labor drama she helped pioneer. As the workers took ownership of their art, the theatre artist grew increasingly irrelevant to the process. MacKaye would feel the impact of this development as the program grew under her leadership. In a final marker of increasing speed with which labor dramatics pedagogy evolved, MacKaye closes her essay by asserting that Brookwood would take "an experimental step" in setting out goals to "not only present plays already existing... but to develop if possible the writings of plays and pageants by the workers themselves" ("To Dramatize" 1).

These statements echo and extend MacKaye's early questions about the program, and their publication in the school paper marks an important shift in attitudes regarding drama's value to the Brookwood community. In contrast with Schachat's earlier assertion about "play-

acting" inciting a "germ of class consciousness" as an exciting, but entirely extracurricular, activity that mostly helped leaders attract workers to union meetings, MacKaye aimed for a higher goal with her drama program (Schachat 3). By suggesting that drama function as an invaluable tool for worker/student/artists to "create a form of drama characteristic of the new proletarian spirit," MacKaye intended for drama to play a more central role in Brookwood's curriculum. (MacKaye "To Dramatize" 1). This shifting discussion about drama's function in Brookwood's larger curriculum indicates that the school community was opening their minds to the possibilities for labor dramatics with MacKaye's arrival on campus, but also starting conversations that would ultimately undermine the value of her theatrical expertise.

The announcement of Brookwood's first one-act plays in the paper created a buzz surrounding labor dramatics on campus. Alongside MacKaye's article and descriptions of the one-acts, the December edition of the paper also announced that the next play was already in production and would be a play "written and largely produced by the students" ("Labor Drama Has" 1). Even more exciting than allusions to MacKaye's course plan—on schedule, no less!—was increased evidence of support from Brookwood leadership. President Muste, the same man who had "no specific comments" regarding the program only a few months before, also published an article entitled "Dramatizing the Labor Movement" in the same December edition of the paper. The article's significance is twofold: It highlights the external developments in the workers' movement while contextualizing Brookwood's place within them, and it serves as a symbol of shifting attitudes toward MacKaye's program from amicable indifference to true investment on campus.

In regard to the larger labor movement, Muste's essay alludes to the complicated negotiations in which Leftist political groups, like the socialists who founded Brookwood,

engaged during the interwar period in an attempt to redefine themselves. Muste's opening quote in this essay, an evocative reminder that labor drama possessed the potential to empower workers to "no longer permit others to dictate its thinking," exemplifies this push toward a new conception of labor activism ("Dramatizing" 2). He offers the following passage:

> When labor strikes, it says to its master: I shall no longer work at your command. When it votes for a party of its own it says: I shall no longer vote at your command. When it creates its own colleges and courses, it says: I shall no longer think at your command. Labor's challenge to education is the most fundamental of the three. (De Man 16)

Muste's evocation of de Man is a powerful reminder of the rapidity with which labor-oriented philosophies and ideologies morphed into new, unpredictable forms in the face of geopolitical instability. Muste's use of de Man begs a moment of analysis.[44] De Man, president of the Belgian Labor Party, endeared himself to many members of the US Leftist contingency by combining his commitment to socialist principles with strident support of the Allies during WWI. More specifically for this discussion, his writings re-examining Marxism and its cultural dimension during the interwar period had a significant influence on socialist education (Pels 75).[45] However, de Man's complex synthesis of socialist principles and ideas sympathetic to the Allies' larger agendas regarding nationalism, colonialism, and military development under the guise of anti-Bourgeois discourses produced a path toward fascism (Pels 75-6). De Man briefly collaborated with the Nazi regime, destroying his reputation, earning him war crimes charges of

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[44] See Dick Pels's "The Dark Side of Socialism: Hendrik de Man and the Socialist Temptation" for additional discussion of de Man's political work and writings.

[45] This uncommon combination of values allowed de Man's writings to serve as a blueprint for a possible model for US-based Socialism that adeptly navigated the forces of industry and capitalism.

which he was convicted, and leaving him "curiously absent" from histories of twentieth century socialist political thought (Pels 75).[46]

De Man's evolution from an influential socialist thinker to shunned fascist traitor is not unlike many of the leaders in the Leftist workers' movements during the same period—particularly those, like Brookwood President Muste, considered, rightly or wrongly, on the more radical end of the Left spectrum. This fate of either being labeled as a danger or actually demonstrating politically dangerous thought by the standards of burgeoning US nationalism during the period befell almost every labor college including Brookwood.[47] Muste's evocation of de Man in the opening of his essay reminds contemporary readers of the promise still found in Leftist thought while also inadvertently alluding to the unsettling future on the horizon for radical art and radical left politics.

The rest of Muste's essay demonstrates shifting attitudes toward drama on campus and connects the program to larger trends in arts-based activism. Muste follows with a description of labor dramatics' evolution at Brookwood, from a "very small scale" with a "creditable rendering of Hauptmann's *The Weavers*" to an "extending phase of its work under the direction of Miss Hazel MacKaye" (Muste "Dramatizing" 2). He reinforces this description with a discussion of the move toward art as propaganda for Labor's purposes, suggesting, "If Labor is to have some part in determining the dreams and visions of the American people it will have to utilize the great

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[46] As Zeev Sternhill points out in his investigation of de Man and his peers' post -WWI political ideologies, many of these artists, thinkers, and activists found themselves a part of a "dissident left" that "forged that brilliant and seductive ideology of revolt that the historian now recognizes as fascism" (302).

[47] As previously mentioned in the introduction, Brookwood's arrival at the "danger crossroads" in 1928 via the AFL schism, particularly when read in relation to the experiences of figures like de Man, shapes understandings of the early interwar period at Brookwood.

modern agencies of propaganda with which this may be done" (Muste "Dramatizing" 2).[48] His examples of propaganda forms which Brookwood might look to as models included the AFL-produced silent movie, *Labor's Reward*; a broadcasting station on which organizations hoped to play programs centered on "labor, progressive, and radical causes;" Labor Chautauqua; and the work of labor players' groups in Workers Education Centers (Muste "Dramatizing" 2). These different examples of arts-based initiatives esteemed by Muste contextualize his view of labor dramatics' utility on the Brookwood campus. By Muste's design, plays produced by Brookwooders should be much like *Labor's Reward,* a rehabilitating and legitimating film that set out to illuminate the union's value to US society as part of "the development of literature that is not only of the workers and for the workers but by the workers" (2). The school's chairman thought Brookwood labor dramatics should follow the forms presented in AFL movies or labor Chautauqua,[49] and thus, should be politically oriented, but accessible in regards to content or form— not in any way avant-garde.

Muste's conception of labor drama as a legitimating force, instead of one set out for the purposes of agitation, marks the first moment where leadership articulated a specific function for labor drama. Up until this moment, ideas swirled around the experimental programs, but no clear statement appeared regarding how the program would best serve the school's pedagogical objectives. In this statement, Brookwood's leadership makes clear they thought of drama as a

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[48] Muste's use of propaganda in this context was informed by developments in propaganda for advocacy as part of WWI and other international movements, like those in Russia and Germany. See Phillip M. Taylor's discussion of these issues in *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* (176-207).

[49] Chautauqua were traveling entertainment/education hybrid performances that often included popular music, lectures, and short variety performance. They usually occurred during the summer and were set up in large tents. See Charlotte Canning's book, *The Most American Thing in America: Circuit Chautauqua as Performance* for additional discussion.

tool to bring legitimacy to the labor movement by illuminating its great contributions to workers' lives, it was not conceived as a radical form—in fact, it was the opposite. This view of labor drama, along with most cultural products associated with labor during the late 1910s and 1920s, reflected the struggles of labor during the new post-war prosperity of the Roaring Twenties. With Wilson's tenure long over and business booming once again, labor found itself managing growing pains associated with the profitable business sector's institution of welfare capitalism practices.[50] These programs gutted many unions' core platform values. At the same time, radical or left-leaning factions also fell under increasing suspicion by the new, pro-business Coolidge administration, a group undoubtedly egged on by the increasing instability of Germany and Russia. Each of these factors likely influenced Muste's rather conservative position on labor drama as a force that would help show workers the relevancy of labor movement while avoiding controversy.

Unfortunately, Muste did not realize that his rather conservative views also contained seeds of radicalism that would ultimately present problems for the school. Even though Muste suggested drama should function as a legitimating force, he also wrestled with this framing. He likely felt unsatisfied with a conception of labor drama as merely a propaganda form designed to quell anxieties over labor's potentially dangerous dimension. These ideas considered alongside his evocation of de Man's aforementioned quote also points to his struggle to make sense of competing philosophies in his ideas about labor drama. He closes the essay with an evocation of a militaristic, more activist-oriented trope: "It is the movement that marches and sings and flings banners to the breeze, that know how to dramatize itself, that gets work done and wins battles" (Muste "Dramatizing" 2). While Muste's conceptualization stops short of advocating for theatre

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[50] Welfare capitalism practices most often appeared during times of economic prosperity and essentially circumvented labor agendas. Businesses simply offered workers concessions—less expensive housing, shorter work days, increased pay, etcetera— on their own (Dray 229).

as a weapon, a deliberate choice to keep radical interpretations of the work at bay, it alludes to the increasingly politicized turn labor drama would eventually take. Despite Muste's struggles to place this new tool in the most appropriate role to support the larger labor movement, his essay demonstrates increased buy-in from the school president accompanied by a more explicit turn toward conceptualizing drama as a tool for advocacy, if not activism. President Muste took a clear stand of support for the "experiment" of labor dramatics classes, asserting their importance to the larger labor movement, and explicitly stating that Brookwood would be a "pioneer" in techniques for labor dramatics pedagogies. If the essay is an indicator, MacKaye had found legitimacy in the Brookwood administration's eyes.

The first one-act performances also helped legitimate MacKaye's role on campus. On December 12th and 13th, 1925, a cast of thirty-four Brookwood students and faculty shared *Peggy, A Dollar,* and *The People* with the campus and community. In January, *The Brookwood Review* published a review that declared, "Labor Drama has Initial Success" and avowed, "this performance represents the initial step in an experimental course in labor drama at Brookwood" (1). Students and faculty collaborated and performed the plays in the social room of the campus commonhouse. Great pains were taken to outfit the space for production. The school administration authorized $200 for the purchase of materials (Faculty Minutes 10/28/25), with students installing new wiring to power a new floodlight and spotlight. Howard Young and his crew designed and built sturdy new scenery that "contrived to get the effect of depth and shadow in very limited space" that the school could reuse in subsequent productions ("Labor Drama has" 4). The costume crew sewed and installed a new proscenium curtain and fabric cyclorama in addition to making all the costumes. These innovations indicated campus-wide investment in the programs, with practically every student and faculty member being involved in their success.

These efforts also exposed the limitations of outfitting a student lounge as a temporary theatre. In the *Brookwood Review's* words, the "low ceilings and cramped space provided many perplexing problems." Sets had to be brought in and out from the porch, creating excruciatingly long wait times for the audience between plays, little room existed for the large casts to move about on the stage, and seating for the audience was extremely limited, necessitating an additional performance to fit in all the out-of-town guests ("Labor Drama has" 4). Despite these challenges, Brookwooders were very proud of their first dramatic accomplishments. The school paper's review glossed over shortcomings ("Too rapid speech was carefully toned down, and blurred enunciations overcome") and lauded the "finish and self possession" of the performers, going as far as to suggest they "would have done credit to a much more experienced group" ("Labor Drama has" 4). Drama was on a roll.

Still riding high after their first performance, MacKaye traveled with her players to New York in March to perform the three one-acts at New York City's Labor Temple. The performance, sponsored by alumni "interested in the development of course in labor drama at Brookwood," was a development event and received attention from *The New York Times*. Muste spoke on behalf of the school, citing drama as tool to "quicken the spirit of the workers and to illumine the purposes and ideals back of the Labor Movement" ("Brookwood Players" 3). The performances fell flat. The swelling pride felt by the Brookwood community about their first one-acts did not necessarily extend beyond the school. In great contrast to the celebratory review in the school paper, an accompanying set of reviews from outside the Brookwood community reinforced both the truly amateur nature of these first performances and the difference in evaluation from those inside and those outside Brookwood. For example, a review from the *New York World-Telegram*, which the labor journalism students fairly included in the school paper,

offered a different take on the production: “The performance was amateurish in situations that had be taught to the students… there were other situations which they understood from their own experiences, and these they delivered with convincing effect simply by being themselves” (“N.Y.” 1). This review contrasts with the school paper’s glowing report, likely providing a more realistic assessment of the productions’ aesthetic quality.

Likewise, the aforementioned *New York Times* article also weighed in on Brookwood’s first performances, treating the work delicately. The author avoided evaluative language other than describing the “successful” production of plays that “portray(ed) the life of workers and dealt with the problems of their existence” (“Dramas of Toil” 12). The articled followed with a statement indicating that the one-acts were an “initial step” in an “experimental course” and reinforced Muste’s commentary about drama’s primary role as “an agency for self expression” (“Dramas of Toil” 12). These early external reviews of the school’s first performances helped steer conversations amongst MacKaye, dramatics students, and the school community about the purpose of labor drama. Brookwood continued exploration and refinement of philosophies and ideologies at the core of their support for drama in workers’ education, and dramatic production continued to grow.

Miners, Shades, and Bootleggers: Spring 1926

After the one-acts’ success, MacKaye proposed to the faculty a plan for “original work of students” and announced plans to take performances to New York and Philadelphia (“Faculty Minutes 16 Dec.”). Requests for help with dramatics poured in from community groups around the country, and MacKaye was placed “at the disposal” for supporting new programs (“Faculty Minutes 22 Dec.”). While unclear if MacKaye placed herself in this role of resource to the large

community, these developments further reinforce the suggestions that MacKaye was moving out of her traditional role as a director and producer and into an experimental role as a facilitator. In February, the group produced their first student-written work, *Miners,* by Russian immigrant and textile worker/student Bonchi Friedman. Friedman developed the piece in collaboration with coal miners who visited the campus in December 1925, and the play premiered before worker's education leaders who gathered for a conference at Brookwood over Presidents' Day weekend. The production of *Miners* marked an important transition for the school. First, as the first instance where The BLP produced student-written work, it demonstrated the pedagogical progression of the labor dramatics program as a learning medium. Second, it elicited the first discussions of censorship of drama by the school administration.

In regards to the premiere of student-written work, *Miners* demonstrated the increasingly ambitious but collective nature of dramatic production under MacKaye's guidance. The three-act play included a two-act prologue, twenty-five characters, and numerous scenic shifts, crowd scenes, and expectedly high level of drama given its status as the first student-written work. The narrative followed the life and untimely death of Martha, a labor organizer and wife of a striking miner. The play opens with "The Masses" crying out for bread, begging for sunshine, and threatening to "come out of our grave." It closed with Martha's murder followed by the Masses screaming for "Revenge!" as Peter, her widower, wrenches himself on the stage with grief: "the agony that Peter, Martha's husband, goes thru (sic) to remember his obligation to the working class" ("Student Writes" 1; Friedman 183-4). Between Martha's untimely demise; the antics of the mining boss, "The All-Devouring Capitalist;" corrupt priests; the antics of grief-stricken Peter; pathetic urchins groveling for food; and hordes of miners afflicted with miner's flu who

coughed and wheezed their lines in a dramatic display of their toil, it is safe to say that *Miners* abandoned all subtlety. Despite the play's lack of nuance, *Miners* was exciting.

The absence of nuance in Friedman's text had little impact on the Brookwood community's evaluation of the play. Again, an excessively laudatory review of *Miners* appeared in the paper, with the reviewer asserting, "It is difficult to say which of the players in the three acts deserve special mention, for they were all admirably suited for their parts" ("Students Write" 2). The author follows with a description every person who participated, and even included mention of the cameos by faculty children who played their ragamuffin roles with "spirited and natural action" ("Students Write" 2). Within the celebratory review of Friedman's play, a subtle turn toward critical evaluation also appears for the first time. In contrast to previous reviews' glossing over of the plays' shortcomings, this evaluation offered a more level-headed assessment of shortcomings: "the performance was not perfect... there was some fumbling of lines... one or two characters were not quite convincing...the delays necessitated by the cramped spaces for scene shifting rather broke the continuity of the play" ("Students Write 1"). This willingness to think more critically about *Miners* suggests that students were learning more about the qualities of performance and developing an evaluative vocabulary for talking about their work beyond a celebratory pat on the back. This subtle shift suggests a step forward in pedagogical dimension of the labor drama experiment as much as the decision to produce student-written work, even if replete with melodrama, indicated MacKaye's commitment to her program's exploration and experimentation. This empowerment of students also serves as another instance in which MacKaye's experimentation and empowerment of students inevitably supported her eventual irrelevancy on campus.

The uncertainty of experimentation also reared its ugly head beyond melodramatic narratives and the changing roles of those creating performance. *Miners* marked the first documented moment of discord between the school's leadership and the dramatics participants regarding content. Minutes from a January faculty meeting discussed the play's depiction of a corrupt Catholic priest with his hand in The All-Devouring Capitalist's pocket, suggesting that "it would be more realistic to make religious functionary be of a more general nature" (Friedman 163; FN 1-20-26). As such, faculty charged Chairman Muste and Arthur Calhoun, the Director of Academics, to take up the matter "with all parties involved" (FN1/20/26). The suggestion of editing Friedman's drama to remove the corrupt priest in exchange for a supposedly more "realistic" construction of an ideologically neutral religious figure, particularly given the school's alliances with sympathetic religious groups, serves as one of the first examples where the struggle to place drama within Brookwood values appears in conjunction with the practicality of producing a show. Unlike Muste's exploratory essays or MacKaye's hypothetical course plans, in which leaders wrestled with ideas in the abstract, the tone of concern surrounding dramatics in this instance provides the first clear departure from otherwise unilateral support by school administration. The potential threat to the school's image via controversial representations of workers' religious communities tested the limits of constructing labor dramatics as morally upstanding recreational curricula focused on legitimating labor and keeping workers out of the pool halls. Unfortunately, documentation makes no further commentary on the outcome of Muste and Calhoun's talk with the dramatics participants, but if the extant script and reviews of the play are to be taken as documentation of the outcome, the Priest was, at most, toned down—not eliminated. A school review cites the student actor who played "the hypocritical Priest" as one of the performances deserving special mention, and the script paints the Priest in a rather negative

light (Friedman 163). Furthermore, despite this attempt to censor *Miners*, the school administration's decision to premiere the work before leaders of the workers' education movement with the hypocritical Priest intact served as a testament to Brookwood's commitment to dramatics, even as cracks appeared in Chairman Muste's carefully crafted the drama-as-labor-legitimator artifice.

Despite tensions associated with the content of *Miners*, the BLP refused to shy away from controversial themes in subsequent works. A month after *Miners* premiered on campus, the dramatics program produced another original work entitled *Shades of Passaic*. This self-designated "dramatic study of Expressionism" about the current textile strikes taking place in Passaic and Paterson, New Jersey in 1926 borrowed the three-act prologue from *Miners* and added a short piece, developed as part of a unit on writing dialogues, entitled "Listening in on Limbo" by student Stanley Guest. The scene depicted deceased labor activists as ghosts, or shades, in labor purgatory, and premiered at the Conference of Teachers in Workers' Education in April ("Faculty Minutes 26 May 1926"). In their commitment to developing work that reflected dramatics students' values, the BLP prepared their fictional drama just as the actual textile strike gathered steam and grew increasingly volatile.

The BLP not only took up current events with *Shades*, but they also used the play to intervene in the actual strike by touring it to workers in Passaic, New Jersey. In early March, the BLP took *Shades* on the road, and this experience helped Brookwood students and faculty further engage with debates surrounding what role labor drama should play in the school's larger agenda. By the time BLP visited the New Jersey city with the show, the legendary strike was entering its third month. Tensions were escalating. The large number of striking workers and their aggressive picketing resulted in the Passaic City Council invoking a Riot Act, thus

empowering police to act with force against the crowds. Using tear gas, hoses, clubs, mounted officers, and other aggressive crowd control tactics, police seriously injured hundreds of workers, with at least fifty strikers hurt the night before the *Shades* performance (Murphy; Weisbord; "Passaic" 3). In the midst of this chaos, twenty-five Brookwooders packed up their sets, props, and costumes and traveled over fifty miles on a ninety dollar budget into a near-warzone to share their performance with angry, disenfranchised workers still reeling from the previous day's violence and the lingering strike (MacKaye "Budget").

A detailed account of the performance appeared in the May edition of the school paper entitled "Passaic Strikers Like 'Shades of Passaic.'" According to the article, a transformative experience transpired for members of the BLP during their trip to New Jersey. *Shades* appeared alongside a remount of *Peggy*, and during the show, angry workers in the crowd responded passionately to the plays, aggressively jeering the "silk-headed capitalist" Mill Owner and cheering for the disenfranchised workers. In fact, the audience was so loud that "the enthusiasm made their presentation rather difficult" ("Passaic" 3). The agitated audience added only one level of complexity to this performance. In the midst of the raucous group, "the sheriff and plain clothes dicks" circulated, taking "copious notes...divided between horror and amusement at such temerity" regarding the audience response ("Passaic" 3). The presence of police officers in the labor hall in conjunction with the striking textile workers undoubtedly transformed the performance space, imbuing it with the air of agitation, and the tension was palpable. Between workers displaying collective, angry, and impassioned audience interaction with the performers and police scrambling to keep the peace while taking notes on the raucous response, the moment solidified drama as tool for activism in the eyes of many Brookwooders. Perhaps this move toward activist art derived from the phenomenological, ephemeral moment generated in the

Passaic Labor Temple, with the BLPs finally experiencing the possibility of labor dramatics activating groups of real workers in real-life situations. While the potential for such moments appear in the aforementioned writings of Muste and MacKaye, they were always written in the hypothetical. In Passaic, drama had a direct effect on the workers in the hall, and for the first time, Brookwood drama was on the front lines of labor activism. In the moment of performance, these labor drama students no longer rehearsed, but became part of a moment of revolution.

In the midst of all the excitement around *Shades*, MacKaye and her students continued with an impressive period of production. As the BLP prepared *Shades*, they also rehearsed five additional new works. In her course notes, MacKaye described twelve different performances opportunities in April and May alone, from monologue performances to circus acts to social Hymn singalongs to minstrel shows (MacKaye "Dates"). Each of these new works and performances moved forward the labor dramatics pedagogical experimentation. For example, only a few weeks before *Shades* traveled to Passaic, the BLP also premiered *Moonshine* by Arthur Hopkins on "The 13th day of March in the year 1926 A.P. (After Prohibition)," a pun reminding audiences about the play's engagement with the vice of alcohol (Hopkins). Although *Moonshine* was not an original work by the BLP, the play marked yet another experiment in the Brookwood dramatics program when it announced, "Direction of the play entirely under the [obscured] characters in the play" and that it was "performed without permission." These announcements indicate the performance was a laboratory piece produced by students for students on the Brookwood campus, marking the advent of student-directed work. In late April the *Moonshine* production teamed up with other students working on *The Price of Coal* by Harold Brighouse for a combined performance of the first two student-directed one-acts ("The Brookwood Labor").

Students also busied themselves with other dramatic experimentation including playwriting exercises. Although MacKaye's course planning notes included several possible scenes for study, it appears she abandoned these plans and instead, supported student-written work (MacKaye "Notes"). The most notable of these included the aforementioned "Listening in on Limbo," the dialogue upon which the students based *Shades*. Other scenes, mostly comedic entr-acte bits, played with comedic interpretations of issues. Titles included "If A Straw Hat Salesman Told the Truth," a short satire about a hat shop owner honestly hawking his subpar wares: "They're a lot of old junk no other stores would by [sic]. Most of 'em were left over from last year, but the boss told us to go ahead and work 'em off on the poor fish who come in here" (1). Another title entitled "What They're All Doing Back Home," documented an interaction between a "Former Resident" of "most any town or city" with a "Current Resident" revealing an entire town's leadership has turned to bootlegging to get rich: "Yep. Lem made quite a bit with the lawn sprinklers, but he allus[sic] was smart and he got into the bootlegging game and is worth a half million now!" (1). They even wrote "Henry Ford Applies for a Job at the Edison Plant," a dialogue in which Edison quizzes Ford with a series of academic questions during a job interview, and Ford responds with humorous series of answers indicative of his disregard for the learned sects. A few examples: "Edison: What's the capital of Sudan? Ford: I dunno; I came in a coupe." and "Edison: What does the Monroe Doctrine guarantee? Ford: Ninety days' service at any of our service stations." ("Henry" 2). While labor drama students never performed these scenes in a formal context, they appeared to have been workshopped extensively, given the notes on staging and number of edits included on the prompt copies. Moreover, the scenes' themes, from getting rich off illegal liquor to poking fun at the irrelevancy of academe in the world of industry, spoke to workers' engagement with themes germane to their lives. These sketches'

quite successful satirical style, particularly when compared with the heavy-handed melodrama of many of Brookwood's other plays, showcases increasing diversity of and sophistication in the original dramatic forms with which student experimented during the first year.

Yes, We Are The Tailors!: The End of MacKaye's Brookwood Tenure

The closing of the school year was busy with performances. As planned, MacKaye and the BLP ended the first year of Labor Dramatics with a "Labor Revue" after commencement exercises in May. The revue, performed in the new outdoor Sylvan Theatre, included choral performances, an interpretive dance piece called *Liberation*, a performance of *Shades of Passaic,* and a sharing of a new work, "a series of songs and dances representing the workers and boss of a union shop, written and devised by the cast," entitled *The Tailor Shop* (MacKaye "Expenses"; "Outdoor" 3). At first glance, this devised six-page work seems short and lacking in sophistication, much like many of the works produced by BLP in 1925-6. However, knowing the trajectory of labor drama's evolution during its first year, *The Tailor Shop's* significance as a final artifact documenting the progression of MacKaye and her students' work is undeniable. The play's narrative is quite simple: a brutish boss catches a group of female tailor shop workers dawdling on the job and threatens to fire them. In an act of solidarity, the female workers rush the boss off the stage while singing "The Owner of a Union Shop," a proletarian spoof of "My Gallant Crew" from *H.M.S Pinafore*. Other songs in the drama, all parodies of popular 1920s tunes, swap "Collegiates" for "Tailors" and "Ain't My Baby Grand" for "My Big Handsome Boss." The play's description suggests amateur details, from a set design including a pale blue fabric cyclorama decorated with bright colored construction paper for "heightened effect" and simplistic choreography where performers "sway their legs to the music," "wave their hands

above their heads," and "join hands and circle around the boss" (MacKaye "Tailor" 1), Undoubtedly, given this description, no one would call *The Tailor Shop* an exemplar of high art.

Nonetheless, *The Tailor Shop* reflects the synthesis of MacKaye's pageant expertise, the innovative pedagogical practice with which the BLP engaged during 1925-6, the direct connection to workers' struggles by via the focus on exploited tailor shop workers, the use of popular culture elements that helped connect workers to the material, the application of techniques taught by MacKaye throughout the year, and the evolution of labor drama into an activist art for the workers who helped create it. Moreover, *The Tailor Shop* signified meaning on multiple levels by integrating important issues that not only affect the everyday lives of workers, but also the lives and livelihood of parent labor organization by engaging with the challenges produced by union in-fighting. Finally, even if done in a clunky fashion, the play marks the first moment where the BLP generated a text that conceived of and represented a solution to these workers' real-life problems.[51]

The play reveals increasingly radical approaches to the creation and production of theatre at Brookwood even within its superficially simple plot structure and dramaturgy. For example, the description of the piece as "A Free Interpretation, Through Dances and Songs, of the Spirit of the Shop" with "Words Written and Dances Devised by Students of Brookwood Labor College, Under the Direction of Miss Hazel MacKaye" (1) demonstrates the collective development of the production through experimentation and consensus. This collective art-making produced the most cohesive synthesis of drama and the socialist ideologies at the core of Brookwood's values. The forward-thinking, avant-garde nature of this work becomes clear when considered alongside MacKaye's previously discussed writings supporting a top-down director-and-text-focused

[51] Richard Altenbaugh's article, "Proletarian Drama: An Educational Tool of the American Labor College Movement" offers the only other reading of *The Tailor Shop* I located in my research.

poetics of dramatic production. While these ideas about Brookwood's program were progressive given their focus on labor's potential intervention into social and political causes, they did not offer innovations regarding the form or structure that drama should take. Thus, by innovating on forms by which students created theatre, *The Tailor Shop* marked another moment of evolution whereby MacKaye finally let go of her authoritative power, allowing her students to dictate the terms of dramatic production. By doing so, she further opened the dramatics classroom to her students, allowing their values and interests to drive production and ultimately, empowering students to take full ownership of their work.

With students collaborating on the performance, *The Tailor Shop's* content signified meaning on several levels, and reflected concerns specific to female garment workers from the northeast. It also showcased their preferred style of recreational entertainment via inclusion of pop culture tunes, dance numbers, and vaudeville structures. In regards to the topicality of the narrative, the decision to set one of Brookwood's culminating works in a tailor shop was not arbitrary since a focus on garment workers directly relates to Brookwood's affiliation with International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). The influential ILGWU, one of the first unions to attract large numbers of women, rose to particular prominence after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. This history of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and the ILGWU role in changing condition for women workers in the fallout provides important context for *The Tailor Shop*. The historic fire resulted in the deaths of over 120 young garment workers— mostly young immigrant women between the ages of 14 and 22—after the women found themselves trapped inside the burning building due to locked doors and disabled fire escapes. Fire investigators discovered that factory management locked doors from the outside and dismantled the fire escapes to prevent workers from taking unauthorized breaks or stealing from the factory,

trapping the young women when the building rapidly caught fire. Despite their clear culpability in failing to protect their workers' basic safety, the owners were acquitted of all manslaughter charges brought against them. In an outcry against this gross negligence, the ILGWU was borne.

In broad strokes, *The Tailor Shop's* theme, in which young female tailor shop workers rush their mean boss off the stage after he attempts to cut their hours and steal their wages, pays homage to and reimagines possible empowerment of the young women silenced by the fires roughly a decade prior. More specifically, the play also comments on the current goings-on of organizations like ILGWU. During the mid-1920s, the ILGWU negotiated a trying set of political and ideological challenges as leadership struggled to unify its diverse membership around a common platform. In 1923, the organization entered a moment of crisis. A disparate constituency of socialists, communists, anarchists, progressives, and "conservative pure-and-simplers" began fighting one another for positions of power within the ILGWU leadership (Tyler 159). New president and "guerilla" for labor activism, Morris Sigman, "applied the iron" to the organizational factionalism and began a process to remove openly communist members, much to the chagrin of Left-leaning constituents (Tyler 159-65). Given these tempestuous realities, *The Tailor Shop's* simple plot offers a gentle critique of the in-fighting among the IGLWU, illuminating some of the tensions present in negotiations within the labor organization. For example, the play opens with characters singing "The Song of the Workers," a tune championing the achievements of unionization set to the tune of a popular ballad, "The Lilac Tree." The song's final stanza demonstrates the IGLWU feud:

> In the sweatshop days, we'd not dare to play
>
> But we'd slave from dawn to dark
>
> For the eight-hour day which our union gained

Makes us ready for a lark,

Still we get too tired if we work eight hours

Without pause for rest and play

But if you watch us here and now

To join work and play we will show you how (MacKaye, “Tailor” 2)

The lyrics reflect the gains of an eight-hour day, but also lament the lack of breaks within the tailor shop’s grueling work schedule. Here, the play draws a distinction between the gains brought about by the conservative business unionism agendas (the eight hour day) and the desire for a more Left-oriented social unionism agenda (higher quality of life via breaks) at the core of the ILGWU’s factionalism. The song even makes a strong claim to the demand for a more social unionist agenda, stating, “But we want our fun while our work goes on,” suggesting that workers will rebel if not given time for rest and recreation (MacKaye, “Tailor” 2). By setting these issues to a popular ballad, this opening song makes accessible for workers the otherwise obscure debates in the unions’ ongoing debates..

The drama continues with The Cutter, The Machine-Operator, The Needle-Hand, and The Button-Sewer, all played by women, singing and sewing in a “rhythmic” pattern “timed to the music and to the relation of one worker to the other” (MacKaye, “Tailor” 2). Over the course of the play, each character performs a solo. The Cutter performs the first number, revealing her love for the Boss in a rendition of “Ain’t My Baby Grand” entitled “My Big Handsome Boss.” Machine-Operator follows with a powerful ballad, “Union I Swear By You,” and Needle-Hand offers a rousing call-to-action number in “I’ve Grown Sharp and Pointed” to the tune of Irving Berlin’s “Yes, Sir, That’s My Baby” (MacKaye, “Tailor” 3). Finally, Button-Sewer performs “All Kinds a Buttons,” a melody that equates workers to buttons. Each solo provides pointed

commentary on the union struggles both in the specific instance of the ILGWU and more broadly for the movement as a whole. For example, The Cutter revelation of love for her boss, while comical, warns against literally and figuratively lusting after the boss's "motor car and lots of dough," a particularly important warning for the vulnerable un-skilled and low-skilled immigrant women represented by the ILGWU (MacKaye, "Tailor" 2). Similarly, Needle-Hand's tune of empowerment calls on workers to be mobilized, engaged, "undaunted when an issue is on hand," and at "no loss when the boss tries to tell me where I get off" (MacKaye "Tailor" 3). Finally, Button-Sewer warns audiences "But do not count on me, To stay eternally, Unless you anchor me, I roll off and leave," alluding to the threat of union splintering caused by not listening to the needs of workers in the leadership disputes. The plot's structure arranges the musical vignettes to reflect diversity amongst the workers' attitudes, from The Cutter's adoration of the tailor shop and The Boss to an increasingly radicalism found in Needle-Hand and Button-Sewer's songs.

Finally, at the end of "All Kinds of Buttons," The Boss storms in and sings "Get Back To Work" (MacKaye "Tailor" 4). The Boss's entrance, a supposedly triumphant act of domination, instead mobilizes the workers. After his performance, The Boss "struts about the stage looking very important," and in the final song, "The Owner of A Union Shop," reveals his hypocritical stance as proletarian union shop owner. From lines like "I'll never, never say 'I'll have to cut your pay,'" and "Though my ties are bright, And my car a Willys-Knight, I never ape the Bourgeoisie," the play sheds light on the corruption present even within unionized spaces (MacKaye "Tailor" 6). Even though The Boss proclaims to be a union sympathizer, he wears fancy clothes, drives a fancy car, and does not embody the proletarian spirit at all. As a response to The Boss's hypocrisy, the workers challenge his assertions, ultimately forcing him to admit that he will cut their pay "hardly ever." With The Boss's admission that he will, in fact, cut the

workers pay, all the workers including The Cutter, who originally sang about how much she loves The Boss, “circle about the boss” and “rush him off the stage.” The play comes to an abrupt end after the workers triumph. The workers pushing The Boss off the stage provides a final image of synergistic rebellion.

Exploring these issues through integration of proletarian adaptations of chart-topping popular songs and a variety format that incorporated dance and music into the drama results in performance that ultimately answers MacKaye’s earlier questions: Could workers could create a “form of drama characteristic of the new proletarian spirit”? *The Tailor Shop* suggests the answer is yes. Even with its characters named after sewing *accouterment*, its pop tune parodies, and it construction paper set decoration, *The Tailor Shop* stands as one of the more engaging pieces of extant dramatic literature from these labor college initiatives. It adeptly represents a moment where workers reclaim their union-guaranteed rights and demand change in their workplace. It presents an accessible dramatization of young women speaking out against corruption and unifying against oppression. Also, after comparing the play’s song lyrics to the popular tunes on which they were based, the music is very catchy.

The Tailor Shop’s success has a great deal to do with MacKaye’s empowerment of her students. In facilitating their ability to create performances that captured their personal connections to larger-scale debates, like those happening within the ILGWU, MacKaye taught her students about making art representative of a new proletarian culture. While *The Tailor Shop* is a far cry from the Shaw and O’Neill she entered Brookwood ready to teach, it nonetheless demonstrates her commitment to experimentation met the needs of her students, even if the products in no way conformed to her original conception of “great and beautiful plays greatly and beautifully interpreted.”

There is a lark!: Making Sense of MacKaye

MacKaye undoubtedly created opportunities for students to generate performances that reflected their lives as workers. Under her leadership, Brookwood students used drama to critique corrupt pro-union Bosses and Catholic clergy, to intervene in current events like the Passaic strikes, and to represent their real-life struggles in accessible formats. MacKaye opened her mind to pop culture forms, melodrama, and humor to support students' buy-in of the work. However, MacKaye's evolution of ideas also alienated her from Brookwood leadership. After final *The Tailor Shop's* performance at the 1926 Brookwood commencement, Muste offered a final evaluation of the first year of dramatics in *The Brookwood Review*:

> Brookwood Labor College has included dramatics in its curriculum this year because it believe that it is of the utmost importance to experiment with the use of the drama to quicken the spirit of the workers and to illumine (sic) the purposes and ideas of the Labor Movement. ("The Year" 2)

In this statement, Muste demonstrates a retrenchment into his conservative conception of drama. He no longer sets out to "get work done and win battles" with labor drama, and instead, looks for it to shed light on the purposes of labor and to inspire enthusiasm among workers. A far cry from the radical reimagining of arts-based activism to which Muste hinted in other later writings and later in his career, a point to which I will return in the conclusion, these comments are not far off from Lillian Schachat's early assertion that drama was best used for enlivening union meetings. In the end, Brookwood wanted a program that generated pleasant, informative plays that showcased the positive aspects of labor activism without controversy. MacKaye gave Brookwood the opposite.

MacKaye was not "reengaged" for the 1926-7 school year. Faculty suggested they needed an instructor who could combine efforts in dramatics with a public speaking course ("Faculty Minutes 5 May"). MacKaye's high salary was likely a burden on the Brookwood budget, but no effort was made to renegotiate her salary and the vote not to reengage was unanimous ("Faculty Minutes 5 May").[52] In any case, she seemed motivated to continue the work, at least in the immediate period after she departed Brookwood. After leaving, she traveled to Taylorsville, Illinois to direct labor dramatics classes for miners at the invitation of Tom Tippett.[53] Tippett, a Columbia Economics student who grew up in an Illinois mining town, led workers' education as "education director for sub-district 5" in 1926 ("Coal Miners" 13). An account of MacKaye's work appeared in newspapers around the country after the Associated Press picked up an article written about the collaboration. By November, the miners had performed "a half dozen one-act plays" and plans were in the works for a tour to other Illinois mining towns. A goal if this work included "spreading, if possible, the idea of labor drama" ("Coal Miners" 13).

MacKaye also wrote to Chairman Muste about her new work and to suggest a replacement instructor. She addressed her recipient as "My Dear AJ," which suggests that her Brookwood departure was reasonably amicable. In the letter, she describes the busy schedule, the fancy stage on which the miners would perform and her overly "conspicuous" picture included in the "impressive affair" of a playbill (MacKaye "Letter…21 July"). Despite her light-hearted tone, MacKaye's last words reveal her continued struggle to evolve labor drama into a performance genre that met her artistic standards while also meeting workers' needs. She jokes: "If this 'high

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[52] Her successor, Jasper Deeter received far less compensation ("Faculty Minutes 3 Dec").

[53] Tippett was professor of Economics at Brookwood from 1927 until 1933 and would go on to write an important labor play, *Mill Shadows*.

brow' fare is too 'high' we shall have to find some other fare which will be acceptable to the lark of our public and to our own standards! *There is a lark*! Well, I shall let you know… 'The best' let us hope'" (emphasis added) (MacKaye "Letter to Muste 21 July"). MacKaye's insistence about a lark can be read two ways. One interpretation suggests that MacKaye hunted for the quality that would make labor drama— somewhere, somehow— resonant with worker audiences. There *is* a lark, and she would find it! Another less optimistic interpretation insinuates that MacKaye grew tired of this work and its challenges. Some form of labor drama that she and her worker/students would both enjoy? *There* is a lark! MacKaye's subsequent involvement in labor drama suggests that she was similarly unsure if she felt emboldened for action or worn out from experimentation after she departed Brookwood.

In May of 1926 and February of 1927, MacKaye published two articles in *Workers' Education,* the main periodical associated with the Workers' Education Bureau: "Plays for Workers" (May 1926) and "A Labor Drama Council" (February 1927). The first outlines several appropriate published texts, many which she produced at Brookwood in the previous year, and offers suggestions for producing them with amateur workers' groups (MacKaye, "Plays" 11-4). The article makes no mention of devising new work, but it closes with a critical comment about the lack of high-quality labor dramas: "So many of the plays on the Worker or on Labor and Capital depict the lives of exceedingly sophisticated people, with drawing rooms and butlers and a lot of small talk…such plays are rather difficult to act convincingly by those not accustomed to "drawing-rooms and butlers" (MacKaye, "Plays" 17). This point addresses the same concern about the quest for non-"high-brow" that she mentioned to Muste. Her later article, "A Labor Drama Council," points to a solution for this problem: a leadership council to lead the movement (MacKaye 27). In discussing the development, she employs an extended metaphor to document

the "variegated shoots... governed by the kind of soil in which these seeds of labor drama have been planted," to explain her view of the field's development (MacKaye, "A Labor" 26). She also articulates the different kinds of projects that had begun to sprout up: "plays that please" in which workers participate for the sole purpose of self-expression; new studies of drama as literature with slant toward labor; and finally, the "ambitious" and "more creative expression," of creating new plays that "interpret the lives and ideals of the workers and help to clarify the whole Labor Movement" (MacKaye, "A Labor" 26). She also makes sound recommendations to move the movement forward, like the publication of a Labor Drama bulletin, a "Jitney Tour" of labor plays, labor drama conferences, and the formation of players' groups within unions (MacKaye "A Labor" 27-31). After this publication, she largely disappeared, producing little, if anything, in the way of new theatre. Her 1944 obituary makes no mention of her time at Brookwood or her work with labor drama, describing her as a "consultant for community drama" ("Miss Hazel" 11). It also asserts that her last published work was *A Quest for Youth*, a pageant she wrote for children and published in 1924 ("Miss Hazel" 11).

Given these thoughtful articles on labor drama councils and next steps for the movement, MacKaye's abrupt departure from the field is odd. In fact, her entire tenure at Brookwood is difficult to evaluate. In one respect, her experimentation in these first classes undoubtedly helped define the field of labor drama a curriculum in labor colleges. For example, Helen Norton, Brookwood's journalism instructor, published a compelling report about labor drama in *Labor Age*, asking, "What does it mean, this sudden interest in circus clothes and the art of dying gracefully? Only that there is being launched at Brookwood an experiment in the evolution of labor drama." (18). Similarly, Arthur Calhoun, Brookwood Economics instructor, also published "The Social Significance of Labor Drama" in *Workers' Education* in 1926, commenting that "It

is through these services of release, recreation, review and rehearsal that Labor Drama, not in the hands of professionals, but liked as a part of the common life, may claim an honored place in the movement" (20). Given Brookwood's prominence in Workers' Education circles, these articles undoubtedly influenced other dramatics instructors and programs. Furthermore, labor drama groups took up every suggestion MacKaye offered in her article: *Workers' Theatre* magazine appeared in 1931, the BLP toured in its own jitney during the mid-1930s, and a Worker's Theatre conference was held at Brookwood in 1936. At the same time, no one, most of all MacKaye, seemed compelled to give her credit for these ideas; she is forgotten despite her instrumental role in the movement. To return to my opening discussion, MacKaye's abrupt and unexpected obscurity likely derives from her role as a transitional figure between one phase of activist performance and another. Brookwood leadership expected elegant, polished pageants they could truck to New York City for fundraising events. MacKaye gave them *The Tailor Shop.* Even though MacKaye germinated the seeds of labor drama, her work as a bridging between pageants and proletariats obscures her larger contribution to field, leaving her dramatic legacy and lineage notably incomplete. A lark, indeed.

Chapter Three: Of Untold Possibilities: Hollace Ransdell and the Ladies of Southern Labor Dramatics, 1928-36

> *Mary Frederickson: I got the feeling from talking to her that at one time she was very optimistic about politics in this country changing dramatically. She was really sort of interested in basic social change, in a major social change more, perhaps, than a lot of the women who were involved in the school. Was that true?*
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> *Miriam Bonner Camp: Perhaps. I really, you know, had never known her before she came to Southern Summer School. And I think she was probably more conscious of the basic roots than the rest of us were. She lived in New York, and I think perhaps in New York she had contacts with maybe more sophisticated people than some of us had had.* (Camp)

In 1976, young historian Mary Frederickson interviewed Miriam Bonner Camp, English instructor at the Southern Summer School for Women Workers in Industry. Their conversation eventually drifted to the labor drama instructor Hollace Ransdell, and the above exchange ensued. Ransdell, a teacher, librarian, activist, and journalist most noted for her 1931 ACLU report about the Scottsboro Trials in Alabama, taught labor dramatics at the Southern Summer School from 1928 until 1936 (Camp). Ransdell is also an enigmatic figure in labor drama. She seems to have come from nowhere, never having shown interest in drama before arriving at the Southern Summer School, and she virtually disappeared after eight years of work in the field, never working in drama again. The above exchange exemplifies her obscurity; her close colleague could not make a definitive statement about Ransdell's beliefs in regards to social change. In researching Ransdell, Camp's comment resonated with me: Perhaps. Perhaps Ransdell was many things. Perhaps she was "more conscious of the basic roots" or "interested in basic social change" or having exchanges with "more sophisticated people." The question "Perhaps?" intrigued me to investigate her work in labor drama.

Beyond her mysterious biography, Ransdell's work at the Southern Summer School is compelling for many reasons. Her eight-year tenure marks one of the longest examples of

continuous instruction by one labor drama teacher in a residential program. Second, Ransdell's educational and activist background, while well connected to radical circles, included no formal dramatics training. Her lack of experience with drama, particularly when compared with figures like MacKaye, who worked professionally in theatre prior to their collaboration with labor drama programs, points to increasing diversification of the labor drama movement. Ransdell's amateur background serves as a testament to the ways in which the budding experiments in labor drama allowed for an increasingly diverse group to take up labor drama and make a significant contribution to the field. Also, the evolution of Ransdell's work with the Southern Summer School shows the increasing interconnectedness and professionalization of labor drama in workers' education programs during the early 1930s.

Given the unique and experimental nature of Ransdell's work at the Southern Summer School, analysis of her labor drama programs first requires a contextualizing discussion about the Southern Summer School's relationship to developments related to women and the labor movement. Studies of labor history have only scratched the surface of gender's relationship to the evolution of labor in the US, due in part to the dominance of neo-classical and positivist lenses regarding economic individualism often applied in the writing of US labor histories.[54] As Nancy Folbre and Heidi Hartmann point out, "most economists seem persuaded that gender inequalities fall beyond the purview of economic analysis, either in the realm of biological givens or sociological imponderables" (184). These readings of economic histories often leave

[54] See Karen Hollis's *Liberating voices: writing at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers;* Joyce Kornbluh and Frederickson's *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Worker's education for women*, 1914-1984; Diane Balser's *Sisterhood & Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times*; Rita Heller's article, "The Bryn Mawr Workers' Summer School, 1921-1938, A Surprising Alliance;" Eileen Boris and Annelise Orleck's "Feminism and the Labor Movement: A Century of Collaboration and Conflict;" and Alice Kessler-Harris's work for additional investigations of women in the labor movement.

out women from the conversation since women have, by and large, predominately held positions in society as wives, mothers, and caretakers of the domestic sphere whereby they were excluded from actively participating in work for pay. These gendered and classed ideas about women's roles in work result in limited studies of women's influence in labor during this period, even as they increasingly made up larger percentages of the working class. Even though women entered the workforce in droves in the lead up to WWII, their jobs in primarily unskilled trades further complicated these matters. Women often worked in the lowest positions in worker hierarchies and thus, their needs repeatedly fell outside the agendas of organizations like the AFL. In 1920, women made up less than 7% of the AFL's constituency, and most of these women were garment workers in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. The organization did nothing to encourage affiliated unions to lift "exclusionary tactics" like gender restricted membership or holding meetings in bars (Crain 1157). The few coed organizations that took up women's causes, like the IWW, were far too radical to gain significant traction amongst women's rights groups, particularly after the first Red scare.[55]

Although women's concerns and political interests failed to find a great deal of traction within larger agendas of labor advocacy during this period, the gains made by first wave feminism and women workers after WWI coupled with Progressive trends in education paved a way for explorations of women's unique educational needs in regards to workers' education. A discussion of women-focused labor activism during this period helps frame discussion of educational programs, like dramatics initiatives at Southern Summer School, specifically for

[55] For example, the IWW attempted to organize prostitutes, and Lucy Parsons, a founder of the IWW and one of the few women leaders of a coed workers' organization, prioritized access to birth control and the legalization of divorce. She was even married to Oliver Parsons, an anarchist hanged in the Haymarket Affair. Unsurprisingly, she managed to secure few alliances with the Suffragettes. See Gale Ahrens's edited collection of Parsons's writings.

women workers. Despite the rise of first-wave feminism and the achievement of contemporaneous large-scale policy and legal advances for women's rights, the realities of advocacy for all workers, especially for those in female-dominated unskilled trades, meant larger agendas assimilated or silenced issues specific to women in labor, particularly in light of the Great Depression.[56] While a necessary practicality, the streamlining of labor advocacy by groups like the AFL during this period meant that the most vulnerable workers— young immigrant women, workers of color, or southern agricultural and textile workers—simply fell off the radars of labor organizations. Additionally, fallout from the ratification of the nineteenth amendment leading to a dissolution of energies for feminist causes amongst previously well-organized Suffragists; the rise in xenophobic and racist attitudes toward new immigrants, of which women and their children were the most vulnerable; and the pro-business leanings of the Harding and Coolidge administrations situated many women workers in an extremely precarious position.[57] Just as women entered the workforce en masse, support systems advocating for their rights rapidly contracted.

The shifting roles of women activists further complicated larger trends in labor activism for women workers. The rise of more female figures in labor activism—the aforementioned Lucy Parsons, Mabel Dodge, Rose Schneiderman, Mother Jones, and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, to name only a few—received support from the more radical arms of the movement, but these women's outspokenness regarding their political agendas often directly conflicted with platform and

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[56] The ratification of the nineteenth amendment, formation of the Women's Bureau within the Department of Labor, and the work of the Women's Trade Union League are only a few examples.

[57] See Kessler-Harris's study, also cited in Karen Hollis's book (14)

gender performances of their Suffragist predecessors and many of their peers.[58] As discussed in chapter two, first-wave feminist leaders at the core of the suffrage movement supported an agenda focused on the dissolution of very specific *de facto* inequalities. They looked for the presentation of high-class, educated, and largely well-behaved femininities to prove their right to a place within male-dominated political enfranchisement. In contrast, the women of radical labor challenged these ideas, looking instead to agitate against first-wave feminist understandings of how women should contribute to activism. They also engaged in outspoken critique of the male-dominated structures of power that held back workers, often to the chagrin of more moderate activists.

These new paradigms for feminist activism strained women's groups. The former Suffragettes sought a new cause for refocusing their now-diffuse leadership, and radical figures of women's labor outright rejected the tactics of the largely successful— and radical in their own time—first-wave feminists. This factionalism proved a stumbling block not only for moving forward feminist causes, but also for maintaining progress garnered in previous decades, particularly in light of the altered labor landscape after the 1929 Crash. In the midst of these negotiations, women workers who fell somewhere on the spectrum between these two extremes negotiated their place within a rapidly changing cultural landscape regarding women's roles in labor— that is, if they had time for an explicit political affiliation after balancing the newfound need to work with the continued expectation that they manage domestic spheres that had otherwise excluded them from enfranchisement in the past. Therefore, new examinations of women who may not have had the political outspokenness of Mother Jones or Lucy Burns, but who still made significant contributions to women's labor activism, like in the case of Hollace Ransdell and her labor dramatics classes at the Southern Summer School, add nuance to US

[58] I use gender performance as defined by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*.

labor's complex histories. They also reframe pre-existing understandings of women's roles in the labor movement and recover the ways in which women-led arts initiatives helped shape the labor drama and workers' education.

From Bryn Mawr to Black Mountain: The Road to Women Workers' Education in the South

Programs like the Southern Summer School exemplify how inchoate ideas regarding labor drama pedagogy developed sophistication as new groups experimented with the genre. These path-breaking programs, born at places like Brookwood in the early 1920s, rapidly evolved and propagated throughout the labor movement by the early 1930s, reflecting the concurrently booming workers' theatre movement in larger arts communities. For example, The Group Theatre's founding in 1931; the IGLWU dramatics program between 1931-7; Hallie Flanagan's Vassar Experimental Theatre, her 1928 book, *Shifting Scenes in the European Theatre*, and her 1931 work, *Can You Hear Their Voices?;* the founding of the Worker's Laboratory Theatre in 1932; the formation of the League of Workers' Theatres and the Theatre Union in 1933; and the first publication of *Workers' Theatre* magazine in 1931 all serve as examples of the growth in the workers' theatre movement during this period.[59] Through this expansion of programs and performance initiatives, labor drama as a pedagogical tool found traction in a variety of workers' education programs, and several groups interested in women's-only workers' education embraced drama as part of educational experimentation. While there are no examples of long-term women's-only residential workers' education like the coeducational programs at Brookwood or Commonwealth College, a myriad of summer residential programs

[59] See Duffy's *American Labor on Stage*, Hyman's *Staging Strikes*, the introduction to Papa's *Staged Action* and the introduction to this study for additional discussion of these developments.

for women appeared in the 1920s. Focusing on these summer programs' incorporation of dramatics reveals a progression of ideas and approaches that made possible pedagogical experimentation necessary for serving new group of women workers.

The Southern Summer School success and longevity directly benefited from women's organizations that supported new programs exclusively for women. An important organization that supported these efforts was the Affiliated Schools for Workers (ASW).[60] The ASW, an organization based in New York City and directed by workers' education pioneer Eleanor Coit, committed its early years to women workers' education programs and initiatives.[61] They published resources, facilitated educational programs throughout the country, and organized conferences and symposia around the issues of women workers and education. The ASW also facilitated connections between different organizations by founding the Affiliated Summer Schools for Women Workers in Industry in 1927. Under this initiative, various summer programs, including the Southern Summer School, the Bryn Mawr School for Women Workers, the School for Workers in Industry at the University of Wisconsin, and the Summer School for Office Workers in New York, the Barnard College Summer School for Women Workers in Industry, The Occidental School, and the Vineyard Shore Schools, among other programs, networked under the ASW umbrella, sharing resources, fundraising information, and professional contacts.[62] The Southern Summer School, a unique institution that maintained ties to

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[60] The ASW later became the American Labor Education Service (ALES) in 1934 and disbanded in 1964. See the archival records held at the Kheel Center at Cornell University.

[61] Coit, a Smith graduate who worked with YWCA prior to her involvement in the ASW, also supervised workers education programs as part of her work in with the Works Progress Administration. She was an undeniable pioneer in adult education for working women. Her papers are held at the Five College Archives and Manuscript Collections at Smith College.

[62] See Gladys Palmer's Department of Labor Bulletin, *The Industrial Experience of Women Workers at the Summer Schools, 1928 to 1930* and the edited collection of essay about

the ASW, but operated largely independent of this organization until later years, served as a Southern outpost of this network (Dwyer 181; "Committee 1929" 3). As the Southern arm, the Southern Summer School was unique in its efforts to provide Southern women workers opportunities to study Southern labor issues. This program included a comprehensive program in labor drama.

The decision to start a Southern summer program for women workers was a deliberate choice that reflected both the growth and diversification of the labor movement and the increasing interest in the South as a potential location for expanding labor activism. More specifically for a discussion of the Southern Summer School's dramatics programs, the interest in the southern women workers derived from increasingly abject conditions experienced by southern women workers in the period immediately before and after the crash of 1929. For the first time, organizations that had previously centered their attention on the industrial north turned their attention beyond this region.[63] These organizations aimed to unite and organize workers excluded from male-dominated labor organizations like the AFL, the Amalgamated, and the ILGWU, and they gathered steam in light of increasingly dire conditions for marginalized workers during the Great Depression (Foner 295-7; Triece 231-3).

These groups turned their attention to Southern women because Southern women workers, along with Southern workers of color, found themselves in the direst of circumstances during the Great Depression. During 1929 and 1935, women workers throughout the country acutely felt the fallout of the lingering unemployment crisis. By the early 1930s, state legislatures

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workers' education for women edited by Joyce Kornbluh and Mary Frederickson entitled *Sisterhood and Solidarity* for additional discussion of these programs.

[63] These organizations included the National Women's Trade Union League (NWTUL), an influential organization that united well-heeled women from the Suffrage movement and working-class women to advocate for women's issues and women's labor industries.

introduced bills that required businesses to hire men over married women or to fire women who had employed husbands. Many companies chose to independently enact this policy by asking women to resign, refusing to hire married women, or firing women en masse. Simultaneously, job opportunities in low-skill professions that employed mostly women simply evaporated.[64] The AFL was of little help since leadership, in addition to turning a blind eye toward women workers, also strategically prioritized the anti-feminist "family wage" agenda. The family wage purported to support the working class's right to an "ideal family" where women handled domestic spheres and men earned the family's money. Even though the AFL introduced their family wage platform as a Progressive critique of industrialization's impact on the traditional family, it "legitimated the division of labor by gender" by assigning a higher value to male wage earners (May 143). Unions advocated for men to get higher paying jobs to support families and encouraged women to drop out of the workforce to care for the home. Single, divorced, and widowed women were literally and figuratively left out in the cold by their employers and their unions. Unsurprisingly, with the most influential unions turning toward the family wage, the few jobs that still existed for women largely abandoned work standards that labor advocates had worked so diligently to obtain in previous decades (Foner 299). If employed, women workers between 1929 and 1938 worked longer hours for less money in harsher conditions than both their male counterparts and many of their female predecessors.

Women workers in the South fell victim to these developments more than any other group in any other place in the US. The anti-union, racist, and conservatively religious attitudes that pervaded Southern culture contributed to women workers' oppressive working conditions.

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[64] See Foner's chapter on the Great Depression (298-317), Marion G. Crain's essay, "Feminizing Unions: Challenging the Gendered Structure of Wage Labor," and Mary Triece's chapters about labor organizing for women before WWII for additional discussion of the developments (177-236).

While much of this tension related to the political agendas of the conservative southern Democrats, a group who maintained practically unshakeable power for twenty years and enacted countless pieces of legislation designed to disenfranchise both African-American and poor white voters, the fallout often pitted poor whites against African-Americans and left both sets of unskilled workers without resources. By the early 1930s, fallout from the Southern Democratic platform, failed Reconstruction efforts, and the Great Depression's lingering influence completely ravaged the region.

The economically depressed Southern states were also Ground Zero for the nadir of race relations in the US between whites and African Americans during this time as well. In the early 1920s, lynchings increased, the Ku Klux Klan grew increasingly powerful, and racialized violence, once thought to be isolated to territories below the Mason-Dixon line, appeared in Northern cities. Concerns about the South led Franklin Roosevelt, elected in 1932, to prioritize policy in the hopes that interventions would break up the Democratic stronghold and enact rapid and large-scale change (Leuchtenburg 55-70). Given this collective worry over the South states, labor leaders, including those who started the Southern Summer School, saw the region as a space ripe for innovation whereby labor education experimentation might take shape.[65] Accordingly, the Southern Summer School's curriculum focused on the challenges inherent to preparing Southern workers— particularly women influenced by conservative, religious, racially charged, anti-industrialization, anti-North, and anti-labor ideologies that permeated much of

[65] See Southern Summer School Director, Louise Leonard McLaren's essays, "The South Begins Workers Education" (1928) and "Workers Education in the South" (1935) for additional discussion of the ASW's approach to workers' education for women in the South.

working-class southern culture— to advocate for themselves and for their communities (Leonard "The South" 3).[66] Drama was a part of this curriculum.

Summer programs like Southern Summer School were important sites where women carved out spaces to care for, teach, and advocate for one another amidst the larger cultural tumult. Since they fell outside the purview of policy makers who had larger issues about which to worry and focused exclusively on women, summer programs created an environment of open pedagogical experimentation. These programs also regularly included dramatics programs as part of their curriculum. In addition to their pioneering work in women-focused workers' education, summer programs for women workers also adeptly managed networking and documentation of their programs via connections with women's organizations like the YMCA and the ASW and women's college alumni groups. When Southern Summer School leadership decided to form their Southern program, they did not have to start from scratch. They first looked to similar programs for inspiration— more specifically, the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. Practically all other summer schools based their programs on the Summer School for Women Workers (SSW) held each summer on the Bryn Mawr College campus. Labor drama at the Southern Summer School owes its existence to the SSW. Since the SSW included dramatics classes, other programs did too, including the Southern Summer School. Therefore, discussing the Southern Summer School's labor drama program first requires discussion of the well-documented summer program at Bryn Mawr.[67]

The Bryn Mawr SSW began in 1921 as an experimental initiative designed by longtime Bryn Mawr president and suffragette, M. Carey Thomas (Hollis 33; Smith 1). A strange story

[66] See archive resources at Kheel Center at Cornell, at Bryn Mawr College, and at Emory University for additional information about the SSW and the Southern Summer School.

[67] The summer program was separate from Bryn Mawr College, but alumni and school leadership aggressively supported the programs, at least in the first years.

accompanies the program's inception: In an opening-of-season speech given to the second class of women attending the ASW, Thomas announced that her conception of this new program came to her in a vision while on a 1919 visit to the Sahara Desert, where "Arabs would unpack our camp chairs and we would sit for hours watching the sun set and moon rise" (Thomas 255-6). In one respect, this strange anecdote serves as amusing apocrypha. In another respect, Thomas's evocation of her Saharan holiday while speaking to a group of working class women, all of whom received scholarships to attend and who often found themselves at great risk of losing their jobs by attending, demonstrates a disconnect between the well-heeled, wealthy women who started these programs and the working-class women who attended them as students. In any case, while sitting on her "golden hilltop," Thomas's vision revealed to her labor education as the next frontier of activism after suffrage. She equated "the peculiar kind of sympathy that binds women together" to the oppression of workers, and she felt labor activism was well suited to women because they could "utilize the deep sex sympathy" as motivation for taking up issues of labor (Thomas qtd. in Smith 356-7). Thomas's statements echo back to Hazel MacKaye's transition from suffrage to labor, further reinforcing the difficulties associated with transitioning from one movement to the other. Despite Thomas's obvious disconnect from SSW students' socioeconomic backgrounds, she nonetheless committed herself to realizing her vision. These lofty aspirations paired with her well-documented tenacity as an activist supported creation of a new program that was, according to SSW president Hilda Worthington Smith, "simple in conception" but "far reaching in results" (Smith 5).

The SSW utilized Bryn Mawr campus buildings, otherwise vacant during the summer, to "offer young women in industry opportunities to study liberal subjects and to train themselves in clear thinking; to stimulate an active and continued interest in the problem of our economic

order; to develop a desire for study as a means of understanding and of enjoyment of life" (Constitution; Article II, section 1). School leadership was extremely careful to avoid affiliation with any radical groups while still maintaining values of intellectual freedom. Their doctrine stated the program was not "committed to any theory or dogma" and was "conducted in a spirit of impartial inquiry with freedom of discussion and teaching" (Smith 304). Between sixty and one hundred students attended the ASW each summer. Students came from a diversity of backgrounds, geographic regions, religious affiliations, and union affiliations.[68] In 1926, the program set a precedent by also inviting African American women to participate in the school.[69] Faculty with an affinity for "experimental teaching," most of whom who also taught at colleges and universities throughout the US, taught different experimental courses (Smith 96). Subjects included various combinations of English and economics as the core curriculum with secondary subjects in public speaking, history, government, labor movements and problems, industrial organization, physiology and hygiene, and, of course, labor drama (Heller 116-8; Kingsbury 265-9; Smith 6). The SSW received accreditation from the AFL as approved workers' education for women, a boon to the program, and it endured for seventeen years before being asked to leave the Bryn Mawr campus in 1938, largely due to escalating tensions with the increasingly radical labor movement.[70] The Bryn Mawr program inspired several other similar programs including

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[68] See Hilda Worthington Smith's *Women Workers at the Bryn Mawr Summer School*, *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Workers' Education for Women, 1914-1984*, the 1986 documentary film, *Women of Summer* and Karen Hollis's *Liberating Voices: Writing at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers* as well as extensive archival resources available through Bryn Mawr College, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Cornell University for additional resources.

[69] The documentary, *Women of Summer*, features an interview with an African-American alumnus who worked for the program as a maid one summer and attended the following year.

[70] It lived on as the Hudson Shore Labor College until 1952. See discussion in the Introduction.

the co-educational University of Wisconsin Summer School for Workers (1925) and the Barnard College Summer School for Women Workers (1927) in addition to the Southern Summer School.

Dramatics were an influential feature of the SSW curricula. Programs involved performances of plays, mass recitations, and pageants; reading and analysis of extant dramatic texts; and development of new labor plays. During the seventeen years of SSW on Bryn Mawr's campus, students wrote and produced dozens of original labor drama scripts, many of which still remain in archives (Hollis 101-3).[71] In her 2004 study, Karen Hollis documents some of the goings-on with SSW dramatics curricula, noting that the school employed a dramatics instructor as early as 1922 (100). The SSW presented various forms of drama and incorporated dramatics programs into their teaching throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. By 1932, the program was in full swing with a dedicated instructor, Esther Porter, and 1937 was the "crowning year for Summer School dramatics" (Hollis 101). The apex of SSW drama occurred under the leadership of Jean Carter (Ogden). Carter, another dramatics instructor, took over directorship of the SSW after Smith departed for a new role within the Works Progress Administration, and she advocated for the SSW dramatics program to hold a more prominent position within the curriculum.[72] During this period, labor drama flourished with students creating and presenting hosts of skits, pageants, and full-length plays.

These acts of creating and presenting new dramatic works were potentially empowering for the SSW students. As Hollis notes:

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[71] Historical record suggests that even more texts may not have survived.

[72] Carter is one of the undeniable advocates for drama in labor colleges during this time. See her publications, including *The Play Book*; her article on labor drama featured in the Journal of Adult Education, *Everyman's Drama*; and her numerous anthologies and bibliographies of labor drama plays.

> ...because creating plays and skits calls for synthesizing experience into a performative mode, workers conceptualized, evaluated, and critiqued their lives, often forcefully (re)writing themselves personally and collectively into current events and public discourse...the working women brought their own marginalized voices to the Summer School, where they encountered other discursive forms, forging more powerful voices in the process… (93)

This assessment of the dramatic literature produced by SSW students reiterates earlier discussion of Augusto Boal's approach to drama as a pedagogical tool for empowerment. As marginalized women workers wrote themselves into dramatic narratives and performed interventions within otherwise impenetrable structures of dominance, they practiced activism in their insular, supportive, and safe learning community at the SSW. This nurturing, open environment allowed for unprecedented dramatic experimentation for otherwise marginalized women and their teachers. This experimentation with dramatics at the SSW directly influenced Hollace Ransdell's pedagogy at the Southern Summer School.

Beyond labor drama, the SSW influenced practically every aspect of the Southern Summer School's inception, but a few distinctions between the two programs appear. The Southern Summer School also billed itself as a "non-sectarian, non-political experiment in Workers' education sponsored by an independent committee of southern workers and educators," following with the SSW's philosophy that espoused no specific political or ideological doctrine ("Southern"). It targeted only women and followed a similar curriculum. The Southern Summer School started in 1927, evolved into a coed program in 1938, and closed for good in 1951. Unlike the SSW, which utilized the Bryn Mawr campus for decades, the Southern Summer School was a transient program. Each summer, the program packed up and traveled to different

locations in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina and Virginia, spending most summers at different school campuses and camp locations near Asheville, North Carolina.

Former Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) National Industrial Secretary for the South, Louise Leonard (MacLaren), drove the organizational plan for the Southern Summer School's founding and remained its leader throughout the organization's existence. A Columbia Economics graduate, Leonard set out to organize a residential program for Southern women after experiencing difficulty when planning programs about labor for Southern women workers under the auspices of the YWCA. Due to the almost exclusively male influence of mill owners, husbands, ministers, fathers, and local business leaders' practically impenetrable authoritarian rule, Leonard found women workers either too scared to consider issues about labor organization or too conditioned to view labor activism as anti-Southern (Frederickson "Louise"). In response, she decided to organize a residential program in workers' education for these women in the hopes getting them away from their rigid communities and into a safer, more open learning community. She secured a grant from the American Fund for Public Service (the Garland Fund) and started building coalitions and funding streams via women's organizations like the League of Women Voters, other Southern YWCAs, and the American Association of University Women, and the National Women's Trade Union League (Frederickson ""Recognizing" 147-160). To plan the curriculum, Leonard met with trade unionists, Progressive educators, and other leaders in the workers' education movement including noted economics professor Broadus Mitchell (Frederickson "Louise" 453; "Southern"). Faculty recruited to teach further demonstrated Leonard's tenacity for organizing and her connections to workers' education circles. In addition to Hollace Ransdell, faculty included Lois McDonald, professor of Economics at NYU (Labor Economics); feminist, activist, and Cornell professor Alice Hanson

Cook (Public Speaking); Miriam Bonner, Columbia graduate and professor of English at the Greensboro, North Carolina College for Women; and others.

As evidenced by Leonard's affiliation with the organization, the YWCA was front and center throughout the Southern Summer School's existence. Members from the YWCA Industrial Department largely made up the core of women supporting the Southern Summer School's formation. As a religious organization, the YWCA fell under less scrutiny for its activist agendas during the late 1920s and 1930s— particularly in the South. According to the logic of the day, God-fearing Christian women were unlikely to take up the agendas of communism and socialism.[73] While the conservative ideologies at play in the organization's leadership most certainly had impact on the level to which students could engage with issues of labor, the Southern Summer School's affiliation with the YWCA not only provided financial support for the program, but it also helped to network the school with women's organizations throughout the region. This alliance provided necessary connections for recruiting students, securing funds, and supporting the program's longevity by keeping its programs off the radars of those interested in bringing down radical arms of labor.[74]

The location of the college in this area around Asheville, North Carolina was also significant. Asheville, best known in radical education circles as the location of Black Mountain College in the 1930s and 1940s, was in a period of economic boom in the early 1900s. The city was on pace to become one of the largest Southern cities. The promise of economic prosperity in

[73] This belief contrasts with the realities of southern-based Communism and Christian Socialism, as well as the explicit desire for the YWCA to "Christianize the social order" during this period. See Ann Firor Scott's chapter, "After Suffrage: Southern Women in the Twenties" in *Myth and Southern History* (81-100) and Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore's book, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* for additional discussion.

[74] This point proves more important in the subsequent chapter on Arkansas's Commonwealth College.

the city coupled with its breathtaking natural beauty attracted a wide variety of visitors, particularly wealthy business owners from the North, West, and Northeast, who looked for an idyllic summer retreat.[75] The decision to place the Southern Summer School program in this area was a testament to the promise of Asheville as a hallmark in a new Southern economy and culture and to the emerging role of North Carolina's piedmont region as an industrial center in textile production. Nevertheless, the Great Depression hit hard in the region, and the impact on Asheville's economy was cataclysmic. The fallout set back development in the region for decades, as it did for much of Appalachia during the 1920s and 1930s. However, these realities proved advantageous for groups interested in experimental initiatives. The region's natural beauty and reputation as a retreat for the rich coupled with a depressed economy keeping cost of living low attracted pioneers like Black Mountain College's founders and the leaders of the Southern Summer School.

Given its long tenure and connection to workers' education initiatives in the South, the Southern Summer School was most certainly a pioneering program. In 1935, director Leonard earnestly, albeit incorrectly, touted the school as the "only school in the South devoted to Workers' Education," and the school's prominence positioned it a leader amongst other institutions like Highlander Folk School and Commonwealth College (Leonard "Workers'" 1).[76] The program also rapidly expanded, initiating several outreach programs during the winter months, including programs in drama led by Ransdell, but the core programming took place over the summer. Summer programs lasted roughly six weeks and were residential for students who

[75] Asheville's Biltmore Estate, the US's largest private residence and summer home to George Vanderbilt, exemplifies this trend.

[76] See chapter four for additional discussion of Commonwealth College and Highlander Folk School. Commonwealth College formed in 1924 and Highlander Folk School formed in 1932.

attended. Women ages eighteen to thirty-five were admitted, and the average age of students was twenty-three (Leonard "Workers" 1-2; Leonard "Director's Report 1929-37"). Unlike all other programs considered in this study, the Southern Summer School student make-up was "one hundred per cent American, one hundred per cent Protestant, and about two hundred per cent exploited" (Leonard "Workers Education" 4). All students, without exception, were white Southern Christian women employed in textile factories, hosiery mills, and tobacco industries. Women of color and immigrant women were not accepted. In addition to the Jim Crow laws that made inviting African American workers to the Southern Summer School illegal, the administration was also uninterested in controversy, so the student body was very homogenous. Students averaged an eighth-grade education, although some reports suggest some dropped out of primary school as early as the second grade to work in the mills (Leonard "The South" 4-5).[77]

Less than half of students were union members when they attended, a testament to the anti-union ideologies at play amongst Southern laborers, and all students attended on scholarship that covered an average tuition expense of $150. Fundraising took care of all additional expenses. Curriculum closely mimicked that of the Bryn Mawr SSW and included courses and educational initiatives designed to "develop social consciousness of the working women" via an "economic approach...which leads directly to the heart of the problems of the working class" ("Southern" 11). Classes included labor histories, economics, English, public speaking, personal hygiene, physical education, and labor dramatics. Between 1927 and 1937, over 350 women attended, with yearly classes averaging around forty students ("Director's Reports 1928-37;" "Central Committee Minutes 1927-37").

[77] The school required a sixth grade education, two years less schooling than Bryn Mawr's SSW required, a testament to the realities of Southern education and economic strain experienced by women in the South.

Tobacco Shops, Yaller Dogs, and Subpenys: Hollace Ransdell's Early Labor Drama Program

Hollace Ransdell started working at the Southern Summer School in 1928 and remained at the school until it transitioned into a coeducational program in 1936. While working at the Southern Summer School, she penned seven original published dramatic works and led students in dramatics courses and current events. She also served as campus librarian, and at the end of her Southern Summer School tenure, she also pioneered work in teacher training. Although Ransdell's path to dramatics instructor is not entirely clear given her apparent lack of formal training in performance disciplines, her extensive study and work with radical circles of labor activism undoubtedly informed her work at the Southern Summer School. First and foremost, Ransdell's educational background positioned her to contribute to the women's labor movement in the South. Ransdell attended Colorado Women's College, a now-defunct institution that aspired to be the Vassar of the West during the time at which she attended. She received a Master's degree in Economics at Columbia University where she studied Industrial Relations and worked as the school's Industrial Relations librarian (Leonard "Director's 1929" 2). She also likely attended Brookwood Labor College around 1923-4 ("Faculty 5 Feb.").[78] After her formal education, Ransdell took on a variety of roles with labor organizations, mostly as a journalist.

Between 1926 and 1928, she worked with International Labor Defense (ILD), serving as organization's secretary and publishing articles in the ILD's official publication, *Labor Defender*. ("Sacco"). The ILD, a legal defense organization associated with the US arm of the Communist Party, collaborated with organizations like the ACLU and worked aggressively to defend leftist

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[78] I cannot confirm Ransdell's attendance beyond a reference to "Hollace" being retained as English tutor in faculty minutes in 1924, but several other authors makes reference to her attending Brookwood, including Mary Frederickson, who interviewed Ransdell in 1975.

labor activists.[79] Its most noted cases included the Sacco and Vanzetti case; the legal defense of strikers in Passaic, New Jersey; and defense of the Scottsboro Boys.[80] As part of Ransdell's participation in this organization, she published several articles about various labor activists' incarcerations and trials both in the *Labor Defender* and in other labor publications ("Prisoners", "Greasing;" "Negro Miners;" "The State;" "Guilty!;" "Jack").[81] Overall, these articles documented the human side of labor strikes, commenting on the gross injustices suffered by workers who dared to organize. They paid particular attention to the experiences of immigrant workers, women, and children and were employed, by and large, as propaganda to solicit funds for legal defenses. Despite their explicit goal as money-makers for the ILD, these articles were also quite well-written and undoubtedly contributed to her ACLU-sponsored journalistic assignment for the 1931 Scottsboro Trials in Alabama.[82,83]

Ransdell's first-hand knowledge of labor struggle via her work in journalism influenced her approach to dramatics. Before her arrival at the Southern Summer School, labor drama was

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[79] It was also placed on Attorney General Tom Clark's first list of subversive organization on December 4th, 1947 (Walker 179)

[80] See Larue McCormick's account of the ILD, as well as documents and histories featured on the Marxist.org website.

[81] Her work with the ILD, Sacco-Vanzetti National League (225), and Prisoner's Relief Fund (215) also led to her inclusion in the *The Red Network- A "Who's Who" and Handbook of Radicalism for Patriots"* (1934) as a potential radical activist who needed to be monitored (Stokes).

[82] Although Ransdell had already started teaching dramatics at the Southern Summer School by the time she wrote about the Scottsboro case, she is best known for this thorough, detailed, and thought-provoking report. In 1931 in Alabama, two young white women who were mill workers falsely accused a group young African American men, later known as the Scottsboro Boys, of rape. The case led to heated debates and legal challenges regarding issues of race and the right to a fair trial. In addition, the case inspired Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

[83] Compellingly, despite her affiliations with these aforementioned radical activist groups, the leadership of the Southern Summer School downplayed her involvement with those organizations and instead drew attention to her work at a librarian.

not a course offering, with a class in “the Appreciation of Music” serving as the only extracurricular course beyond Physical Education (“Proposed” 1). A few students interested in “trying out their dramatic ability” produced several skits, but no formal productions appeared that year (“Central-Sweet Briar” 1). In 1928, Ransdell arrived on campus, charged with both dramatics instruction and managing the campus library (Leonard “Director’s Report 1928” 2). During the first year, Southern Summer School students produced several works including a pageant dramatizing “scenes depicting the ways people have earned their living” as an extension of their economic history course and three one-act plays including the aforementioned *Peggy* from the Carolina Playmakers; a second unidentified script that showed “some of the effects of economic pressure upon the city worker;” and a student-written improvisational dramatization about working conditions in a tobacco factory entitled “Tobacco Shop” (Leonard “The South” 6; Frederickson 157).[84]

[84] *The Tobacco Shop* has not survived, but the title and description evoke MacKaye’s *The Tailor Shop*.

Fig. 1. Production photograph of *Work and Wealth*. “Southern Summer School 1928.” Box 111. “Labor Drama” Folder. American Labor Education Service Records, 1927-1962 Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, M.P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University. Ithaca, NY.

In 1929, programs picked up steam. Leonard established a year-round directorship and set up program headquarters in Baltimore, Maryland with the goal of enacting “experiments in the field” as part of “Applied Workers [sic] Education” (Leonard “Director’s Report 1929” 7). Ransdell returned for the 1929 summer session and devised two new plays with students: *Work and Wealth: A Modern Morality Play In One Act* (*Work and Wealth*) and *Oh Mr. Yaller Dog Take Him Away: A One-Act Sketch from the Life in a Mill Village* (*Yaller Dog*). *Work and Wealth* reflected the lingering influence of pageantry in amateur labor drama circles. The

"modern morality play" included characters fashioned as archetypes: Work and her associates Machinery, Overwork, Disease, and Ignorance, engaged in a *tête-à-tête* with Wealth and her crew, Pleasure, Profits, Love, Book-Learning, and Health (Ransdell *Work and Wealth* 1). Work, who appears in a "worn gingham dress" with "dark lines of weariness" etched into her face, and Wealth, who appears in an evening gown and jewels and rests atop cushy pillows, are the only characters who speak (Ransdell *Work and Wealth* 1). They meet a crossroads and then engage in a dialogue about each of the other non-speaking characters. The non-speaking roles dance and move about the stage as Work and Wealth discuss them. A few stage directions: "Overwork comes hobbling in leaning on a cane; Disease floats like a ghost a few steps behind...they approach Work who shrinks but does not move from where she is standing" (Ransdell *Work and Wealth* 3). Naturally, Wealth is terrified of Overwork and Disease, but Work knows them "too well" (Ransdell *Work and Wealth* 3). The five-page play ends with Machinery, wearing a costume of "a cardboard box covered with black paper," gathering up Poverty, Ignorance, Disease, Overwork, Unemployment and Accident, forming a chain gang, and pushing on Work as they crack whips and cry, "Faster, faster" (Ransdell *Work and Wealth* 5). As Work becomes increasingly exhausted, Wealth sits on a sofa, powdering her nose and ignoring Machinery's new influence on Work. The play abruptly ends.

In contrast to *Work and Wealth, Old Yaller Dog* resists archetypal structures and pageantry influences, instead focusing on dramatizing a moment in the lives of women mill workers. Knowing Ransdell's experience with journalism, the play reads as somewhat biographical and seems a prototypical version of Living Newspaper theatre included in the Federal Theatre Project. Its subject matter derived from the Marion, North Carolina millworker strike in which several women were being tried for violating an injunction in the nearby

Burnsville court ("Southern School;" "High Spots 4"). Students attended the trials and met with the workers, and faculty even lectured at their rallies ("High Spots" 4-5). A dramatic retelling was an appropriate extension of this study about the Marion strikes. The reference to a yellow dog signifies on several levels. In the play, *Yaller Dog* refers to a taunting folksong sung to anti-union activists who refuse to organize. However, the reference and folksong also pays homage to the contemporaneous pro-business innovation, the yellow-dog contract. A yellow dog contract functioned as agreement between employer and employee that made hiring contingent on the employee's promise not to join a labor union (Seidman 348).[85] On another level, the evocation of the yellow dog, a euphemism for a mongrel, also refers to aforementioned stronghold of Southern Democrats (Yellow Dog Democrats) and pays homage to critiques by pro-labor activists and Northerners regarding Southerners' stridently held beliefs in Southern identities and ideologies that ensured the Southern Democratic political stronghold for decades. Critics believed that, as indicated by colloquialisms, "Southerners would rather vote for a Yellow Dog than a Republican" or "Southerners would vote for a yellow dog if it were a Democrat," that Southern tradition prevented Southern culture from moving forward.[86] The many degrees of signification in the play's title alone suggest that Ransdell and her students thought carefully about the limitations and perceptions of Southern identity as they related to labor issues.

Yaller Dog begins with Miss Shaw, a "Government Industrial Investigator" likely fashioned after Ransdell, stopping by the home of Mrs. Bessie Dashwood, a unionized millworker, in the midst of a strike (1). A comedic exchange starts the play, with Mrs. Dashwood's young son, Johnnie, screaming for his "Maw" after Miss Shaw greets him. In the

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[85] Yellow dog contracts were outlawed via the Norris-La Guardia Act in 1932.

[86] Later, conservative Southerners reappropriated the pejorative "yellow dog" designation, making it a point of Southern pride, particularly during the Civil Rights Movement.

play's first half, Miss Shaw interviews Mrs Dashwood, asking a series of questions like "Tell me what your grievances are. Why did all of you go on strike?" and promising to change the law: "The government wants you workers to be satisfied...it can pass some laws to help you" (Ransdell *Yaller* 1-2). In dialect-laden dialogue, particularly when compared to Miss Shaw's pristine speech, Mrs. Dashwood reveals skepticism toward Miss Shaw's plan: "I don't know's laws will help us out much. Seems laik nobody don' pay much tention to the few little ole laws we got already" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 2). Despite the comical southern characterization of Mrs. Dashwood at the beginning of the play, as the narrative progresses, she reveals startling and sobering realities about her work and life. She laments her work schedule, discussing how it regularly exceeds sixty hours per week despite the law, and she remarks on how "it seems laik nobody runs the bossmen but theirselves" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 2). In another moment, she also matter-of-factly discusses her relief at losing her husband in a mill accident because the mill "bought the coffin" and besides, she "couldn't bear to be gettin' a new baby every year or so...watchin' 'em growin' up peaked and pale around me" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 3). She even shows surprising self-awareness when discussing her naive decision to move for a job in the mill: "But law we was green. We thought it we nice and fine...We didn't know then that the bossmen was assayin' to theirselves, 'them mountain people don't need no more'n just 'nuff to keep 'em from starvin' to death'" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 3-4). In all, Mrs. Dashwood's testimony provides honest, provocative documentation of the experiences of southern workingwomen even as her comically stereotypical characterization makes her statements accessible to the audiences at Southern Summer School.

After Mrs. Dashwood's commentary, Mrs. McClain enters. Although the outspoken Mrs. Dashwood proudly joined the union, Mrs. McClain has not. As such, she represents the anti-

union ideology at play in many southern workers' resistance to organization. She states, "I ain't goin' let no union tell me what I cain and what I cain't do" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 5). The three women discuss and debate the pros and cons of unionization until the only male character in the play, the Sheriff, enters and interrupts their exchange. The decision to include the male Sheriff, a buffoonish figure brandishing a "subpeny to appear in court," reads as deliberate commentary about male interventions in labor activism. Prior to his entrance, the three women, all from different walks of life with different perspectives on labor, engage in a dialogue about issues, sharing their thoughts and engaging in a heated, but respectful exchange. The Sheriff's entrance disrupts all of this collaborative conversation. He demands that Mrs. Dashwood see the judge and insists that she not go to the picket line. Mrs. Dashwood responds with indignation: "Here's' the sheriff a servin' me with an injunction paper sayin' I cain't go in the union picket line; he'll be servin' me with one sayin' I can't blow my nose next" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 8). Upon hearing Mrs. Dashwood's resistance, other women, passing by on their way to the picket line, gather round the boss and begin "jeeringly" singing "Mr. Yaller Dog Take Him Away" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 8). The increasingly angry Sheriff uses his club to chase out all of the women in Mrs. Dashwood's yard, and menacingly reminds Mrs. Dashwood that she should stay off the picket line "fer your own good" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 8). In a surprise response, Mrs. McClain jumps up, requests a copy of the injunction, and declares, "I'm a goin' to jine the union. I ain't agoin' to have nobody a tellin' me I cain't picket!" (Ransdell, *Yaller* 9). The play ends immediately afterwards.

By imagining a more realistic route for activism for these female workers, Ransdell distinguishes her texts from earlier works. *Yaller Dog's* ending is somewhat surprising, particularly when compared to other similar plays like the aforementioned *Tailor Shop* produced by Hazel MacKaye. The play's striking millworkers, unlike Brookwood's *Tailor Shop* characters,

are not successful in shoving off or silencing the Sheriff in a theatrical act of solidarity. Instead, the Sheriff rushes off the women, leaving the remaining characters, Mrs. Dashwood and Mrs. McClain, to assert their agency in the face of his oppression. Mrs. McClain must make a choice: join the union or become complicit in shutting down her fellow women's right to picket. The distinctions between *The Tailor Shop* and *Yaller Dog's* endings highlights Ransdell's unique approach to labor drama, drawing attention to the way she navigated challenges unique to the Southern Summer School. For example, Brookwood students crafted *The Tailor Shop* prior to the AFL controversy, so the possibilities regarding what could be represented were much more open. Depicting a boss rushed off the stage by women tailor shop workers was playfully subversive, but not dangerous. In contrast, Ransdell worked in moment where she was acutely aware of both the aura of skepticism surrounding labor activism in the South and the recent Brookwood controversy. She opted for a more conservative solution for her striking women.[87]

The move from outlandish solutions with little practical application in the real world— as in the case of rushing a Boss off the stage while singing "Owner of a Union Shop" or shouting down a Sheriff brandishing a club and a "subpeny"— to a more realistic approach whereby women represented practical approaches to labor activism also speaks to Ransdell's adeptness in navigating the Southern Summer School's expectations for her program. Like other programs, Southern Summer School leadership used dramatics as a tool for community building and publicity, and Ransdell had to strike a careful balance with her plays. Her program needed to represent her Southern students' real-life experiences, but the products could not generate controversy for the new school. These productions' roles as school publicity also helps explain

[87] This point proves even more salient when looking at documents like a letter from Southern Summer School board member Mary Barker to a "Mr. Green" ostensibly AFL president William Green, asserting "there is nothing in the program of the Southern Summer School to which you could object. As for Communism, "irreligious" and unfriendliness to the A. F. of L. they are beyond our horizon" (Barker).

Ransdell's use of pageantry forms in *Work and Wealth*. The allegorical good-versus-evil plot demonstrates dramatics students' investment in and engagement with different issues contributing to labor exploitation. Similarly, using pageantry paradigms for dramatizing complex economic concepts like the influence of machinery on the experience of workers shows the potential for performance-based pedagogy to help students make sense of abstract concepts in the curricula. However, these broad archetypes, even as they exploited poor, gingham-clad Work, avoided controversy. *Work and Wealth* was a living economic lesson where characters were concepts— not real people. Likewise, the narrative explained an economic process instead of giving voice to specific examples of real-life worker oppression.

Students performed both *Work and Wealth* and *Yaller Dog* for the student body and for the school's first Labor Conference held on campus at the end of summer. Forty-three guests, all labor leaders, visited the Southern Summer School and saw Ransdell and her students' work ("Southern-Program"). The decision to present these original labor dramas at the Southern Summer School's inaugural Labor Conference demonstrates the increasingly visible role dramatics played in the Southern Summer School students' educational experiences. Presenting original labor dramas for guests to campus also supports the idea that Southern Summer School leadership believed in Ransdell's leadership. Nevertheless, these performances were also important profile-raising products that reinforced the Southern Summer School's no-doctrine philosophies even as they showcased how the students developed increased knowledge about the Southern labor movement. News reports, like an article featured in *Women's Wear Daily,* marking the school's goings-on took note of the innovative, but safe dramatics program in which Ransdell took "the themes and many of the lines suggested out of the experiences of the students" ("Southern School"). Likewise, Eleanor Coit, director of the ASW, published a report of the

Southern Summer School in a December 1929 edition of *Women's Press,* citing the Southern Summer School's work in labor drama when she suggested that the school might become "the classroom of the Southern Labor Movement" (3). If these reports are an indicator, Ransdell balanced the politics of labor drama during her first years with aplomb.

Well?.......Whut air we agoin to do about it?": Depression Strikes the Southern Summer School

Southern Summer School labor drama found its footing in 1929. Even the stock market crash in October of that year seemed to have little impact — at least at first. In fact, the impact of the Crash on dramatics in 1930 was largely positive. According to a February 1930 edition of *The News*, the Southern Summer School's intermittently published newsletter, Miriam Bonner, Southern Summer School English teacher, and Hollace Ransdell spent the winter of 1929/30 in Europe "visiting workers' schools and other progressive educational centers" ("Staff" 3). They traveled through Europe, and visited workers' schools in Brussels, Copenhagen, London, Berlin, and Leipzig (Camp).[88] In the off-season, Louise Leonard started teaching extension courses in Nashville, forming a partnership that would last several years and lay foundations for a later dramatics extension program. In her course entitled "Worker's Risks," Leonard incorporated labor drama pedagogy, the creation of "a dramatic sketch, written by members... presented by the class" with "a real trade union message and was itself an example of another form of workers' education" as a culminating assignment (Leonard "Worker's Risks" 4). Leonard's incorporation of drama into her larger course demonstrated that Ransdell's work continued to have impact on the Southern Summer School programs. Luckily, the structure of the 1930 Southern Summer

[88] They also noted the rising tide of fascism. In Camp's interview with Mary Frederickson, she states, "And I learned, that's where I really began learning things, because I was in Vienna and I was in Germany. And I saw the coming of the Fascist movement, really, in Germany. And I was scared as hell" (Camp).

School summer encountered only a few, mostly positive changes. All staff returned from the previous year, and the school relocated to a new, more desirable campus in Arden, North Carolina, an Asheville suburb.

Despite positive developments in terms of staff continuity and improved location, the student body, a more "mature and serious minded" group, was notably smaller than previous years' cohorts. Only twenty-five students attended ("Central Committee 1930" 1). Leonard's 1930 director's report noted concern regarding the shift in students' darker outlook on labor, remarking that it seemed to be "a reflection of the social situation at the present time" ("Statement" 3). Alongside discussion of the challenges teaching this smaller, more somber group of students, Leonard also makes note of the growth in "socialized dramatics" programs, citing the "noteworthy" results (Leonard "Director's Report 1930" 3). In addition to new student-produced scripts, the school also started more significant conversations with visitors to campus regarding labor drama outreach opportunities.[89] In a description of these developments, Leonard describes Ransdell's skill as dramatics instructor as "a rare combination of ability both to teach through dramatics and to present artistic productions" and discusses the potential extension work planned for five Southern cities for the winter of 1930 (Leonard "Director's Report 1930" 3). In another testament to the labor drama's growth, the school also welcomed playwrights William Wolff of the Carolina Playmakers and Dorothy Gardner, the first guest teaching artists (Leonard "Director's Report 1930" 6).[90] Leonard further discussed the 1930 dramatics programs in an essay she published in *Mountain Life and Work* in January of 1931 ("School"). While playtexts

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[89] Despite my best efforts, I have not been able to find the scripts produced in 1930. This may have to do with the fact that Ransdell did not donate her papers to any archive upon her death.

[90] Dorothy Gardner is a pen name for Mrs. Bradford C. Durfee. She also published under the name Dorothy Worthington Butts. She wrote *Eastward of Eden,* which premiered on Broadway in 1947.

from the 1930 summer are missing from the archive, glowing assessments from the director about the course remain:

> "In dramatics classes they discuss dramatic situations in their common experience, situations arising, as a rule, out of their work life either on the farm or in the factory. With the dramatics director, who has great skill in editing their work, they create plays depicting the most dramatic situations of their group life, such as the picket line at Marion, or the employment office in a southern city. These plays have both artistic and educational value. Drawn from real life, as they are, they are an addition to the folk literature of the South. ("School").

Clearly, Ransdell's work made an impact on Leonard. Labor drama programs continued to develop throughout 1930 and 1931.

After the summer session, Ransdell continued work in labor drama via extension programs. She immersed herself in amateur workers' dramatics courses under the sponsorship of the Southern Summer School. In the spring of 1931, the same time she traveled to Alabama to report on the Scottsboro trials, she was also "on tour in the South to encourage the formation of workers' dramatic groups as a phase of workers' education" (Ransdell "Report" 1).[91] For a salary of three-hundred dollars a month, she led programs in Nashville, working with the newly-formed Union Labor Dramatic Group to produce "And they call us civilized!," a one-act farce based on real events surrounding the corrupt Duckhead overall company's union-busting efforts. She also supervised a "second experiment" in Louisville, Kentucky where she collaborated with the

[91] Ransdell's approach to documenting the Scottsboro trials in relation to her dramatics programs begs glossing. Her sophisticated analysis of race- and class-based discrimination likely drew influence from her work dramatizing Southern Summer School students' personal narratives and life experiences. In her interviews and in-depth analysis of the information surrounding Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, young white working-class women who were plaintiffs in the case, Ransdell pulls no punches in her commentary about the discrimination the two women faced.

Amalgamated Clothing Workers and Transportation Brotherhood on another new production, a farce entitled "What's Wrong With Business?" about unemployment relief (Ransdell "Report" 3; Crall "Labor"). She led a third program in Jackson, Tennessee, but details on this program are scant (Ransdell "Report" 4). Given her primary role as a journalist, Ransdell submitted a lengthy report about the work in these programs to the Southern Summer School in which she offered insight about her approach to labor drama and discussed her motivation for working in the discipline. This document provides some of the only documentation from Ransdell's perspective regarding her intense commitment to labor dramatics between 1928 and 1936.

When commenting on drama's value to workers' education, she boldly suggests that, "Social recognition and appreciation of the poetic imaginative qualities, the dramatic instinct found in the working class and the dynamic self-confidence which its recognition would bring, *completes an educational force of untold possibilities"* (emphasis added) (Ransdell "Report " 1). Ransdell's suggestion that drama helps to complete a virtually limitless force of educational possibility suggests that Ransdell found labor drama such a compelling form because it provided her a synergistic, collaborative format in which to synthesize her work as a journalist and her work as an educator. She goes on to describe the pedagogical design of her Southern Summer School summer courses:

> The dramatic program of the Southern Summer School which has been carried on for four summers during the six weeks' session of the School has served as a laboratory for experimentation in the use of dramatics as a potent education force for workers whose limited schooling and industrial life have given their minds little chance to learn to grasp abstractions. (Ransdell "Report" 2)

Here, Ransdell articulates drama's value as pedagogical tool that makes abstract ideas concrete for worker/students. Her evocation of laboratories whereby pedagogical experimentation took place speaks to the reflective practice in which Ransdell immersed herself as she evolved as a dramatics instructor. This view of education as a form of experimentation meant she, along with her Southern Summer School colleagues, perpetually assessed programs' effectiveness as a tool for learning. Through this reflection, Ransdell determined that labor drama was good for workers' education because it avoided traditional pedagogical formats with which Southern Summer School students, a group of non-traditional students with an average eighth grade education, had little experience. This commitment to meeting the unique needs of her worker/students also appears in Ransdell's assessment of results in her extension report. She asserts, "The most important thing that stands out in looking over the results of this first dramatic extension program of the Southern Summer School is the corroboration it gives to the idea that dramatics makes a great appeal to those who spend their lives in physical activity and has great value as an educational force." Ransdell identifies drama's connection to experiential learning; workers learn through drama because drama engages the physical body. Her references to labor drama as an experiential learning medium that also connected to the lives of her students by providing them new modes for learning serves as an early example of an educator speaking explicitly about dramatics' value as pedagogical tool in the US.[92]

By the summer of 1931, dramatics was fully integrated into curriculum. Ransdell, firmly secure in her role as dramatics instructor, started to take more risks with her productions. The later plays are much darker and more explicitly critical of worker injustices, as shown by the course's title change from "Socialized Dramatics" to "Workers' Dramatics" (Leonard

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[92] For example, Winifred Ward's seminal 1929 work, *Creative Dramatics*, is consistently regarded as one of the first works making explicit connections between drama and education.

"Director's Report (1931)" 2). Students now attended daily classes in drama where they "read together and learned folk plays and character sketches" (Crall "Southern"). They also produced five short plays in 1931, and two, *Job Huntin'* and *On the Picket Line (Picket Line)*, have survived. *Job Huntin',* an absurdist "tragi-comedy in one act" depicts a group of downtrodden unemployed millworkers who decide to start a "Starvation Army" in order to use their deaths from starvation as a tool for advocacy. As they wait in front of the Unemployment office hoping for jobs that are unlikely to materialize, they hatch a plan to be "jist as inconsiderate-like as we could when we wuz goin' kick the bucket" by dying *en masse* on the front steps of the bosses' home (Ransdell *Job* 1-5). The play, a modest proposal about the ever-increasing problem of unemployment in the South, functions as a sophisticated satire that makes clear the acute desperation experienced by workers. Despite their willingness to work, they were literally starving to death, and little relief was on the horizon. At the same time, the blackly comedic aspects of the play, like the final moments in which a crew of zombie-like workers, "ragged and hungry" stumble across the stage singing, to the tune of "In the Sweet By and By," "We will eat, by and by/ In that beautiful land beyond the sky/ Work and pray, Live on hay/ You'll get pie in the sky when you die" captures much-needed levity in its representation of these issues. Through its satirical style, *Job Huntin'* avoids the heavy-handed melodrama that predominate in many labor drama scripts.

In contrast to *Job Huntin'*, *Picket Line* offers another slice-of-life narrative about organization similar to *Yaller Dog*. While similar to *Yaller Dog* in theme and structure, *Picket Line* conveys a darker, more desperate tone in response to the deepening Depression. The play opens with a group of strikers sitting around a bonfire. A high wire fence of the "Walden Cotton Mill" appears in the background. The strikers are on watch, making sure scabs do not cross into

the mill to work in the cover of night. It is cold and late, and the strikers are punchy with exhaustion and hunger. They trade jokes about stealing one of boss's chickens, huff and puff about beating up scabs who cross the picket line, and sing labor tunes (Ransdell *Picket* 1-3). Various characters drop by the picket line bonfire, including Joe, the union organizer who checks on their well-being and brings them coffee, and Miz Howard, a scab who makes ends meet by doing the bosses' laundry (Ransdell *Picket* 3-5). Even Walden Cotton Mill owner, Boss Peters, visits, commenting on strikers' apparent laziness: "You seem to be takin' it easy enough." (Ransdell *Picket* 3) Ma Simpson, an "old and lively spinner" quips back, "Ye..e...e..h! Jist like a bossman.....if'n I had the money" (Ransdell *Picket* 3). The group suppresses laughter as Boss Peters stares suspiciously at the stewing stolen chicken, and as he exits, one of the strikers walks behind him comically imitating his pompous gait. The mood is jovial. Later, an abrupt shift in tone occurs. Like in *Yaller Dog*, the Sheriff enters, brandishing injunction subpoenas for the strikers. The strikers' indignant responses to their subpoenas hearken back to *Yaller Dog*; they cheekily discuss how they use their other subpoenas to "start th'ktichen fire," how they framed and displayed them on the wall "like I did my marriage license," or how they gave it to the "baby to chow on" (Ransdell *Picket* 8). After making light of the injunction papers, they threaten to vote against the Sheriff in the upcoming election.

Despite their taunting, the Sheriff is not deterred, as in *Yaller Dog*. He saunters off stage, warning, "I'll see yuh all in co't one these days." (Ransdell *Picket* 9). The group once again feigns flippancy, but when the Sheriff is finally out of earshot, the strikers "fall silent and stare thoughtfully into the fire. They are disturbed, uneasy" (Ransdell *Picket* 9). Only after a lingering silence does Tom, the young and outspoken member of the group, ask, "Well?.......Whut air we agoin to do about it?" (Ransdell *Picket* 9). Another pause. Finally, Old Man Sally, an otherwise

quiet character "who is about 40 but looks 60," simply says, "I dunno, lad. I dunno." The drama ends with the group quietly singing, "We are building a strong union" to the tune of "Jacob's Ladder" (Ransdell *Picket* 9). Even though the show's stage directions indicate the singing slowly grows "stronger and stronger," the somber tone penetrates the last moments of the play. Unlike *Yaller Dog,* no one takes action; instead, the strikers simply sit, unsure of themselves and their purpose with another round of injunction subpoenas in hand. The message is clear: these strikers have been here before and nothing seems ready to change. A quiet desperation lingers amongst the once-punchy workers, and their marked ambivalence about what comes next trumps their surging chorus. In this simple drama about stolen chickens and bossladies' laundry, Ransdell and her students raise important existential questions about the purpose and goals of labor organizing in such a dire time. The result is Beckettian. Both *Job Huntin'* and *Picket Line* provide a sophisticated embodiment of the Depression's impact on workers using absurdist theatrical tropes, and they pay homage to Ransdell's risky, but innovative, avant-garde approach to staging her students' narratives.

In addition to creating and producing plays like *Job Huntin*' and *Picket Line*, Ransdell also responded to the impact of the Depression by both broadening curriculum to help her students plan for outreach in their respective communities. Her new focus on helping students develop dramatics clubs speaks to her increasingly prominent role in the field and growing commitment to disseminating labor drama as a workers' education tool in Southern communities. In a planning session held at the end of summer, students and faculty collaborated on workshops and talks about teaching dramatics in home communities ("Follow-up"). As a response, students from Atlanta, Durham, and Louisville all presented plans for dramatics courses. They described new classes at local YWCAs and strategies for organizing labor play benefit presentations to

raise money for the Southern Summer School and to network with local trade unions ("Follow-up"). A report about the 1931 summer in *School and Society* took note of these innovations. Elsie Jenson, a professor at the Texas State College for Women and a visitor to campus, remarked on labor drama, commenting that the program "demonstrated well the fact that even a small group may show considerable dramatic ability when asked to portray situation which are familiar to its own experience. A run on a bank or a meeting to discuss unemployment remedies can be depicted with both humor and pathos by those who know the bitter irony of such situations." (3-4) Jenson's reference to the "bitter irony" speaks to the political complexity included in *Picket Line* and *Job Huntin'*, and her commentary that "even a small group may show considerable dramatic ability" indicates that Ransdell's experimental dramas opened up new, more nuanced interpretations of Southern Summer School students' life experiences that outsiders found compelling.

Unfortunately, the Depression's impact finally hit hard at Southern Summer School in 1932. Financial strain, held at bay for a few years by Leonard's expert networking skills, threatened to shutter the program by the end of 1932. After the summer session, Leonard wrote to ASW director Eleanor Coit, stating "There were many times during the past year when we thought the [Southern Summer School] would have to be given up because of lack of funds" and expressing concern that the 1932 session might end in a financial deficit (Leonard "Letter 3 August" 1;3). The program also moved again, this time to a less expensive, but much smaller campus, and several faculty members who had been with the Southern Summer School since the beginning did not return (Leonard "Letter 3 August" 1). Only twenty students attended, and leadership was unable to hire support staff like cooks or maids. "Domestic work" fell to the faculty and students (Memo Leonard to Coit). Visitors to the campus were also in short supply,

and the annual Labor Conference severely contracted. The 1933 summer was not much better. A group of thirty students shrunk to twenty-two a week before the session's start due to a "business up-turn" that "brought back their jobs" (Leonard "Director's Report (1933)" 1). Thirteen of those who attended were unemployed and attended mostly because they had nothing better to do. (Tsyinger 1). These students shared many of the same concerns reflecting the increasingly dire state of Southern economies: cut wages, higher expectations for output, part-time employment, and unexplained and unwarranted termination (Tsyinger 1). Once again, the program moved locations, now forced to share a campus in Weaverville, North Carolina with another program due to this financial strain (Grady). The situation for the Southern Summer School was grim.

Still, Ransdell stayed on as dramatics instructor despite other colleagues' departures, and labor drama endured as an undoubtedly bright spot. In the same memo Leonard wrote to Eleanor Coit lamenting the challenges of the 1932 session, she also commented on labor drama as "not only another avenue of expression and a delightful form of recreation, but a method of conveying to fellow workers information and a point of view about industrial problems" (Leonard "Letter 3 Aug." 2). Through this work, Ransdell honed her craft and continued to spread the word about labor drama beyond the Southern Summer School community. She made available a few of her plays for twenty-five cents in order to raise funds for the Southern Summer School while still generating and publishing new plays with her students.[93] In regards to the summer course, student Emma Smith commented on their "recreational study" in a 1933 course description, one of the few testimonies about Ransdell's instruction:

> This group meets just before dark when groups of girls love to sit around and talk. In this class they are given much opportunity for constructive talk. After reading a

[93] Her decision to publish plays is one of the only reasons that the few texts discussed here have survived.

> short play on one labor problem or another, Hollace asks the students to analyze the characters, the play, and the author's ideas in writing it. One of the biggest surprises came when after a group of nine students practiced parodies to several popular songs without the help of music, stage setting or scenery, they produced "The Forgotten Man." It was enthusiastically received by the faculty and guests who spoke of the good work which had been done by the director. (2).

The production of *The Forgotten Man*, a 1933 "musical skit" by Commonwealth College teacher Bill Reich, signaled the increasing interconnectedness of the southern labor schools and the commitment to supporting other initiatives in the southern labor drama community. A description of the production featured *The News* also demonstrated the challenges Ransdell encountered in producing plays at this new, less functional site. The performance space was a "classroom," and the "director worked under hardships of having no stage and very little stage properties" (Thomas "Dramatics" 3). Despite these lackluster conditions, Ransdell continued her courses. Students read and studied seminal labor plays like *The Adding Machine*, *RUR*, and *The Weavers* (Leonard "Director's Report (1933)" 3), and they also managed to create at least three more plays during this period: *Bank Run* (July 1932), *World Economic Nonsense* (August 1933), *Mother Jones's Tin Pan Army* (August 1933).[94]

Bank Run, another "tragi-comedy sketch in one act," once again showcases Ransdell perpetual experimentation by asserting its status as the first drama "based on a actual scene" (1). The play also shows Ransdell's increasingly outspoken approach to labor drama. An opening description includes the following information:

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[94] These plays are among the few Ransdell published, but she very clearly collaborated on other works that were not published and have not survived.

> This sketch is based on an actual scene that took place during a run on a large Eastern bank which failed in the Fall of 1931. Many of the remarks in the dialogue are repeated word for word as they were heard and noted down by a person who stood in the like. The sign about a 'word to the wise' was pasted on the window and was worded exact as given below. (Ransdell *Bank* 1)

The following narrative includes exchanges between depositors waiting in line at a failed bank hoping to get back their money. The opening scene features a picture of the depositors "stretching from the door of the bank on the right clear across the stage and out into the wing on the left as far as the eye can see," and a sign on the window that reads, "The thrifty person is one who has started a bank account and regularly makes his deposits ensuring his future with funds that mean so much to him when most needed. A word to the wise is sufficient" (Ransdell *Bank* 1). The sign is an ominous reminder of the Depression's economic atrocities. Even the people who were "thrifty" and responsible lost everything when banks busted. Throughout the skit, a Hobo, the play's narrator, shuffles back and forth along the line, stopping to talk with different people. He talks with an old man who has lost his entire life savings; a Shopkeeper who suggests the bank "didn't invest the money the way they should"; a couple of men who debate over the role of elected officials in the bank bust; and others (Ransdell *Bank* 1-4). Finally, "a large unhealthily fat man with a pasty complexion, probably a German baker" announces, in German dialect, that he is going to "look into vat these Reds are saying, py Gott if I'm not!" (Ransdell *Bank* 4). The group debates the pros and cons of communism and talks about the economic state of affairs in Russia. Suddenly, a Cop appears, threatening to arrest anyone who speaks of Russia (Ransdell *Bank* 4-5). By the skit's end, the Cops brandish their clubs, demanding the group

disperse. The Hobo, the iconic Invisible Man, escapes the scuffle by hiding behind some other people in the line and delivers a final monologue:

> See? I told you so. You say anything's that true, they call you a Bolsheviki. They tell you to beat it, I know. I see the same thing everywhere I go. If they throw you out of your job to starve, take it. If they take away your furniture and set you out in the street to freeze, take it. If they fool you into putting money into the bank and then steal it from you, take it. Take what they give you, for if you don't you're a BOLSHEVIKI, one of these here Reds. And why don't you get back where you came from? (Ransdell *Bank* 5)

This final moment is powerful. Ransdell and her students pull no punches, articulating a scathing critique of banks, law enforcement, government officials, and the wealthy. They also criticize the systematic silencing of any voices of dissent through their characterization of blustering Cops who threaten to arrest anyone who speaks of Russia. A far cry from the demure allegory in *Work and Wealth*, *Bank Run* reveals an increasing radicalization of Southern Summer School labor drama.

Both *Economic World Nonsense* (*Nonsense*) and *Mother Jones' Tin Pan Army* (*Mother Jones*) are equally inflammatory. *Nonsense* is a satire of the 1933 London Economic Conference in which President Roosevelt controversially refused to join an international agreement that would stabilize currency and relieve the worldwide impact of the Great Depression. The text is written in rhyming verse, features a Hog and a Clown as narrators. The cast is made up of a cadre of international delegates, including two buffoonish US representatives who bicker throughout the entire scene and start a raucous fight at the end of the play (Ransdell *World* 1-7). The Clown and the Hog manipulate the puppet-like delegates, forcing them all to settle down

after the US-led fracas (Ransdell, *World* 7). The final moment of the play shows The Clown forcing every delegate to turn and grin at the audience. The final moment of the play show the German delegate grimacing at the French delegate as the Clown yells to the stagehand, "Hey Turn off that light quick! They can't hold that grin much longer!" (Ransdell, *World* 7). The effect provides a haunting image foreshadowing the lead-up to WWII.

Mother Jones dramatizes a moment described in Mother Jones's autobiography where she and her tin-pan army, a group of women marching with mops, brooms, and tin pans, butt heads with law enforcement. The Sheriff and Deputy are terrified of the raucous group of women and are barely able to stop their bayonets from shaking as the army approaches (Ransdel,l *Mother Jones* 1-2). In the middle of this exchange, in which Mother Jones clearly has the upper hand, a scab working in the mines wanders by the group. The women rush him, trip him with their mops, bang their pans in his ears and leave him completely disoriented (Ransdell, *Mother Jones* 3). In his bewildered state, the scab agrees to join the union as he "looks fearfully at the women" (Ransdell, *Mother Jones* 3). At that moment, the Union President rushes in "wringing his hands" and gives Mother Jones a talking-to once she announces that the scab joined the union: "Took them into the Union? What do you mean? How could you do that? You didn't have the ritual!... That's not according to the by-laws of the Union." (Ransdell, *Mother Jones* 4). The play ends with Mother Jones giving a rousing speech in which she states she is going to "fight like……well like my women fought today! And you men had better come and join us!" (Ransdell, *Mother Jones* 4).

Mother Jones is radically feminist by including characters that emasculate male leaders; depicting images of violent, rowdy women; and directly critiquing union policy that keep women disempowered for purposes of activism. If there were any confusion about the shifting tone of

Ransdell's plays, *Bank Run*, *Nonsense*, and *Mother Jones* clear up her turn toward an agitation style of performance. All three of these plays are provocative texts with no-holds-barred commentary about the labor movement's state of affairs. However, these plays did not appear to encounter any controversy with the Southern Summer School leadership. I uncovered no documentation suggesting that Southern Summer School leadership censored these texts or prevented their publication or production in any way. In fact, they are among the handful of texts published by the Southern Summer School. Given the lack of "drama" surrounding these dramas, they stand as defining examples of the evolving movement. These texts stand as markers of labor drama moving away from supposedly neutral workers' education to more radical forms designed to agitate on behalf of disenfranchised workers.

Between 1932 and 1933 summer sessions, Ransdell continued her outreach work. The more radical tone that appeared in her plays from the 1932 and 1933 seasons also appeared in her work with community groups. However, this presented problems given Ransdell's new affiliation with the Affiliated Schools for Workers. With the Southern Summer School struggling to makes ends meet, funds could not be secured to support planned projects in Mobile, Alabama. Instead, Ransdell was forced to continue her work as a teaching artist for the ASW under Eleanor Coit's supervision (Leonard, "Director's Report (1933)" 3). Unfortunately, this new affiliation forced her to abandon the South. Instead of supporting Ransdell on the Alabama project, Coit dispatched her to the Northeast to devise theatre with women workers through local YWCAs. This initiative was a pilot project, designed to serve as a model for other extension programs, but these other opportunities never materialized (Coit, "Letter to Floyd"; Coit, "Letter to Elizabeth"). Ransdell committed to projects in Woonsocket and Pawtucket, Rhode Island, northeastern textile centers and sites of recent strikes (Foner 297). She encountered difficulty in Rhode Island. The

women with whom she worked were very uninterested in developing dramatics clubs and hoped that Ransdell would simply come and direct them in a play, much to Ransdell's disappointment (Parsons). Through much cajoling, Ransdell managed to unify the women and produce "What, No Work?," a short skit about Unemployment Relief and sweatshop conditions in local textile mills (Ransdell "Letter to Coit (25 Apr.)" 1). The tone of Ransdell's letters to Coit reveals her annoyance with the lack of investment from the Rhode Island women: "We are therefore putting on a short, quite simple skit which we may call 'What, No Work?' or some such thing…Our performance will be simple, for I've tried to continually emphasize the question of going on with dramatics, and we have spent quite a bit of time talking over plans for organizing the group… I will go into this more fully when I see you in New York" (Ransdell "Letter to Coit (25 Apr.)" 2). Her reference to "continually emphasizing" the question of strategies for organizing labor drama clubs, the primary purpose of her visit, highlights the resistance she encountered with the group.

Under the auspices of the ASW, Coit also charged Ransdell with organizing local dramatics groups with unions and networking with Bryn Mawr and Brookwood students, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful. Ransdell's letters to Coit regarding these matters also expressed increasing frustration and suggested a bit of resentment toward this new public relations role as part of her work with the ASW. Two brief samples: "The Union is dead as a door-nail and quite hopeless. Elizabeth Nord is discouraged and disgusted with the officials, and rightly so" and "So far, I have spent my time entirely with the girls, and have seen none of the members of the committee" (Ransdell "Letter to Coit (13 Apr.)"; Ransdell "Letter to Coit (19 Apr.)"). Ransdell struggled to reconcile her increasingly radical interests with the ASW initiatives with which she was charged.

Although the extension programs no longer fell under the Southern Summer School's leadership, Ransdell still had her summer programs, but sadly, in 1934, the Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) fundamentally altered the Southern Summer School's core summer programming. In order to secure additional funds to keep the program afloat, Leonard applied for monies via FERA in exchange for supporting a "unit of unemployed workers" in teacher education training. These twenty-four new students combined with the unprecedentedly small class of seventeen workers recruited "through regular channels" (Leonard "Director's Report (1934)" 1). This small class resulted from several factors explained in the 1934 Director's Report:

> Four hosiery workers…dropped out because they feared if they got off they would not be taken on again; two hosiery workers could not leave economic responsibilities for their families; 1 garment worker's…company refused her time off; 1 garment worker…decided to get married; 1 Amalgamated garment worker…was laid off and obliged to get another job; 1 shoe worker…apparently lost interest; 1 waitress…who had been unemployed for a long time dropped out because she got a job; and 1 waitress…had to drop out because of illness. (1)

The majority of students left because they either feared losing their jobs or recently found a job, an economic reality in the face of a long-awaited economic uptick in the South.

In addition to the unprecedentedly small core of regular students, other concerns arose from the new group of teacher trainees. The Southern Summer School received approval for the FERA money very late in the season, and leadership had to scramble to recruit new students and plan for their curriculum. Reports indicate that the unemployed unit "had not known what to expect," had "very little industrial background," and did "not have a very clear idea of what they

were coming to" before they arrived on campus, indicating a need to rapidly shift curricula away from workers' education to a more practical-oriented program in teacher training Leonard "Director's Report (1934)" 1 1; "Central (1934)" 1). This shift produced strain for the teachers like Ransdell who had grown accustomed to a particular flow in summer programs. Additionally, the poorly conceived solution to this odd new set of circumstances only made matters worse. Reports suggest that much instruction during the 1934 season involved the twenty-four teacher trainees sitting on the sidelines of classes observing the methods of faculty as they taught the seventeen "regular" students ("Central (1934)" 1). Naturally, this was a significant departure from the intimate, discussion-based models of instruction the faculty had previously incorporated in their teaching and presented "difficulties in teaching a 'crowd'" that the instructors struggled to overcome ("Central (1934)" 1).

Another set of complicating issues arose from the Southern Summer School's new affiliation with the ASW. While the Southern Summer School had maintained connections to this organization, they had resisted a formal association for almost a decade in order to protect the Southern Summer School's autonomy. However, the financial realities of the time made joining the ASW a necessary strategic move in the hopes of bolstering support. Much to the Southern Summer School's leadership's annoyance, in the first years, this new alliance mostly resulted in additional challenges related to bureaucracy with transitioning into full membership ("The Southern Summer and the Affiliated" 1). Most documentation about this period addresses growing pains associated with these new developments. Little commentary about dramatics programs, other than a brief mention of another outreach project by Ransdell in "the anthracite region of Pennsylvania" exists ("The Southern Summer and the Affiliated" 2). The only other reference to Southern Summer School labor drama I located was a mention in Commonwealth

College's school paper in March of 1934, which stated, "Ransdell will have charge of labor drama projects for a series of workers education projects under the ASW. Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction will supply unemployed teachers for a number of groups in the anthracite section of the state (Mahaney City, Frackville Center, and Hazleton)" ("Koch" 1). Ransdell continued her new job as a teacher of teachers with the ASW in the off-season as well, likely an economic necessity given the Depression's lingering effects.

By 1935, teacher-training programs had all but taken over the Southern Summer School. Ransdell, while simultaneously continuing as dramatics instructor, also "acted as chairman of the teaching staff of the Teachers' Training Center" carrying "major responsibility for this course" (Leonard "Director's Report (1935)" 1). A few dramatics presentations appeared, but they were mostly "comic pictures of the life of the school," some simple student-generated skits, and few scenes from *Waiting for Lefty* ("Dramatics" 5). In a report on dramatics classes that Ransdell somehow found time to put together while also organizing and leading the Teacher Training Center, she also commented on another competing development that threatened her dramatics program: the motion picture ("Labor Drama" 5). A great deal of conversation in the dramatics classes now centered around the movies, a development Ransdell worked to integrate into her curriculum, but clearly struggled to appropriately contextualize in her approach. Mostly, Ransdell directed students to the idea that motion pictures "so seldom" took up "the problems and lives...of the working class" and offered labor drama as an alternative ("Labor Drama" 5). However, the plays she offered as fodder for this idea that drama more effectively took up working-class issues in no way addressed the lives of Southern workers. Titles included Paul Peters's *Stevedore*, Odets's *Waiting for Lefty*, Ernst Toller and Louis Untermeyer's *Man and the Masses* and Friedrich Wolf's *Floridsdorf*. These texts were, in many ways, worse than the

movies in addressing the lives of southern workers because even though popular movies failed to address workers' lives, at least they provided an escape from workers' day-to-day drudgery.[95] Ransdell's film alternatives were both oppressive and unapproachable. The US-centered titles represented narratives from the Northeastern industrial centers and dealt with dockworkers (*Stevedore*) and cab drivers (*Lefty*). The German plays by Toller and Wolf were even more obscure. *Man and the Masses* was based on the German workers' movement, and *Floridsdorf* chronicled the February Uprising of Viennese workers in 1934. While these titles might have been engaging for Ransdell as a highly educated journalist with roots in radical Left politics and experiences with European workers' movement, these plays were an undoubted misstep for hooking in her Southern students who had little context for US taxi cab drivers, let alone Viennese socialists.

Although classes continued in 1936, the stage was clearly being set for a transition to a coeducational program that radically altered the Southern Summer School's pedagogical function. Sensing this inevitable change, Ransdell dug in her heels regarding her desire to introduce students to "some of the outstanding modern plays" and use them criticize the "intent and value" of "other types of plays with which students are more familiar" (Ransdell "Dramatics" 1936 10). The tone of her dramatics reports during this period show an increasing desperation for maintaining the integrity of her program, an endeavor she had diligently nurtured for eight years. For example, she tersely insisted that her course "aims to develop confidence and self-expression in all the members of the group. A few of the students of course have more natural ability at acting than the others. If the aim of the course were to present a perfect performance as possible, these few would be selected and trained intensively to the neglect of the others" (Ransdell

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[95] For contextualization, Frank Capra's screwball romantic comedy about a cheeky heiress, *It Happened One Night,* swept the Academy awards in 1935.

"Dramatics" 1936 10). This quote points to increasing pressure to produce polished performances as part of the summer program, a point reinforced by the evaluation she wrote in 1936:

> Dramatics at a workers' school has a very different function than that of the usual dramatics course in schools and colleges, or in the typical little theatre movement. The emphasis in a workers' dramatics group or in labor drama as it is sometimes called, should be not so much upon technique, as such, [sic] as upon ideas, and how to present those ideas simple and tersely in dramatic form, and in a way that students with a working class background can understand and respond to emotionally. (Ransdell, "Dramatics" 1)

Clearly, the shifting pedagogical objectives of the Southern Summer School, the changing landscape of popular entertainment, and the pressures of to generate a product over engaging in a process weighed heavily on Ransdell. She ended her affiliation with both the Southern Summer School and with workers' education after the 1936 summer session.

Ransdell never worked in dramatics again. Instead, she returned to her activist/journalist roots by joining the staff of the *CIO News*, the official publication of the newly formed CIO (Cook 85-6; "Personals" 6). A few months prior, the AFL ousted CIO-affiliated unions from the federation, and this historic fracture marked, as Robert Zieger notes in his history of the CIO, increasing "politicization of organized labor," "recasting of racial and ethnic dynamics," and a new "openness to anticapitalist movements" (1-2). Ostensibly, Ransdell saw promise in the CIO for also continuing her work with women in the South, since the organization's openness created untold possibilities for new labor activism initiatives. However, this was all for naught. The CIO's founders, given their primary focus on industrial trades, maintained "traditionalist views

of the economic, social, and political roles for women" and thus, women were once again relegated to the periphery of the organization (Zieger 87). Ransdell published a few articles during her twenty years as assistant editor of the *CIO News*,[96] but based on titles alone, none of them seem as compelling as her plays or the essays she wrote in conjunction with the ILD.[97] In a particularly poignant and sad turn of events, Ransdell was discharged from her job under the guise of early retirement for participating in unapproved organizing in 1958. Accounts suggest that she "refused her gift" of a wristwatch "with much indignation" during the retirement ceremony (Cort 14). She did not publish again.

"That was a long time ago": Beyond the Southern Summer School

To close this essay, I return to the exchange between Mary Frederickson and Miriam Bonner Camp, one of the only sources that offers insight regarding Ransdell's personality or her students' opinion of her:

> *Mary Frederickson: I was interested in Hollace Ransdell's work with labor drama [Laughter]. How did the students react to her, to the plays?*
>
> *Miriam Bonner Camp: They enjoyed them; they were very enthusiastic.*
>
> *Mary Frederickson: Was she easy to work with?*

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[96] Later the publication was renamed *AFL-CIO News* once the organizations merged in 1955.

[97] It has been difficult to locate all of the articles she published as part of the *CIO News*, but some titles included, "Tomorrow's Factories Are Here Today with Automation-So Are New Problems for Labor, "Lack of Equality Hurts Canal Zone," and "Factory Din Splitting More Workers' Ears."

> *Miriam Bonner Camp: Well, I think she had certain standards, and was rather demanding, but I think they appreciated that because they got good results. She was a very able person.*
>
> *Mary Frederickson: What was Hollace Ransdell like?*
>
> *Miriam Bonner Camp: Oh, she was a charming person, very bright—very bright. That was a long time ago.* (Camp)

This exchange about Ransdell's charm, brightness, demanding nature, and ability coupled with the anecdote about her standing up at her retirement ceremony and indignantly rejecting her well-earned wristwatch, helps me make sense of Ransdell's decade-long detour into labor drama. Both moments suggest to me that Ransdell was a radical at her core. When she signed up to lead Southern Summer School labor drama programs, the hopes—the untold possibilities—for radical innovation through education and art were still very real possibilities, and Ransdell wanted a part of the action. Even though she resisted these radical tendencies in the Southern Summer School's early years, producing safe pageants and pedagogical vignettes of practical activism, over time, her views once again returned to her radical roots in organizations like the ILD and ACLU. Sadly, in the face of reawakened Red fear and the Great Depression's lingering influence on the labor movement, by the end of this adventure into labor drama, Ransdell was back where she started. Instead of radical art that agitated on behalf of, as Mary Frederickson states, "a major social change," she was producing simple dramas with women workers most interested in

producing a nice play that would showcase their virtuosity on the stage. And ASW director Eleanor Coit's watchful eye now monitored her work. The experience had to be demoralizing.

Perhaps these developments in Ransdell's life help explain why, just as she appeared poised to lead the field, her commitment so quickly waned in 1936.[98] Her few articles about the topic, "Amateur Dramatics" published in the 1936 ASW *Labor Drama Scrapbook* and "The Soapbox Theatre" published in an April 1935 edition *The Crisis*, offer additional insight. In her ASW article, Ransdell outlines the "confusion in many workers' minds" about why labor drama should be part of the workers' education:

> They do not see why it is necessary for them [labor plays] to be different from ordinary plays, and to be put in a class to themselves as though they were strange and outlandish things...They resent the idea that the theme or subject should deal with problems of their working lives. 'We are fed up on it. Give us something different,' they say, 'something romantic with love and excitement and thrills in it such as we see in the movies.' (Ransdell, "Amateur" 2)

Here, Ransdell clearly articulates the frustrations with which she wrestled during her final year at Southern Summer School. The tide of what theatre historian Thomas Postlewait's calls hieroglyphic stage "whereby a democratic or mass culture enters into a new kind of spectatorship, an optical culture defined by the reign of the eye and the seduction of images" overwhelmed Ransdell's commitment to culture reigned by the mind, by dialogue, and by rigorous engagement with real problems in order to change the world (188).[99] As Ransdell demanded engagement, her students begged for escape. With her students no longer interested in the labor drama, she had

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[98] In the ASW *Labor Drama* scrapbook, Ransdell is one of three authors with essays in the document.

[99] I return to Thomas Postlewait in my concluding chapter.

little reason to stick with her experiments. The practice of self-reflection she cultivated as Southern Summer School labor dramatics instructor ultimately led her to leave the profession. She chose to abandon her efforts in labor drama in the hopes of making a difference elsewhere.

Despite her decision to leave the field, she acknowledged new avenues for this kind of work, particularly in the Civil Rights movement, In “The Soapbox Theatre,” which appeared in the NAACP publication, *The Crisis*, she discussed the use of activist drama in Southern African American communities. She also identified the next frontiers in the fight for labor drama’s legitimacy—a fight of which she ultimately opted out:

> The battle that goes on among the intellectuals as to whether or not propaganda can also be art passes over the heads of most members of the labor drama classes...they are far too modest to dream of claiming that their simple, spontaneous, and impromptu performances come anywhere near the august realm of art. (Ransdell “Soapbox” 125)

Perhaps the struggle to place these workers’ dramas into the category of art, education, or something new and undefined also vexed Ransdell, and she ultimately moved to a discipline, labor journalism, that made clear the delineation between what counted as art and what did not. For whatever reason, Ransdell’s infatuation with labor drama ended quietly and she slowly drifted into obscurity even as she continued to seek out opportunities for activism at *The CIO News*. Ransdell and the ladies of the Southern Summer School demonstrate the risks and rewards of asking “Perhaps?”

Chapter Four: Lee Hays, a Preaching Hillbilly, and the FBI: The Last Gasps of Labor Drama at Commonwealth Labor College, 1937-9

"Occupational therapy is not our function."- Lee Hays ("Dramatics" 2)

"This institution for a number of years has been brought to the attention of this Office and of the Bureau from time to time as being a Communistic institution" –Fred Halford, Special Agent In Charge (Arkansas), Federal Bureau of Investigation

A story of evangelical preachers, real-deal communists, and an FBI investigation defines this examination of labor drama's evolution during the interwar period. Looking at courses in labor dramatics at Commonwealth College in rural Mena, Arkansas reveals the increasing radicalization of pedagogic drama in residential labor colleges. This increasing radicalization also draws attention to challenges associated with workers' theatre programs that demanded revolutionary change from dominant structures, even as those structures turned against the labor movement. Commonwealth labor drama between 1937-9 serves as a case study of the last gasps of pedagogic drama experiments in labor colleges and suggests new avenues for exploring legacies of these programs. Commonwealth Labor College (Commonwealth), an institution that focused on educating students about the needs of agricultural workers in the racially divided and socially conservative southern US, formed in 1923 and closed in 1940. The school was the longest running residential labor college, and when it closed, it was the last of its kind. The founders, Kate O'Hare and William Zeuch, former students of Ruskin College, aimed to create a secular labor college comfortably grounded in the Democratic Socialist Party's political views

that also left open a space for a diversity of approaches for studying the labor movement.[100] The pair started their program, a residential agriculture-based commune-style school with a four-year curriculum in labor studies, in the Ouachita Mountains of northern Louisiana. After a tumultuous and transitive beginning, the college relocated several times, finally settling in Mena, Arkansas in December 1924.[101]

Tracing the year-to-year history of Commonwealth is challenging since, as will be shown, Polk County police destroyed all of the school's records in the 1940s. The few studies of the school, William H. Cobb's quite detailed book, *Radical Education in the Rural South* and Commonwealth leaders Raymond and Charlotte Koch's *Educational Commune*, and the school's paper, *The Fortnightly*, provide the best information about the goings-on at the school. Commonwealth had a working farm designed to support the school's self-sufficiency, and all students and staff, including faculty, were expected to earn their keep through manual labor on the farm. Cobb suggests that Commonwealth covered around seventy percent of expenses through the college's agriculture programs (111). Students paid little in tuition (fifty dollars a semester), but faculty received no compensation. Most students and staff were young—the youngest of any group considered in this study— with almost everyone being under forty. The school was coeducational, and student cohorts averaged between forty and fifty students. Most students came from the northeast or Midwest (Cobb 113).[102] Students' schedules included class

[100] Ruskin College, named after John Ruskin, was a British workers' college formed in 1899 in Oxford. It became a model for workers' education. See Valerie Quinney's article, "Workers' Education: A Confrontation at Ruskin College" (53-5).

[101]See Cobb's discussion for additional detail about the school's founding (36-45) and his discussion of life as Commoner (111-26).

[102] See discussion in *Educational Commune* about the school as well (Koch and Koch 36-50; 85-93; 130-3)

in the morning, farm work in the middle of the day, and informal study and recreation in the evening.

Commonwealth was arguably one of the most fascinating labor education institutions for one important reason: the school tolerated the missions of radical leftist political groups despite its location in rural, racially divided, and religiously conservative Polk County, Arkansas. Given these realities, Commonwealth was and continues to be a radical anomaly within Arkansas's history. In regards to its support of leftist political groups, even though the school endorsed no official doctrine, calling itself, like many other programs, a "non-sectarian, non-propaganda institution" that "sponsors no particular religion, political or economic dogma," school founders and almost all participants maintained beliefs in radical Left political and ideological philosophies. Most often, these views derived from the radical arms of communism and socialism.[103] Unexpectedly, the predominance of communist and socialist beliefs on campus created strife for the school given the surrounding conservative community. Accordingly, Commonwealth proved an ever-present Red thorn in the conservative side of many a rural Arkansan between 1922 and 1940. The presence of self-proclaimed socialists, communists, Independents, and Trade Unionists— from the north!— inspired outrage from the staunchly Democratic and fervently anti-union Arkansans who lived near the school.

Of course, many of the allegations lobbied against Commonwealth from the locals *were* true. The school taught Marxism, harbored communists, organized agricultural unions, fought for racial integration of labor organizations, and generally displayed a shockingly honest approach to

[103] Even though the small institution maintained a philosophy supporting total academic, religious, and political freedom for the worker/students who attended, in reality, this supposed freedom made room only for left-leaning, politically-minded worker-students. Religious and political conservatives, coeds, and "sex experimenters" were summarily denied admission or quickly booted from the school (Fulks qtd. in Cobb 115).

living one's radical Left beliefs. With this commitment to leftist politics, Commonwealth fared poorly at mitigating attacks on its reputation, a point to which I will speak later in the chapter, particularly toward the end of its tenure in Polk County. Since the basic truths supporting most of the local attacks were true, Commonwealth's leadership found it difficult to refute them. For example, how could they convince their religiously conservative neighbors that the school did not endorse atheistic communism when the school's director, in sworn testimony to the Arkansas legislature, self-identified as an anti-Capitalist atheist who supported communist ideology?[104] In total, the school was simply in direct ideological and political opposition to the community that surrounded it.

The school did not help its case with the locals by failing to form lasting, meaningful ties to the surrounding community. While the college attracted a diversely leftist student body mostly from the north and west, it infrequently attracted southern students who could provide a connection to the local Arkansans. As a result, the school warranted much unwanted attention from the locals and regularly defended itself against charges of being a free-love, atheistic commune harboring communist terrorists. The Red threat of tiny Commonwealth College attracted so much attention that local, state and government agencies like the Arkansas State Assembly and the FBI started to monitor and actively attempted to close the school.

Unfortunately, Commonwealth's surrounding community was only one factor threatening the school's existence. When the Commoners, a catch-all term for students, staff, and faculty of Commonwealth College, were not alienating the surrounding community, they spent a large amount of time responding to internal fractures amongst the student body and school leadership. Many of these problems arose from the students attracted to Commonwealth's school's doctrine, which, in theory, positioned the school as utopic space of educational freedom. As with most

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[104] See the testimony's transcript in Cobb's book (149-54).

utopias, Commonwealth's operated most effectively in the abstract. In reality, students, most often young labor activists between ages eighteen and twenty-five, arrived on campus with remarkable passion for study of the many facets of the labor movement. The school's bucolic setting in rural Arkansas combined with its promise of no-doctrine education and opportunities for work and study of the Southern labor movement attracted these energetic, outspoken young people. Unfortunately, these passionate students often fell into the just-enough-knowledge-to-be-dangerous trap and perpetually organized attempts to radicalize and re-radicalize the school, much to the consternation of faculty and school leadership. One exasperated teacher spoke to this concern in an anonymously written 1933 article designed to recruit new teachers: "Many Commonwealth students consider themselves more mature politically than the liberal and would think of themselves as having something to teach him rather than something to learn from him" ("On Being" 2). These "politically mature" students regularly attempted to redefine and reshape the school via Commonwealth's admirable, but largely ineffective and time-consuming governing structure by which the whims of students and staff received attention, no matter how extreme the idea.

Given this open-door policy in regards to school governance, at any point in Commonwealth's existence, the school's leadership was engaged in a lead up to, fallout from, or an immediate crisis emergent from student uprisings. Students called for more (or less) political activism on the part of the college, more (or less) authoritative leadership, more (or less) representation by students on the governing board, and more formal (or less formal) affiliations with different labor organizations and political groups, in addition to a myriad of other concerns.[105] In fact, these uprisings were so common they might be seen as the only constant experience shared by Commoners during the school's seventeen-year existence. These internal

conflicts, discussed with greater specificity in regards to labor dramatics later in the chapter, created tensions so great that students struck against the college, faculty abandoned teaching in support of students, labor organizations severed ties with the college, and leadership was forced out. In defending the school's egalitarian no-official-doctrine values, Commonwealth leadership constantly negotiated the complicated task of governance in the face of their students' radical ideologies about education, politics, and activism.

In addition to external attacks from the Mena community and internal attacks from politically mobilized students, Commonwealth also cautiously navigated geopolitical instability in the period between the World Wars. The unfinished business of World War I shifted popular opinion of leftist politics and labor activism from skepticism toward hysteria, particularly in response to Germany and the Soviet Union developing allegiances with one another by the end of the 1930s. While the US had never fully integrated leftist or radical political groups, with the Palmer raids, the first Red scare, and the government crackdown on the IWW's communist contingency still very vivid memories from the prior decade, New Deal legislation opened space for more tolerant attitudes toward communist and socialist ideologies in government. Nevertheless, fear of the Soviet republic never drifted far from view. Even though Red fear had subsided somewhat between the mid-1920s and mid- 1930s, by 1936, the US once again looked toward the Soviet Union with increasing suspicion.[106]

This nervous distrust toward the Soviet regime, and, by proxy, the communist ideologies found in Marxist-Leninism philosophies, increased with Stalin's purge of Red Army military leaders in 1937, followed by the Great Purge in 1938. The situation grew even tenser with the

[106] Of particular note, the Stalin constitution, a document redefining government in the Soviet state under Stalin's rule that was initially viewed as important step forward for communist/socialist rule, was signed that same year.

signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-aggression Pact in August of 1939, only weeks before the British declared war on Germany. With the Soviets aligning themselves with the Nazi regime, US citizens and leadership easily conflated the oft-suspect tenets of m, once in direct opposition to the Axis powers, with fascist rule. As a result of these actions, the US zeroed in on the Soviet regime and its supposed goal of integrating Marxist/Leninist philosophies into US politics as a clear and present danger.

Given this newly reawakened Red fear, interest in or association with communism in the US during the mid-1930s once again proved dangerous, particularly for members of the increasingly politicized labor movement. Predictably, opponents of labor, namely conservatives and anti-New Deal Republicans still reeling from labor's influence on a second devastating loss during the 1936 presidential campaign, picked up on the sublimated Red fear that once again bubbled to the surface. They began an aggressive campaign to reignite anti-communist fervor (Dulles 315; van Elteren 80-2). In this campaign, conservative anti-labor leaders correctly— albeit nefariously— directed attention to communism's influence within labor's leadership. As a result, politically influential labor organizations like the newly formed CIO, the Labor Non-Partisan League, the American Labor Party, the United Automobile Workers, and other groups fell under intense scrutiny for their inclusion of communist Party members within their organizations (Dulles 315-7; Dray 444-5; van Eltern 78-80).[107] The adversarial relationship and resulting factionalism, feuding, and in-fighting between the AFL and CIO, discussed in greater detail in the opening chapter, further complicated the role of labor organizations between 1936 and 1939.

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[107] According to van Elteren, by 1937, Communist Party members held leadership positions in 40 percent of CIO-affiliated unions (79).

Back in Arkansas...

Somehow, in the midst of all this chaos, Commonwealth College, a tiny institution with a student body never exceeding sixty students and faculty made up entirely of volunteers, set out to navigate these forces and continue its mission of developing future leaders of the labor movement. Labor drama was an integral part of this curriculum, and labor drama's ultimate failure at Commonwealth derives from a grim confluence of the aforementioned factors. Clearly, Commonwealth faced uphill battles of Sisyphean proportions. These internal and external factors converged in a moment of crisis for the school in 1937. From the Mena community, Reverend Luther D. Summers, pastor of Mena's First Baptist Church, launched a full-scale attack on the school in September of 1936 by preaching weekly sermons about the evils of Commonwealth (Cobb 173). Commonwealth's paper, *The Fortnightly*, documented Summers's attack in articles entitled "Bearing False Witness from the Pulpit" (2-3), "The One Man Circus" (1;4), and "Preaches Violent Sermons" (2). The shifting tone of these articles, from humorous, sarcastic descriptions of Summers as "a magician at a carnival" pulling "another Red Herring" from his hat ("Circus" 1), to "Reverend Summers repeatedly accuses the school of being atheistic, godless, communistic, socialistic, believing in free love, Negro equality . . . Virtually every Sunday sermon delivered by Reverend Summers within the past four months has sought to build up hatred against the college" ("Preaches" 2), demonstrates the growing intensity of Summers's campaign against Commonwealth. The Summers threat grew so significant that Commoners issued a request for readers of the school paper to write the Mena Chamber of Commerce "urging action to stop Summers' violent attacks" ("Preaches" 4). By January of 1937, the student

body and school leadership, once bemusedly annoyed by Summers's antics, now considered the fallout from Reverend Summer's attack a serious threat to the school's existence.

Commoners were right to fear Summers. In September of 1937, he published a free fifteen-page pamphlet entitled "Communism and Commonwealth College Unmasked" as a compendium to his sermons. In it, Summers asserted:

> "When this institution was first established in Polk County, Arkansas, the citizens were lead to believe that it was a school in which poor boys and girls could obtain an education with little expense; that is, if they were willing to work part of their time. The citizens of Polk County welcomed such an institution, feeling that it would be a blessig [sic] to their people. It finally dawned on the citizens of Mena and Polk County that this was an institution in which radicals were being trained to further the cause of Communism in this state and other states..."

The tract continues, describing the prior year's investigation of the school by Arkansas's General Assembly, at which Lucien Koch, the school's vibrant 23-year-old director from 1931-5, testified that the school was supposedly, "atheistic...that Communism was being taught and that revolutionary movements were being organized among the student body and morals were at a very low ebb" (Summers 11).[108] Summers was correct in his assertions about much of Koch's testimony; Koch *had* asserted his personal atheism, denied belief in Capitalism "as it now operated," admitted to socialist and communist factions on the campus, and even admitted to seeing "indecent activities" and "illegal co-habitation" at the school (Cobb 150-3).[109] However, Summers's twist of Koch's testimony toward an image of Commonwealth as radical anarchist

[108] See Cobb's additional discussion of Summers's attack on the school (172-5)

[109] Read a substantial portion of the transcript of the testimony in Cobb's book (149-53)

training ground that immediately threatened the Mena community was a gross exaggeration. Still, the fallout from the provocative testimony accompanied by Summer's pulpit attack on the school resulted in the Arkansas State Assembly announcing a new sedition bill that directly targeted the school in 1937. The bill, coupled with a newly formed Summers-led "Citizens' Committee" focused on closing the school, caused *The Fortnightly* to announce, "The college is again under fire from its enemies" (*"*Preaches" 2).[110]

Summers's campaign against Commonwealth was just the tip of the iceberg. From within Commonwealth, a group of militant communist students had grown so powerful that they all but forced out the already-quite-radical aforementioned director, Lucien Koch, in September of 1935 (Cobb 167; Koch and Koch 187-95). With the departure of charismatic and popular Director Koch, a power vacuum resulted. Unfortunately, this vacuum came into existence at the exact moment when Commonwealth garnered increased national radical-left attention as southern communist enclave, much to the chagrin of school supporters and allied labor organizations like the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). Given the bourgeoning national fear of communism, these Southern labor organizations viewed any association with communism as a threat to their work and thus they threatened to sever ties with the school if the radical faction of students were not dealt with by school administration. Several new directors stepped up, starting with Richard Babb Whitten, a moderate socialist handpicked by the recently departed Koch (Cobb 168). Whitten was charged with the task of ridding the campus of its communist faction, but this task was much too difficult, and he remained for less than a year, passing off his duties to Charlotte Moskowitz, the school's administrator and an undoubted sympathizer with the school's communists (Cobb 172; Koch and Koch 196-200). After Whitten's departure, a

[110] The school had previously been targeted Representative Gooch via a failed sedition bill in 1935 (Cobb 173).

tumultuous director's search commenced, ending with the controversial appointment of Arkansas's own "Preaching Hillbilly," Reverend Claude Williams, in August of 1937. Reverend Williams acted as a surprising catalyst for revolutionizing drama at Commonwealth.

Williams, a forty-two year old Presbyterian minister from Tennessee, had a notable track record of political activism. The Arkansas presbytery had booted Williams from his church for preaching to mixed-race congregations, he served jail time for organizing on behalf of unemployed agricultural workers, and he collaborated with STFU and the American Federation of Teachers on organizing workers' education for sharecroppers of all races ("Williams Active" 4). In 1936, the year prior to Williams's appointment as director, he had famously endured a beating from Tennessee law enforcement on his way to eulogize a murdered African-American sharecropper in Memphis.[111] Williams's social justice pedigree combined with his deep commitment to his Christian faith positioned The Preaching Hillbilly as solid choice for the school's new leader.

However, Reverend Williams faced a pitched battle. The goal of reorganizing Commonwealth to eliminate the communist influence meant boisterous, outspoken Williams would be introduced as a de-radicalizing force, an odd role for such an outspoken personality with clear ties to practically all radical Left political movements in the South— including communism ("Announce" 1). Even Moskowitz, the aforementioned secretary and Communist sympathizer and her husband, Raymond Koch, the former director's brother, asserted in their memoir, "It was Claude's dubious luck to be available at that particular time" (Koch and Koch

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[111] See additional resources, including Cedric Belfrage's laudatory biography, *South of God* (1941), Harold Preece's entry on Williams in *The Crisis's* article, "The South Stirs—The Pulpit and the New South" (1941), Robert H. Craig's discussion of Williams in *Religion and Radical Politics* (144-230), as well the Claude Williams papers held at the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan for additional information about Williams.

197). Given the increasingly tense factionalism amongst the different personalities working in southeastern labor politics, the diminished funds available as the school reorganized and sought new financial donors with less radical political ties, not to mention a shift in the labor college's role in response to the CIO and programs like the Works Progress Administration brought about by New Deal legislation, Williams was doomed to fail.[112]

The Preaching Hillbilly's Dramatic Influence

Even though Williams failed to save Commonwealth, the new charismatic leader inadvertently revolutionized labor drama programs at the school. Drama had existed at Commonwealth in a variety of forms since the program settled in Polk County; however, by 1936, the school's drama program, like the school itself, struggled to find its footing given the discontinuity of leadership. Between 1932 and 1936, the school hosted at least eight different volunteer dramatics instructors of various backgrounds, from students studying theatre at other four-year universities to directors working regularly in workers' theatre on Broadway.[113] The lack of a consistent dramatics instructor resulted in a somewhat schizophrenic drama program during the period before Williams's tenure.

Still, within the Commoner community, labor drama was an integral component of the school's cultural life from the beginning. In the school's early days, participation in mounting full-length productions was a popular extracurricular activity for students. For example, in 1926, the first year Commonwealth published *The Fortnightly,* Commoners produced at least two full-length productions under the direction of Alice Hanson, the public speaking teacher: Kichizo

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[112] See Cobb's discussion for additional details regarding the intricacies of these issues (175-84).

[113] See Appendix X for a timeline and biography of each dramatics instructor.

Nakamura's *The Razor* with "clear traces of the influence of Ibsen and Strindberg" ("Society" 2; "Student-Workers" 1) and Nicholas Evreinov's *The Merry Death* ("School" 1*)*.[114] The next year, Helen Bellman, wife of the school's Executive Secretary and sociology instructor, supervised drama as part of her music program at the school. She directed Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon,* which included a backdrop of "tan blankets" and a resourceful cast of four that "surmounted the property difficulties" ("Irish" 1). By 1929, the "monthly theatrical in the Commons" appeared as regularly scheduled component of campus life ("Irish" 1). In addition to formal productions, early Commoners regularly incorporated collaborative, informal works into school celebrations like May Day, holiday celebrations or school-closing festivities. Mass recitations, dramatic readings, original farces, minstrel performances, satirical skits about campus life, and other variety acts featured regularly in the monthly theatrical sharings.[115] Overall, drama was an integral component in early Commoners' lives.

A series of "stunt" plays were the most interesting early performances in regards to drama for pedagogical purposes. These stunts, practical jokes through performance, incorporated playful uses of the agit-prop fourth-wall-busting techniques celebrated in many well known worker's theatre productions like *Waiting for Lefty*.[116] In regards to the mechanics, dramatics students identified moments of oppression specific to campus life and employed theatre to open a dialogue amongst the school community. In the following example, William Zeuch, the school's

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[114] See Appendix Y for a complete list of Commonwealth productions.

[115] Some examples include a Thanksgiving "farce in which students aped the foibles of their campus elders" ("Party" 3), two original dramas based on *Charge of the Light Brigade* presented at the December student program ("Students Sing" 1), and a lecture on Greek drama's role in the labor movement ("Seminar" 1).

[116] See Lee Papa's discussion of the legacies of interactive techniques in his article "We gotta make up our minds": *Waiting for Lefty*, workers' theatre performance and audience identification." (68-9)

first director, helps students explore the tensions between the open-minded student body and his stodgy reputation as a social conservative:

> A kimonoed woman, yawning, opens the door of her apartment. A young man enters, embraces her. Pantomimes that he would like to remain for the night. The woman gives him a pair of pajamas. He goes into another room, returns decently pajamaed. They embrace again, are about to walk off stage when the door smashes open. A man rushes toward the couple..."Here, here !" Father Zeuch protests from the audience. "This sort of thing won't do!" The audience is thrown into an articulate confusion. The indignant actors, Irving Weissman, Fannie Schlefstein and Herman Erickson remonstrate and demand a hearing of their pantomime. The audience shouts, "Go ahead!" The actors now speak their parts and unfold the prosaic story of a young brother who "runs in" on his married sister unexpectedly, asks to be put up for the night, is loaned his brother-in-law's pajamas, and meets the brother-in-law himself just as he is about to go off to bed. The spectators laughed, ignorant of the fact that Father Zeuch was "planted" in the audience and that the point of the skit depended upon his conscientious objection. (“Zeuch”1)

In this example, Father Zeuch plays himself from the audience, interrupting the supposedly salacious skit and attempting to censor it. The students plead their case, causing Zeuch to concede and allow the performance to continue, where it turns out, nothing scandalous occurs. In performance, the stunt becomes a performative pedagogic tool. Students engage in the process of overturning the dominant power structure even though the power structure, stodgy Father Zeuch, is in on the joke and allows himself to lose his power and be proved wrong by the students. Only after the performance ends, via the school newspaper and likely via campus rumors about Zeuch’s involvement, do the students realize they have been stunted. Although no record exists

documenting any conversations about this particular stunt, the performance creates a space for students to engage with the ethical, aesthetic, or pedagogical implications of the acts being performed, which very likely took place given the focus of the school's dialectical model of instruction. This example demonstrates how pedagogic drama techniques worked in tandem with early dramatics at the school.

Even though many of Commonwealth's early efforts in drama demonstrate how performance techniques supported the school's overarching objectives of open education via experimentation, it appears that Commoners concerned themselves little with the artistic quality of their productions. Instead, these programs supported community development on the campus, with students and staff sharing responsibilities of devising, producing, acting and technical production with limited resources. The content focused on political themes cogent to Commoners' studies in regards to labor issues or on the day-to-day life of Commonwealth. Aesthetic quality was secondary to community-building and pedagogic objectives. This early paradigm for labor dramatics as an inclusive, proudly amateur extracurricular activity endured throughout the school's existence and created a point of contention for later dramatics instructors who hoped to evolve the quality of Commoner dramatics.

As the extracurricular drama program thrived, the school's leadership incorporated an explicitly pedagogical component to the program as well. The study of drama as a curriculum appeared in several formats in the school's early years. Commonwealth's early curricula included a course in Modern Drama, a literature-based course oscillating between an official offering and an elective in the first few years of the school (*Fortnightly* 4/1/29 1; *Fortnightly* 12/1/29 3). Literary, text-focused drama that predominated the school's earliest full-length productions, like aforementioned productions of Lady Gregory and Evreinov, reflect the largely

traditional Modern Drama class's influence, as well as the predominance of these text-based dramatics courses in higher education at the time. The school even requested dramatic literature from "Strindberg, Porto-Riche, Widekind [sic], Pinski, Benavente, Pirandello, Molnar, and Andreyev" in a notice asking for new materials ("For" 2). However, Modern Drama courses were no longer offered by 1931, the same year *The Fortnightly* first employed the term "labor dramatics" in connection with the school's theatrical goings-on ("Commonwealth College" 3). In this reference to labor dramatics, authors describe an "extracurricular" program offered alongside reading groups, writing clubs and a "modern poetry circle" ("Commonwealth College" 3). This shift away from a literature course to a program in labor dramatics corresponded with the school's founding director, the aforementioned Father Zeuch, departing Commonwealth and a new guard, led by the aforementioned Lucien Koch, taking over leadership. With Koch's more spirited and more radical leadership, a new focus on labor activism also emerged, with an accompanying philosophical shift in school's curricula whereby "education now presumed action" (Cobb 135). With the new focus on education as action, labor drama, with its potential to inspire activism, also emerged as an integral part of the school curriculum.

Throughout the early 1930s, school catalogs listed Labor Dramatics as an extracurricular program, hinting toward a full course in labor drama. For example, a 1933 course description offers the following note: "If there is sufficient demand, courses of study will be worked out for those interested in labor drama" ("Three" 4). And course announcements in the *Fortnightly* stated that Beatrice Carlson, "who is in charge of the work in labor drama, will direct a number of plays. All members of the group will be invited to participate in this dramatic work." ("Seven" 1) In the fall of 1934, teachers at Commonwealth listed Labor Drama as uniquely categorized courses "in that they are carried on by the entire group under the direction of a faculty member"

("Quarter" 1). Here, the shift in language from description of the program as an extracurricular activity to a course/extracurricular hybrid can be seen. In these examples, labor drama's evolution from a social extracurricular to an integral pedagogic component of the school curriculum becomes more clear. The shift in Labor Drama's course categorization in the early 1930s foreshadows the official announcement of a labor drama class in Fall 1935 under Peter Frye's direction.

Frye's arrival signaled a shift in labor drama's importance on the campus since he was the first dramatics instructor with extensive teaching experience specific to drama curricula. Prior to Frye's arrival, the dramatics instructor position, when not tacked on to other instructors' responsibilities, often fell to the wives of male instructors at the school. For instance, Modern Drama was taught by both "Mrs. John Kirkpatrick," the Modern History teacher's wife ("'Lock-Step'" 1-2), and Helen Marcel Bellman, wife of Earl S. Bellman, the school's executive secretary ("Helen" 2). Both taught the Modern Drama course as an ancillary interest to their work in music at the school. Later, Beatrice Carlson, wife of the school's Marxism teacher, Oliver Carlson, oversaw drama between 1932-3 ("Three" 1). Like previous instructors, Carlson lacked expertise in drama and primarily taught English. As a result, the school promoted her as "active in directing amateur dramatics" in school catalogs, a clear nod toward her lack of advanced-level drama training ("Catalog 1933").

Other instructors included wives of students, like Alice Ettinger, wife of Manfred Ettinger; students with other interests, like Agnes "Sis" Cunningham, who specialized in music; and occasionally former students who dabbled in drama, as in the case of instructor Vaughn Alberston, an English professor at University of Texas who directed the dramatics program

during the 1932 Summer quarter ("Neighbors" 1; "'1931'" 1; "Commoner" 1).[117] The few exceptions to the predominance of amateur instructors who led Commonwealth's drama program included Ben Low, a working theatre professional interested in the Leftist theatre movement who drifted over to Commonwealth after spending time at the socialist colony New Llano Cooperative Community in Louisiana ("Ben" 2).[118] Overall, most of the dramatics instructors came to Commonwealth with labor drama as a secondary interest in their larger careers or areas of study.

Peter Frye's appointment to instructor in 1935 changed this trend. Frye, a Canadian who moved to New York City in his late teens, worked extensively in Leftist theatre movements during the first half of the twentieth century. He studied with Michael Chekhov and taught Drama at the American Theatre Wing and at Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop in the New School for Social Research in New York after his time at Commonwealth. Also, like so many others discussed in this study, he fell under suspicion for communist sympathies during the McCarthy era and as a result of blacklisting, he immigrated to Israel in 1954. There, he led Tel Aviv University's drama department until his death in 1991 (Kronish 182). Despite this remarkable resume, when twenty-year-old Frye arrived at Commonwealth, he was a young artist just starting his exploration of leftist theatre practices. The young instructor demonstrated unprecedented experience in theatre and a complex understanding of the ideological and pedagogical complexities present in the study of labor dramatics. The new Drama instructor's credentials as published in *The Fortnightly* reflect as much: "A background of seven years of

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[117] Sis Cunningham was one of the few Arkansan students and sister to Bill Cunningham. She later became a famous folk singer.

[118] A connection with the New Llano colony in Louisiana was one of the reasons Commonwealth first set up a school in this region, but this relationship grew rapidly strained, and Commonwealth relocated to Arkansas.

varied theatrical experience (four of them spent in teaching), [he] comes to direct Commonwealth dramatics 'keenly interested in experimentation along the line of finding new American theatre-forms in the light of the political need for more articulate dramatic expression'" ("Myra" 1; 4). The rest of this description, a detailed and theoretically sophisticated narrative about Frye's specific interest in Labor Drama, reveals a shift in thinking regarding Commonwealth's Labor Drama program. Instead of a community-building extracurricular, it could also be a pedagogically valuable course that supported the labor movement's needs and the school's mission of education as action.

During Frye's tenure, labor drama finally secured legitimacy on campus by earning a place in the regular curriculum. The paper announced, "Labor Drama under Peter Frye is now a full-time part of the curriculum, with regular class periods, an advance from its former status as an evening and spare-time activity" (Frye "Commonwealth" 2). This announcement was accompanied by a lengthy course description, the thesis presented with concise clarity: "A formal course in labor drama at Commonwealth must in this sense at least be largely experimental" (Frye "Commonwealth" 2). He continues, identifying four guiding principles:

> a) The students are essentially non-actors.
>
> b) None of them has the signal intention of leaving the college to engage solely in the work of building the workers' theaters.
>
> c) Most students seek only an elementary knowledge of theater-practice as an aid in some other task.
>
> d) The aim of the course will therefore be to adapt the theory and practice of revolutionary theater to the particular requirements of Commonwealth students without, however, telescoping our artistic principles. (Frye "Commonwealth" 2)

In these principles, Frye outlines an admirably ambitious plan regarding his approach to teaching at the college. However, Frye's insightful, inspiring, and somewhat idealistically naive ideas about drama failed to materialize in any significant form.

In total, Frye directed two productions, only one of which included original or experimental material, and he departed the school by the Spring quarter of 1936.[119] For his productions, Frye played it safe, producing Odets' iconic *Waiting For Lefty*, in November of 1935, ten months after the Group Theatre's January premiere in New York City.[120] Given the popularity of *Lefty* by the latter half of 1935, it is not surprising that Frye produced this work. In fact, Ben Low, the previous instructor, had already produced scenes from *Left*y during the summer ("Rhythmic" 4). In a review of Frye's production, Clay Fulks, longtime faculty member and drama supporter on campus, lauded the school's performance, enthusiastically asserting that it "embraces a new 'verve and realism' causing the audience to rise en masse and shout STRIKE! *Waiting for Lefty* certainly deserves its fame..." (Fulks 4).[121] However, Fulks's review reflects the mythic reputation of *Waiting for Lefty* instead of specifically addressing Commonwealth's production.

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[119] Frye's widow, British actress Thelma Ruby, who co-authored a biography with Frye, cannot remember Frye ever mentioning Commonwealth. When I contacted her to learn if he had discussed his time at the school or why he left, she was insistent that I had my Peter Fryes confused.

[120] While ten months might seem a short time to consider a play a safe bet, particularly in regards to labor drama scripts, *Waiting for Lefty's* popularity in 1935 was spectacular, allowing for more than seventy-eight performances and securing its place as the iconic text, if one could ever exist, of the Labor Drama movement. The production had received a New York Times review that asserted, that the show "is clearly one of the most thorough, trenchant jobs in the school of revolutionary drama" (Atkinson). By this point in 1935, everyone in labor drama circles knew *Waiting For Lefty*. It had even been published in *New Theatre* magazine in 1935 after winning the magazine's play contest (Evans).

[121] As an example of Fulks's commitment to drama, in 1930, he asked for and received a seven-month leave to manage "a little theatre" in Tulsa, OK. ("Fulks" 2)

After his assessment of *Lefty*, Fulks transitions to critique Frye's sister production, a "new adaptation" of Erskine Caldwell's short story, *Daughter*. Fulks offer a much less celebratory review of *Daughter*, describing it as "far inferior" despite some good performances by a few students, one of which "handled the crow-bar at the jail door with the resolution of a bold and intrepid proletarian" (1/1/36 4). Fulks continues with a rather inflammatory critique of the play, a text that suffered from the same problem as many labor drama productions that were "too obviously the work of over-ambitious adolescents:"

> The main character is 'a simp almost too weak to win any respectful sympathy'; it is not necessary to make the sharecropper out a stark simpleton in any effort to win sympathy for him. In the first place the typical Southern sharecropper is not a simpleton and, in the second place, readers and audiences, taken by and large, don't waste good sympathy on congenital simps-- there are too many deserving Democrats. It is the actual condition of millions of sharecroppers of something like normal human intelligence and of at least a modicum of strength of character-- a condition apparently hopeless under capitalism-- that calls for the highest efforts of the literary workers. (Fulks 4)

Fulks's devastatingly lackluster assessment of Frye's new work was a common critique found in more formal Workers' Theatre. The plays often reduce the complexities of workers' struggles to polemic didacticism, and they depicted laborers as hyperbolized archetypes and oversimplified their struggles into clear, good-versus-evil plots. However, this critique was a low blow for a brand new instructor clearly interested in experimental initiatives. While Frye fell victim to the same problem of melodrama and didacticism, this was a likely consequence of his first play on campus seeing that he was, in fact, an "over-ambitious adolescent" at the start of his career.

Perhaps this critique by Fulks discouraged Frye, since he left quietly by the summer quarter and never made mention of his work at Commonwealth again.

Despite his mistakes, Frye's impact on the campus dramatics program boosted its popularity. By the start of Claude Williams's official tenure as director in the fall of 1937, the program had grown quite popular not only on the campus, but in the surrounding communities and within other labor education circles as well. Unlike most of the problems related the school's geography, in this instance, location worked in Commonwealth's favor. In rural Arkansas, quality entertainment, particularly of the theatrical variety, was in short supply, and local community members positively received the Saturday night theatrical to which they were invited on a regular basis. Frye expanded the Saturday night event to include productions off campus. Although he had not managed to overcome the common traps in crafting his scripts, he had managed to reach out to the Polk county community and produced both *Waiting for Lefty* and *Daughter* for local residents ("Drama Group" 1). Frye's precedent of sharing the school's productions with the community served as one of the most important outreach tools as Commonwealth transitioned to the Williams era.

In the summer of 1937, Commonwealth student Mara Alexander (Gilbert) took the helm of theatrical production, extending Frye's work. Alexander had extensive theatrical experience; she had acted on Broadway, organized on behalf of the Theatre Union, and directed her own troupe called the Contemporary Players ("Students to" 3).[122] Alexander's biography marks a shift of the kinds of students attracted to Commonwealth in regards to theatre. Instead of taking over drama as an ancillary interest, Gilbert arrived at Commonwealth as a student with a strong

[122] She later founded the Bay Area Actor's Laboratory, which, like its more notorious sister, the Hollywood-based Actor's Lab, came under fire during the McCarthy era for teaching Communist philosophies ("Communist").

background in theatre. With this respectable resume in actor training and professional theatre, Gilbert moved beyond acting and directing and explored her interest in teaching while at Commonwealth. Even though her work at the school appears haphazard, perhaps the result of her taking over the summer theatre programs as a student volunteer during a period where no instructor was on staff, she managed to keep the program afloat for several months until Williams arrived. One of the Preaching Hillbilly's first tasks was to call twenty-two-year-old Lee Hays to take over dramatics courses.

The Preaching Hillbilly, The Lonesome Traveler, and "Ninety-Seven Cents"

Lee Hays, the self-titled Lonesome Traveler best known for his involvement with Pete Seeger in folk band The Weavers, found himself teaching drama to a group of radical young people in rural Arkansas at age twenty-two. He was the most unlikely candidate for the position of dramatics instructor in the school's history, even among the plethora of wives and students who defaulted into drama at Commonwealth, but he was also the most famous and the most uniformly beloved instructors associated with Commonwealth College. Hays's biography follows a similar trope to many considered in this research. As a young man, Hays committed himself to social justice issues. This commitment contributed to his work in The Weavers, a musical group who inspired a generation of young people to activism via folk music. As part of his work fighting society's injustices, he also sympathized with Leftist and radical political movements. Consequently, he fell victim to the systemic blacklisting of politically engaged artists during the 1950s and was forced into relative obscurity until McCarthyism subsided. Afterwards, Hays drifted away from society, summing up the experience in his dryly sarcastic wit: "Having a listed number with no fear of Trotskyite crank calls is a huge relief" (qtd. in

Willens 226). He lived simply in a New York City suburb until his death in 1981 from complications related to his lifelong battle with diabetes, a condition complicated by his alcoholism and smoking. However, this narrative deals with Hays's life before blacklisting destroyed his career and before this politically engaged artist grew disempowered and disenfranchised.[123]

When Hays was thirteen, his father, a rural Methodist minister, died in a violent car accident. This cataclysmic life event upended young Hays's world. The provisions left unmade in the reality of Reverend Hays's untimely death coupled with the emotional devastation experienced by the remaining Hays clan left young Lee virtually forgotten (Willens 10-25). While Reverend Hayes had provided for his three older children's high school and college educations through his work with the Methodist church, no provision had been set in place for Lee. Consequently, the thirteen-year-old young man was left to "make my own 'educational advantages'" since his mother experienced a complete mental breakdown requiring institutionalization and his siblings, very young adults attempting to figure out their own lives, could not afford tuition expenses for their youngest brother in light of the Great Depression (Hayes qtd. in Willens 14). As a result of this turmoil, when Lee turned sixteen, his oldest brother, a financial analyst for a Cleveland investment fund, moved him from Arkansas and secured him a job at the Cleveland public library. There, Hays developed a voracious appetite for banned books, using the library's "Unfit for Children" black stamp as his guide among the stacks (Capaldi 3). During this time, Hayes developed his nascent radical Left sensibilities: "Somewhere along in there, I became some kind of Socialist" (qtd. in Willens 20). In 1934, when Lee was twenty, he left Cleveland and returned to Arkansas, his home state. There, Hays met the

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[123] He co-authored iconic folk songs like, "If I Had A Hammer" and "Kisses Sweeter than Wine."

Preaching Hillbilly, Claude Williams. Williams changed Hays's life and brought Hays to Commonwealth.

It is no understatement to suggest that Williams was one of the most influential figures in Lee Hays's life, and their relationship directly contributed to Hays's political activism. As Doris Willens, Hays's biographer asserts, "Indeed, from 1934 to 1949, Claude was the dominant figure in Lee's life—a surrogate father— a man of the cloth but with a radical difference" (26). Williams's unique blend of intellectual, passion-driven, and undeniably Southern Christian Marxism appealed to Hays, a young man who still held tightly to his father's religious conviction and piety. The two formed a fast bond, and their relationship supported Hays's development of a social group and a place to belong. In his associations with Williams, Hays encountered a group of young Southerners, much like him, who were committed to the study and enactment of labor activism through the leftist understandings of Christianity found in Christian Marxism, Christian Socialism, and the Social Gospel movements.[124] In this group, Hayes met Zilphia Johnson Hornton, who would lead him to Highlander Folk School in rural Tennessee (Highlander). There, he would explore using theatre as a vehicle for social activism.[125]

Hays and Horton ended up in Tennessee devising activist theatre by way of Claude Williams and an angry Arkansan father. Always a mentor/preacher/father hybrid when dealing with his flock of young people, Claude Williams encouraged young Horton to flee Arkansas and

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[124] See *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* for additional discussions about the influence of Christian Socialism and Christian Communism in the South.

[125] Horton is best known for writing "We Shall Overcome" and other protest songs of the Civil Rights movement. Her untimely death in 1953 after accidentally drinking typewriter fluid, cut short her amazing career in arts activism. As Vicki Carter writes in her 1994 essay about Horton, "At no time, however, was Zilphia taken from the margins and put at the center where her work could be explored as standing on its own. In many ways in fact, the literature of music history acclaimed her work more than the studies of Highlander did"(5)..

attend Highlander Folk School, a labor college in Monteagle, Tennessee. Horton's trip to Tennessee would provide her escape from her conservative father, a prominent coalmine owner whose employees had tried to organize under Williams's guidance (Carter "Singing" 6). Naturally, Horton's father railed against his eldest daughter's involvement in leftist movements, labor organizing, and any association with Williams. Her father threatened to involve local politicians and law enforcement to prevent his daughter from continuing any work in labor activism, so she rebelled by leaving the state to study at Highlander. Upon arrival, Horton, a classically trained musician, led courses in music, drama and dance.[126] There, actor/students engaged in a curriculum that taught skills in improvisation and Stanislavskian techniques in psychological realism (McDermott 83; "New" 22). As Douglas McDermott points out in his narrative about the pedagogies employed at the New Theatre School, "the improvisations were of situations and problems which affected the working man, since these were the problems of the characters in the Theatre Union plays" (80). The grounding in theory and practice Horton received from her studies with the New Theatre School directly influenced her work at Highlander. Horton directly influenced Hays's approach to drama at Commonwealth.

While Hays never commented on his decision to attend Highlander, given his close relationship with Horton and his lack of secondary education, Highlander was a natural destination. Plus, Williams likely urged him to continue work in southern labor issues alongside Horton. No matter the reason, upon his arrival at Highlander, Hays paired up with Horton once again and took her dramatics and music classes. Using her musical expertise and New Theatre School training, Horton guided students in the creation of theatre and music from personal experience. This innovative pedagogy was an evolution of the labor drama programs outlined at

[126] While she arrived at Highlander with a strong foundation in music, she traveled to New York in Spring of 1936 to study drama with the New Theatre League. She also married the school's founder, Myles Horton, after spending only 2 months at the school.

places like Brookwood in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but her slant toward Southern workers was unique.

In regards to exactly what happened in Horton's classroom, a description of pedagogic processes appear in a 1939 publication entitled "Five Plays About Labor" published by Highlander. In the document, Horton states:

> "Each one was made up in about eight hours for an audience before it was written down. The actors, therefore, didn't have exact lines to memorize. They simply knew the situation and what sort of person they were playing and talked accordingly. So the lines of the script should not be taken word-for-word. No busy worker could be expected to learn some of the long speeches by heart. But if he understood what they contained he should be able to say them in his own words." (*Five* 2)

Horton's devising process, a short intensive session in which worker/students produced a narrative in skeletal outline then improvised dialogue during performance, was refreshingly simple. As labor organizations regularly struggled with the need for texts that captured workers' struggles, like the aforementioned *Waiting for Lefty*, the idea of perpetually creating new plays specific to the needs of a specific group of workers was, in many ways, revolutionary.[127] This issue was even more pressing in the South, where few plays existed to illuminate the needs of sharecroppers, farmers, or other agricultural labors, let alone ancillary issues related to race, carpetbagging, and other uniquely Southern economic issues. Horton had found a solution to the lack of plays for workers in the south—she would simply create them in collaboration with her students.

Through Horton's innovative approach to labor drama, the value of a text, a concern already taken on in avant-garde theatre circles for decades, finally garnered attention amongst

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[127] Hays speaks to this very concern in his later labor dramatics report.

amateurs developing labor drama. In her conception of labor drama pedagogy, Horton suggested that texts should play a secondary role to the experience of creating performance. More importantly, she upheld the notion that anyone could participate in making an event of theatrical production. She stresses both the importance of the value inherent to creating drama and the accessibility of these techniques in pep-talk-esque description: “You don’t have to have a stage to put on these plays. They can be done in a room, or out-of-doors. If you don’t have a curtain the actors simply walk on and offstage at the beginning and end of each scene, carrying their properties with them” (2). She follows this advice with encouragement for anyone producing the plays to contact her at Highlander for advice. Horton not only provided texts, some of the first devised about the Southern experience, but also provided guidelines for producing these plays so the texts were easily accessible for other Southern labor groups.

Figure 2: Cover of *The Lolly Pop Girls* by Zilphia Horton. *Five Plays About Labor: Highlander Folk School*. Monteagle, TN: Highlander Folk School. Aug. 1939. Box Two. Eveline M. Burns Collection. Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Martin P. Catherwood Library, Cornell University. Print.

Horton's collection of plays also displays the diversity of theatrical styles with which

Highlander experimented. One drama, "North-South," originated from a speech given by a union organization president; another presents the "Lolly Pop Girls," a Southern retelling of the familiar narrative about a group of naive millworkers who rush out the boss in a musical farce; another quasi-Meyerholdian pageantry-inspired piece, "Stretch-Out" is performed without words ("Five 42-7). It features drum-beat signaled action, and actors, representing symbols of Labor, moving in a syncopated dance. Even though the collection of plays include qualities often cited in critiques of labor drama, from poorly conceived plots to heavy reliance on popular culture forms, their diversity, from avant- garde " Stretch-Out" to Tailor Shop knock-off, "Lolly Pop Girls," also convey a commitment to experimentation. Undoubtedly, Hays took the lessons from Horton's drama program, specifically the value of time and place and purpose for the creators of theatre and the commitment to experimentation, with him to Commonwealth where he innovated theatre practice.

In 1937, Lee Hays joined the teaching staff at Commonwealth amidst the tumult of the school's increasingly hostile environment. However, the appointment came more as Williams's endorsement of Hays as an ally in Williams's deradicalization efforts since the two were close. Hays's theatrical expertise was of secondary importance. In truth, Hays had no formal training in theatre. In a 1982 interview, Hays stated, "I was teaching dramatics, as little as I knew about it." (Capaldi 3). Unlike his mentor and many of his Commonwealth predecessors, Hays had not studied at New York theatre institutions. He had little practical experience in theatre even in amateur settings; most came from his work with Horton at Highlander during the Spring and Summer 1937 quarters, a total of 10 weeks learning techniques for labor drama. During this time, he largely contributed through playwriting, only collaborating on one piece of theatre, a play entitled *Gumbo* about a murdered black sharecropper, under the close guidance of Horton (Carter

Annotated 3). Even his musical expertise came from the informal training he received singing with his father's church choir. Still, upon twenty-two-year-old Hays's arrival at Commonwealth, the school paper announced, "He has been assistant to the drama director at Highlander Folk School... Lee brings with him to Commonwealth valuable experience and ability" ("Arkansan" 2). [128]

This assertion was partially correct. A few years earlier, Hays had drifted to New York for a brief period of study as a resident of Judson Memorial Church. There, he made one short documentary film, *America's Disinherited*, about southern sharecroppers and the STFU. Few people viewed *America's Disinherited* outside of New York City's Leftist elite because of the film technology Hays employed; few labor organizations could access the projectors capable of play the 8-milimeter film upon which Hays had recorded the project. This brief filmmaking experience was the "valuable experience and ability" that Hays supposedly brought with him to campus. Despite this lack of theatrical experience, somehow Hays found himself leading dramatics at Commonwealth by the fall of 1937. Hays, like most other previous instructors, defaulted into the dramatics instructor position at the college.

Whatever Hays lacked in experience, he made up for with his theoretical knowledge, general intellectual inquisitiveness about the subject, and commitment to the program. On the same day *The Fortnightly* announced his appointment, the paper also published an essay written by Hays about his plans for the dramatics program. In it, he emphatically states, "Emphasis will be placed upon the drama as a weapon for union organization" (Hays "Workers'" 2). He follows this assertion with an outline of the course, "a survey of professional plays of social content and of special interest to labor" with an ancillary study of professional theatre and motion picture

[128] Doris Willens points to the same point regarding Hays's inexperience with drama, but her study focuses on the broader narrative of Hays's life and gives less attention to his work in labor drama at Commonwealth (51-8).

institutions "as influencing and molding opinion" (Hays "Workers'" 2). The significance of these statements are twofold: first, Hays explicitly conceptualizes labor drama as weapon, a far cry from Reverend Muste's milquetoast assertions about quasi-militaristic labor drama genre that marched and sung and waved flags.

Second, Hays fully integrated the influence of film into his course from the beginning. In addition to the theoretical and literature-based study of texts, he also describes the course's practical components: "Most important, students will write and produce their own plays out of their common experiences and ideas. They will learn how to use dramatics in attacking their own social, economic, and organizational problems. These plays will be produced on the college stage and before workers' audiences in the Southwest" (Hays "Workers'" 2) He includes "labor songs, mass chants, and other theatricals" as part of the coursework, a nod to the role of informal drama in campus cultural life, but the creation and production of plays that attack the injustices of labor in the south, as determined by the Labor Drama students, was the primary pedagogical objective of Hays's program.

Hays's strongly worded course description foreshadowed his spirited and focused commitment to teaching. Developing his curriculum was a challenge, particularly when he was required to do so in tandem with maintaining expectations of the extracurricular Saturday night theatrical program. In a 1947, Hays addresses his workload, stating, "I had to think up a show for my students to do every Saturday night, when the neighbors were invited" (Hays qtd. in Cochran). Hays managed to balance it all. Unlike Frye, who seemed to bog down in the practicalities of both Commonwealth life and the realities of getting productions on their feet, Hays was prolific in his theatrical production. In October of the same year, a month after he arrived, he published a request for "copies of labor or social-protest plays or skits" in order to

meet his objectives of studying “as many plays as possible” (“Dramatics Teacher” 2). By January, the school collected over two hundred new drama texts (“Plays Contributed” 3). In November, he sent Max Cohen, the school’s industrial manager, on a side trip to New York City while visiting family to procure resources for the labor drama program, including forging contacts with the New Theatre League and the American Writers Union (“Director” 4). By mid-November, Hays produced his first skit, an adaptation of Florence Lasser’s International Ladies Garment Workers Union pamphlet, “Who is Getting Excited?,” the ever-popular narrative about female garment shop workers who take on their mean, brutish bosses. Even though the performance derived from an extant text, Hays makes clear that this first production served as a resource for learning “the qualities most productive of dramatic effect” for new works. He also announced the next production’s performance date as less than a month away (“Dramatics Class” 2). He was off to an incredibly productive start.

From Ninety-Seven Cents *to* Hushpuppy*: Lee Hays’ Experiments in Labor Drama*

True to his word, on December 4th, 1937, Hays led students in “Ninety-Seven Cents,” a courtroom drama about a young worker named Helen accused of attacking her boss after receiving a paycheck for ninety-seven cents. The one-act play showcases creative experimentation upon which Hays based his program. The dramatic narrative opens with darkness. A disembodied “pompous” voice of a factory owner describes the Southern Dress Company’s arrival in a fictional southern town called Jefferson (“Ninety” 2-5). Through a series of eight blackouts, undeniably excessive within the three-page work, the voice promises “increased prosperity” for the town, describes free medical care as part of the company’s compensation packages, outlines a workers’ education program, and promises to be a

"conscientious employer" (Hays "Ninety" 2-5.). Over the course of the drama, these promises turn out to be thinly veiled lip service paid to community leaders designed to hide the northern company's plan for exploitation of its new Southern workers. Between the copious blackouts, a courtroom drama unfolds. A series of witnesses, from Helen's fiancé to her corrupt coworker Lucy, testify on behalf of Helen or on behalf of her boss, George Butler. Within this dialectical testimony regarding Helen's guilt or innocence, the audience learns that Helen has violently attacked her boss and now, the court must decide if she acted in self-defense or with premeditated malice toward her cheapskate supervisor. The play ends without resolution; the defense attorney finishes his closing argument by turning from the imagined jury to the actual audience: "The bench is not here— the bench is there— with the citizens who view this trial. They review this case, and they shall pass judgment. When will their voices be heard" (Hays "Ninety" 2-5)? The play ends with yet another blackout.

Most of the play's structure, from the mean-boss-versus-female-worker narrative to the final moment of the play wherein a character asks the audience to react to the drama, follows the same paradigms found in many labor drama texts.[129] In addition to its predictable plot, the text rests heavily on narrative description instead of dramatized action, and struggles to find flow given the disjointed back-and-forth between the blackened stage, a disembodied voice, and Helen's trial. The play also takes itself very seriously, with stilted, overly dramatic dialogue: "Helen Bryant is not on trial here! The Southern Dress Company is on trial!" (Hays "Ninety" 2-54). However, despite the play's obvious faults, it is also serves as an important example of how and why the pedagogy of labor dramatics worked in practical terms.

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[129] See *Pins and Needles*, *In Union there is Strength*, *Singing Jailbirds*, and, of course, *Waiting for Lefty*.

Within its clunky structure, “Ninety-Seven Cents” reveals the students’ attempts to incorporate compelling theatrical techniques in order to generate plays relevant for Southern audiences. For instance, the play explores strategies for breaking down separation between audience and performer. The stage directions included actors planted in the audience who yell out responses to the testimony and enliven the production from outside the drama. Even though the technique is the same as employed in the “stunt” skits with Father Zeuch, as well as countless other workers’ theatre productions, this audience/ performer interactivity is the most exciting part of “Ninety-Seven Cents.” When Lucy, Helen’s coworker, testifies against her, a “girl in the audience” shouts, “You're a liar, Lucy Andrews! I saw the big yellowbelly pushing Helen around that day! And what's more every word she said was true! How much are you paid to make this speech, Lucy?” (Hays “Ninety” 3). “Much banging of the gavel” ensues, and a bailiff exits the stage, enters the audience, and drags the girl out. As she’s being dragged, she screams, “You can’t keep me from talking!” (Hays “Ninety” 2). Later, when Tom, Helen’s fiancé, takes the stand, the audience erupts with shouts of affirmation after Tom alludes to plans for a strike percolating amongst Southern Dress Company’s workers: “That's why the company don't want us to talk -afraid we'll start something they can't stop!” Voices respond with, “You tell em, Tom! We’re talkin’ now!” (Hays “Ninety” 4). By manufacturing audience involvement through the performance of spectator outrage, the dramatics students give their audiences permission to rise up within the dramatic moment and pursue the goal of drama as a weapon for change. The reality of the production’s overall failure, a fact that Hays asserts in a later evaluation of the play, does not diminish the pedagogic significance of dramatics students’ experimentation with strategies designed to make their unique Southern audiences rise up to activism.

Similarly, the overly simplistic and predictable plot structure of "Ninety-Seven Cents" overshadows the pedagogic significance of the play's major theme: the exploitation of southern workers by northern industry. The process by which the group decided on this theme is clearly outlined in an article published a week before the premiere: "The theme was selected because of its pressing interest all over the South, and its direct relation to the labor movement nationally" ("Dramatics Class" 4). Even though the plot elements appear reductive and amateurish, they still reveal nuance in the problems of carpetbagging during the 1930s whereby northern business owners moved south to exploit cheap Southern labor.[130] For example, the pomposity of the factory owner's disembodied voice exposes the hegemonic good sense found in promises of community uplift via welfare capitalism that had become a *de rigueur* strategy employed by corporations to gut unions' power by the 1920s.[131] This concern grew even more important in the context of the South, as corporations looked for communities ravaged by the Great Depression who would welcome jobs with open arms, while sacrificing the rights guaranteed to the same kinds of workers in the North. By giving voice to issues that directly affected Southern workers, "Ninety-Seven Cents" spoke to new audiences, even if in an imperfect fashion. The students also considered the needs of other groups in the south who might want to produce the work. A description of the play includes discussion of practical needs considered by the group, suggesting "minimum of properties" and "simplicity of production" are necessary if the play is to travel or be performed by other groups with meager means. Overall, "Ninety-Seven Cents" shows the important process of experimentation in learning about and creating a uniquely Southern

[130] As northern corporations looked to the South for cheap land and labor, the conversation about labor organizing these workers grew more important.

[131] See issues surrounding Taylorism in Philip Dray's chapter Industrial Democracy (235).

workers' theatre, even if the product fails in terms of several pedagogic, aesthetic, or political metrics.

Although no documentation regarding the success or failure of "Ninety-Seven Cents" appears in *The Fortnightly*, increased enrollment in labor dramatics under Hays suggests that his program resonated with the Commoner community. By the start of Winter Term, "Worker's Dramatics," as the course had been retitled, was "enlarged to include virtually the entire student body" ("Two" 1). Hays divided the students into three groups, and each would research and devise a new play. He supervised a group focused on the lives of sharecroppers. A second group, directed by student Rosalie Stinson, centered their work on the struggles of the "independent farmer." The third group, guided by Don Kobler, the school's secretary-treasurer and mimeograph teacher, would write an industrial play. The paper also announced that these three new plays would be performed for the "appropriate audience" during the quarter, with the productions traveling off campus and into surrounding communities for performances before local workers.

In this flurry of activity, Hays also took time to further explicate his increasingly complex understanding of labor drama's function within the Commonwealth community. In a lengthy essay entitled, "Dramatics at Commonwealth Must Serve the Needs and Aspirations of Labor Audience," a rhetorically sophisticated and inspiring work that reflected the author's preacher-like passion deriving from his father and Williams, Hays opens with three questions:

> *What is labor drama?*
>
> *What part should it play in workers' education in the Southern labor movement?*

> *How can Commonwealth produce plays worth of the worker audiences and get them before those audiences?* ("Dramatics" 2).

While these questions might first appear rudimentary, in reality, they reflect the first instance where a Commonwealth dramatics instructor carefully considering both theoretical and practical motivations behind labor drama specific to the Commonwealth community. Hays wrestles with the theoretical foundation of labor drama, and he narrows his scope to Commonwealth. By thinking locally in his conception of "Worker's Dramatics" classes, he engaged with the techniques and narratives that would support the school's unique contribution to the larger field instead of simply recreating or replicating other groups' work. To return to Hazel MacKaye's earlier "variegated shoots" metaphor and the importance of the earth in which the "generic seed" of labor drama was planted, Hays thought carefully about his unique Arkansan soil.

In the remainder of the essay, Hays delineates himself from his predecessors by outlining a specific pedagogy for his new course in Workers' Dramatics. In extending the work of instructors like Frye, who outlined compelling programs, but failed to connect them the pedagogic needs of worker/students, Hays honed in Commonwealth labor drama's specific pedagogic function as program to engage with issues of the Southern labor movement, a likely influence from his friend Zilphia Horton. In order to establish a foundation for his unique approach, Hays fairly assesses the state of affairs in Southern labor drama, stating that it is a "casual and immature affair. We find very little writing about dramatics and know of no group which tries systematically and consistently to develop drama for Southern workers, in any form" ("Dramatics" 2). He continues, evaluating the pedagogic goals of the few workers' education programs in the South that incorporated drama. In this evaluation, he also critiques the programs' focus on process over product, or their "chief benefit of preparing and producing plays is to the

players themselves... the experience of preparing the play is paramount" (Hays "Dramatics" 2). Hays states, matter-of-factly, "*Occupational therapy is not our function.* We are amateurs...but our job is to make plays of consuming interest to the workers who view them" (emphasis added) ("Dramatics" 2). In this assertion against "occupational therapy" Hays complicates the goals of almost all other labor drama programs, including the one led by Zilphia Horton. By rejecting the privileged state of process-oriented work designed specifically for the participants' development or pleasure, Hays's critique serves as an important indictment of pedagogic labor drama's status quo and moves forward theoretical conversations about drama in labor education.

Though he critiques labor drama's focus on process, Hays does not privilege the product, as is the case with many external assessments of labor drama. Instead, he suggests that the product, the live event in which performers and audience come together and share in a moment of collective meaning-making, should be valued *as much* as the act of workers generating theatre. Essentially, workers' theatre should neither be process-over-product nor product-over-process. Instead, it should be process *and* product. By addressing the importance of liveness, both in presentation and creation of labor drama, Hays offers an important analysis concerning the genre's pedagogic dimension regarding who gets to learn through labor drama and why that learning is important. Accordingly, he takes to task amateur groups for resting too comfortably within their amateur status and for accepting the process of creation as the apex of labor drama's pedagogic function. Most importantly, he calls for a theatre that "cannot wait for the arrival of fully developed professional playwrights" and instead, demands a theatre that is "recognizable in speech, action, and principle to the workers who view the plays" no matter who creates it (Hays "Dramatics" 2). In this essay, he refuses to accept that amateur labor drama still fully meets its pedagogic objectives even if politically insignificant, poorly constructed, or culturally irrelevant

for the audiences who see it; instead, Hays demands that amateurs use their intimate knowledge of the issues they hope to change and craft an authentic theatre that simultaneously makes meaning for both the creators and audience.

By equally valuing process and product, Hays's conceptualization of the field opens new possibilities for workers' drama programs. Through this dual focus on product and process, labor drama might transcend the bourgeois nature of professional theatre, an artform dominated by money attached to the product of performance. It might also break free from the strictures placed on performance that chiefly valued the worker's participation, not the audience's experiences, in assessing value. Even as Hays concedes that the creation of theatre that intimately connects to both the lives of workers who watch and to the workers who create is a "a large order," he holds up the recent production of "Ninety-Seven Cents," however imperfect, as a prototype for his program. He closes his essay with the following: "To Sum Up: Our stage is 'any spot which can become a target for witnessing eyes'... We are forging techniques which will help bring workers' education closer to the daily struggles of Southern workers" (Hays "Dramatics" 2). Commonwealth began an intense phase of theatrical experimentation focused on these principles.

As a result of Hays's sophisticated experimental approach to theatrical production, Commonwealth dramatics courses stood at the vanguard of theatre in the South. Between fall of 1937 and Hays's departure in the fall of 1939, Commoner dramatics students produced over twelve original full-length plays, plus "numerous skits and sketches" (Hays "From" 2-3) Hays outlines this remarkably prolific time in a 1939 report entitled "From 97 cents to Hushpuppy," which he presented at the Second Annual Meeting of the Commonwealth College Association in February of 1939 just before his departure. Here, the production history of Commoner drama

between 1937 and 1939 demonstrates the diversity of production and the evolution in style as students explored labor drama:

> 97¢: our first play; about 'southern carpetbaggers of industry." Produced for the first annual meeting of the Association. Published. Produced elsewhere.
>
> ONE BREAD, ONE BODY; our best play. Written and produced several times for local audiences, and for the annual convention of the STFU. Published. Produced elsewhere.
>
> GET GOING, GEORGE: A play written and produced for several Farmer's Union locals in East Arkansas. Published. Produced elsewhere.
>
> BACKBONE OF THE NATIONS: Another play for the Farmer's Union, produced for Calhoun County locals in South Arkansas.
>
> THE PEOPLE'S RIGHT: a play about the poll tax. Produced for local audiences.
>
> SOW THE SEED DEEP: a play about farm relief, produced for local people.
>
> RISEN FROM THE RANKS: a play with hand puppets.
>
> HAYMARKET: a play about May Day.
>
> WE ARE NOT ALONE: about the Blytheville boys, falsely accused of rape. Published, used by the NAACP as a reading. Sent to a large number or Arkansans, urging them to free the boys by protesting. Apparently they did, for Governor Bailey's secretary wrote me asking me to 'tell my friends' to stop writing the governor; and indicating that popular protest was having its effect.
>
> HUSHPUPPY: the Oklahoma show, consisting of:
>
> > The People' Press, a play about the Midwest Record.
> >
> > The Pecan King, a play about the new wage and hours bill.

Hushpuppy and the Admiral, a marionette play.

Numerous Toby skits, and songs.

CI-CIO: an unproduced marionette play.

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK: an unproduced play for hand puppets.

Numerous skits and sketches.

We took our plays to 3000 people. 2000 saw them produced by other groups.

All our published plays have been sold out. The market for worker' plays - easy to produce, well planned to meet the money limitations of workers' groups, and with specific appeals- is wide open. (Hays "From" 3)

These descriptions demonstrate Commonwealth's drama increasing focus on both audience and dramatic creation. As the program evolved, experimentation with style and subject resulted in a wide variety of plays tailored toward specific Southern audiences. These plays met the needs of diverse groups, from the NAACP to the STFU.

In regards to meeting Southern workers on their level and through their life experiences, the development of Toby skits was an important and unprecedented innovation. The beloved "golden hearted son of toil," Toby was a hillbilly stock character who wove together vaudeville traditions and evolutions of minstrelsy in Southern popular performance. Toby became a "dumb but inevitably triumphant" hero for Hays's unique brand of Southern workers' dramatics (Hays "From" 2). The dramatics program discovered that workers more clearly heard the issues of labor through the comic musings of Toby since "he is usually a native of the South...Nothing slick. Nothing foreign in their accents. They twang in Arkansas, drawl in Mississippi, and close up both nostrils in North Carolina. Just like the man on the street." (Hays "Toby" 4). At his core,

Toby spoke the language of the Southern poor. Through a reappropriation of Toby, Commoner dramatics generated a vehicle that could speak to "millions" of unorganized Southerner workers: "Toby is our own discovery, though he has been under our noses for generations. He's a difficult character, but we have made great progress in using him, and 900 Oklahomans who saw him approved of him completely" (Hayes "Toby" 4; Hayes "From" 2). Hays felt so strongly about the importance of Toby that he mentioned him in several discussions of labor drama, including the aforementioned dramatics report in which he states, "We must develop this medium. It is the only way we know to reach unorganized workers - and if we can do this, we shall be doing what workers' theatres ought to be doing but are not." ("From" 2). Employing Toby as a potential dramatic innovation marks only one development in the Commoner dramatics program.

Hays's dramatics report also includes invaluable reflection about the program's evolution between 1937-9. In the introduction, he asserts, "Every group works within certain cultural limitations. Its program must be fitted to the needs of its members, or of those whom it addresses. *To ascertain its limitations is the first big job of any group, and it is the point at which most groups fail* (emphasis his)" ("From" 1). This quote cites the importance of failure inherent in path-breaking programs and alludes to the challenges weathered by the drama students during Hays's tenure. In a continuation of his analysis, Hays cites other labor drama organizations' use of "an Odets production or some similar ambitious play which may have won fame on Broadway" for their lack of suitability for specific labor groups and geographic regions, again drawing attention to the flawed methodology in reproducing labor drama hits for audiences who do not connect with the content (Hays "From" 2). He hits on this point more explicitly later in his life when he describes the tension between his students' desire to create theatre and the needs of the Southern audiences they hoped to address:

> A lot of the kids were from New York and the East, and naturally they inclined toward plays like *Waiting for Lefty* and *Private Hicks*— exactly the wrong kind of stuff for west Arkansas hill farmers who didn't know about New York taxi drivers, didn't care about them, and thought plays about them to be in the worst possible taste. ("From" 71)

This tension led to Hay's negotiation of Commonwealth's unique contribution to the field of workers' theatre in the South.

After discussing the material conditions that challenged Southern labor drama, Hays once again outlines Commonwealth's approach, insisting that he and his students "are sold on no theatre dogma, no school of method, but have tried only to use available forms in new ways. They will not produce Broadway plays for Arkansas audiences" ("From" 5) In yet another evolution of his pedagogic approach, Hays makes clear his values of experimentation, open-mindedness, and willingness to look beyond standard approaches in creating art. These values directly relate Hays's lack of theatrical training, a blessing and, at times, a curse that allowed him to approach production with a fresh lens of understanding but also contributed to a frustrating set of challenges for continuing the work.

Hays did not sugarcoat his experiences. In addressing program challenges, he demonstrates humility and self-reflective practice by leveling criticism on his process and productions. Similarly, he willingly and openly addresses difficulties with leading a course lacking pedagogic precedent as an instructor forced to learn alongside his students. One succinct, comical assertion about flawed prototype "Ninety-Seven Cents" sets the frank tone for this discussion: "[It] was a very bad play because it used a mechanical blackout device which meant very little to our audiences, and because it was devoid of humor." The reference to "Ninety-

Seven Cents'" lack of humor reflects the trend of many labor drama groups defaulting to secular homiletics within their scripts whereby characters preach to the audiences about labor issues. As a result of their polemical nature, many dramas reduce complex struggles to binaristic quests where the good worker triumphs over the bad boss. This critique parallels the commentary offered by Clay Fulks in his review of Frye's *Daughter*, as well as many other assessments of the literary or cultural value of labor drama's surviving texts.[132] Through this honest review of "Ninety-Seven Cents," Hays draws attention to labor drama's need to, as Colette Hyman eloquently states, "place itself within the main currents of American culture" (117). He stresses the value of drawing upon popular cultural forms and meeting audiences on their level so they have the opportunity to learn while be wholly entertained, and he arrives at this assertion by carefully evaluating his group's failed experimentation.

Many of the challenges and failures present within Commonwealth's dramatics program derived from the group's negotiation of a collaborative pedagogy within the reality of severely limited resources. The Commoner dramatics programs "had to write our own plays, build our own equipment, and finally, build our audiences" (Hayes "From" 3). No easy task. In a section of the essay entitled, "WE HAVE WORKED COLLECTIVELY," Hays discusses the ways in which he approached these challenges: "The 'approach' is no one man's idea. It has been developed by teachers and students, exerting collective effort. *We have many things to learn about working together*, but our approach is right, our purposes are clear and with adequate organization most of these problems will be solved" ("From" 3). The assertion that dramatics classes have "many things to learn about working together" is refreshingly honest. It acknowledges that disagreements, disputes, and frustration feature heavily in the process of experimentation and reminds readers that collective work "with no great amount of money" and

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[132] See Hyman (110-123).

"little space" is time-consuming and stressful. He continues, describing the practicalities involved in making a new theatre for workers in the rural South with students new to drama:

> "They have had to develop new ways of reaching their audiences...It takes a long time to write a play. It takes patience and a purpose... [It is] easy for students to lose interest when a projected field trip fails to materialize. Difficult for them to work against great odds, when there is but a short time to prepare... We must build our equipment out of tin cans... We have had only one person qualified to do the production work... We were to have showed in a country school but the hogs had taken over the building and released a brigade of fleas" (Hays "From" 3-5).

Indeed, the challenges faced by Commoner drama students would vex even a seasoned theatre professional. Hays also reminds Commonwealth leadership about the challenges of engaging with dramatic learning at a school that relies on collective labor: "The director has been switched from kitchen to office, from mimeographing to dishwashing, from bread baking to office work and back again." (Hays "From" 4). Likewise, he expresses concern over the school's open approach to learning that allowed students to pursue their academic interests, even to the detriment of other studies: "Students have come to study drama, made a good beginning, and then been completely absorbed by the other courses...It has from the beginning demoralized the drama work" (Hays "From" 4).

In the midst of this lengthy critique, Hays also celebrates that important learning that happens in regards governance, organization, collaboration, and creative innovation that also occurred. He describes the program's flexibility, suggesting, "our approach is not a static thing. It has grown out of our experience until today, I am proud to say... It is far from completely practical but, with the direction it has achieved, and with its ability to absorb new experience it

can solve its problems and become a leader among drama groups" (Hays "From" 1). These skills, and the need to develop them more fully, directly apply the needs of general labor organizing, particularly at a moment where the in-fighting amongst labor organizations and political groups, both on the campus and beyond, threatened the longevity of labor's influence in the US.

With this exciting and fruitful experimentation, Commonwealth garnered attention from a variety of labor outposts. The school toured several original productions throughout the South, presenting performances at the STFU Convention, The Farmer's Educational and Cooperative Union, the Indiana Farmers' Union, the Dallas Civic Federation and the local community in 1938 and 1939. A variety of labor organizations, including Arkansas Farmers' Union, the Farmer's Union Institute, the Religion and Labor Foundation, and the Midwest Daily Record purchased, published, or produced Commonwealth's dramas. Hays started a new course in Union Recreation as an extension of Workers' Dramatics to help students develop cultural entertainments and activities for the campus as "a practical exercise in arranging such programs for union meetings" ("Quarter" 1), and he published "Commonwealth Labor Songs," a compendium of thirty original songs developed through the arts programs on campus ("Around" 2). The dramatics activities on campus continued to grow and gain increasing national attention.

As a result of the exciting goings-on, Commonwealth attracted several recent graduates from the New Theatre School, and by the end of 1938, the school had developed a reputation as an innovator in Southern Labor Drama Techniques ("Backgrounds" 1). New students developed workers' puppet theatre, drafting an unpublished pamphlet entitled "Marionettes for Unions" that included guidelines and blueprints for constructing puppet stages. Claude Williams's 1938 Director's Report cites dramatics as one of "Commonwealth's best drawing cards for students

and support," and describes the dramatics program's evolution into "postgraduate work for students who have already attended professional theatre schools" ("Dramatic Programs" 1). Recommendations by both Hays and Williams called for increased support of the labor drama program and a continued commitment to developing "The Commonwealth Approach" ("Dramatic Program" 1). Even Charlotte Moskowitz (Koch) and Raymond Koch, members of the group replaced by Williams's in the 1936-7 reorganization, acknowledged Lee Hays's leadership as the college, "continued to lose old ground while failing to gain in new directions, except in the field of dramatics" (198), and credited Hays's extant play, *One Bread, One Body* "toured and was a hit... These dramatic expeditions...were the high points of educational achievement during this period" (198). Likewise, William Cobb, in assessing Commonwealth's decline, also credits Hays for the bright spot generated by workers' dramatics: "While the college leaders were attempting to ward off the inevitable, campus life had been reinvigorated by the success of its dramatic production, essentially the work of Lee Hays" (204). In the history of labor drama, Hays was among the most successful in carving out a future for his programs.

The Wanderer Wanders On

However, the newly invigorated dramatics programs and Hays's tireless commitment to his students were not enough to save the school. By the summer of 1939, issues around Reverend Summers' attack, political in-fighting amongst Southern labor groups, the lead-up to WWII, and the threat of communism came to head. Williams was ousted by the STFU after being accused of allowing Communist students to remain at Commonwealth. Soon after, he announced a medical leave of absence that would require him to leave the post of director ("Association" 1). Hays followed closely behind. He left behind exciting possibilities for Commonwealth's labor drama

program. The New Theatre League, inspired by the work of the FTP and the Coffee-Pepper bill, looked to the school as a potential outpost for a new Southern Theatre School, but these efforts were for naught. The school closed in the summer of 1940 after a “quasi-legal lynching” from the local government, which included a formal investigation by the FBI and lien on the school for failure to pay fines for the crime of “anarchy” (Halford). In a particular twist of the knife, when the school’s equipment was auctioned off, Reverend Summers bought the library, destroying practically all of the labor drama materials, along with most of the resources, because they sympathized with communism. Later, the majority of school documents and records mysteriously disappeared from the Polk County Courthouse during the 1940s. They have never resurfaced.

After his departure from Commonwealth, Lee Hays wandered once again to New York City. There, he continued to make art, but mostly in the form of music. In one of the few discussions Hays engaged in about his time directing drama at Commonwealth, an essay published in *People’s Songs Bulletin* in 1948, he assesses the program, “Perhaps we borrowed considerably from ‘Waiting for Lefty,’ for the burden of his lectures was usually, ‘Don’t wait for the organizer to come and tell you what to do. Fight your own fights. Make your union strong the way you want it to be, the you can make it strong by your own efforts’” (Hays “It” 12). It seems the need to make his activism strong by his own efforts led Hays, like Ransdell, away from drama. After his time at Commonwealth, he wrote only a few musical dramas that continue to sit, unpublished, in his archive at the Smithsonian (Hays “Space Cantata”; Hays “Corey”).[133] A musical career reshaped this amateur dramatics instructor into the voice of leftist political folk music in the 1950s and 1960s.

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[133] One of the dramatic texts, an outline for a work entitled “Space Cantata,” is production for children.

Commonwealth was a radical school with a radical curriculum and radical students. Because of this affiliation with extremism, it paid a high price, and the literal destruction of Commonwealth's enduring records marks an important moment of erasure. For conservative Arkansans it was not enough to shut down Commonwealth; they wanted to obliterate its memory. This obfuscation, deriving from the increasing suspicion of leftist politics that ultimately resulted in the blacklisting of a generation of left-leaning artists, including Hays, points to the disintegration of important narratives surrounding Leftist theatre initiatives. It also highlights the contributions of individuals who believed in radical educational theatre pedagogies, particularly in their younger days of intense experimentation. This study of Commonwealth labor drama also alludes to new historical periods and geographic spaces regarding how and why radical labor drama programs not only drifted into obscurity but also how they morphed into new, largely unrecognizable forms after the 1940s. For example, this history Lee Hays's involvement with Commonwealth dramatics as an energetic, but inexperienced young artist who had some good ideas and tried to make the best out of a terrible situation reveals an early lineage of his arts-based activism. This case study also suggests a role for labor drama as an precursor to arts-based political activism used in the Civil Rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s, a point to which I will return in my conclusion, even if the connections are difficult to see upon first examination. Labor drama suggests a legacy and a lineage for the work of unlikely theatre artists and students— like Hays, Frye, and so many others—whose theatrical experimentation has otherwise slipped into obscurity.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Labor Drama

"There is no labor audience for this theatre..."

- Louis Schaffer, editor of *Labor Stage*, Brookwood Theatre Conference, 1936

To conclude this dissertation, I return to my starting point: Brookwood Labor College. In sharp contrast to vibrancy found at Brookwood during Hazel MacKaye's tenure during the mid-1920s, by the late 1930s, the school was in dire straits. Chairman Muste, the once-moderate Christian Socialist interested in toeing the AFL party line, had radicalized his views, further distancing himself and his school from mainstream organizations like the AFL.[134] He departed in 1933 over a faculty rift regarding Marxism on campus and took with him a core of loyal donors and supporters. More importantly, he left behind a sullied reputation for Brookwood as an elitist and radical establishment no longer in step with the needs of labor education. A financial crisis at the school closely followed Muste's departure. By 1936, the school had closed for good. In the midst of Brookwood's closing, in late March of the same year, the campus held a "Workers' Drama" conference on campus. The conference included a veritable who's-who in US labor drama circles, including Louis Schaffer of the *Labor Stage*, Fannia Cohn of the ILGWU Education Department, Samuel Friedman of Rebel Arts, Herbert Kline of *New Theatre* Magazine, and Margaret Larkin of the Theatre Union, among others. This collection of labor drama leaders demonstrated the movement's growth between the early 1920s and the late 1930s,

[134] After the AFL rift, Muste formed the Conference for Progressive Labor Action (CPLA). Muste saw the CPLA as an alternative organization that would challenge the AFL's stronghold within a withering Great Depression-era labor movement. However, the CPLA's increasing radicalism that included sharp critiques of the Socialist party and a statement of explicit support for Soviet Russia, further alienated the school from more mainstream labor organizations.#

as hundreds of different organizations and initiatives sprung up in the pursuit of a new labor-related theatrical genre. However, this gathering also foreshadowed the rapid demise of the labor drama experiment in light of the lead-up to WWII.

Unlike many previous gatherings of workers' theatre leaders, this particular conference possessed a notable aura of pessimism, with each participant outlining their concerns and frustrations with labor drama's failure to thrive. Louis Schaffer offered the above statement, suggesting, "intellectuals know of the progressive labor movement of twenty-five years ago, an immigrant labor group desiring culture, imbued with revolutionary spirit.... Now we must sell the program, we must coax the members of the union to take part. They are new generation, with no experience of going to the theatre" ("Minutes"). Schaffer's accusations call to the carpet labor drama artists, charging them with the dangerous act of nostalgia for time gone by. He also chastised labor dramatists for their refusal to acknowledge the changing labor movement, particularly after the reality of a fundamentally changed post-WWI world. Similarly, Fannia Cohn pointed fingers at artists' lack of understanding, recommending that they "must get closer to the labor movement to get the story" ("Minutes"). Samuel Friedman blamed the Left's reliance on Soviet Russia's theatrical forms: "Out of agit-prop theatre developed the workers' theatre and then the united front. There the vigorous thrust necessary to a workers' theatre was lost in an effort to gain a broader base. This was a vital loss" ("Minutes"). Herbert Kline criticized the material, stating, "The big problem is plays. The audiences don't want bad plays. Only good plays will form a theatre habit," and Margaret Larkin castigated the movement failures in administrative and organizational management ("Minutes"). Others targeted New York City bias, suggesting big-city artists failed to find resonant stories of real US workers. The movies, working conditions of labor drama troupes as compared with other professional theatre

companies, the cost of theatre tickets, the intellectual bent of plays, and even the inability for labor organizations to pay labor drama playwrights for their scripts also received mention in the discussion. In his succinct evaluation of the field, playwright Albert Maltz summed up the state of affairs regarding labor drama: “There is too much pessimism” (“Minutes”). If reading this conversation as a warning, the nadir of labor drama appeared on its way, and each group struggled to figure out what exactly had gone wrong.

What *had* gone wrong? And who was right in their assessment of the problems with labor drama? The answer can be found in all of the aforementioned critiques, but also beyond them. Plays *were* bad, artists *were* disconnected from the narratives they hoped to represent, Soviet Russia *was* enemy number one, and administration and management *was* often quite poor. Still, these reasons alone do not encompass the entire trajectory of labor drama’s failure. In reality, these experiments, good and bad, failed to produce many of the desired outcomes of movement pioneers, but they paved a way for several different initiatives that were far more successful and historically significant. In concluding this dissertation, I suggest new lines of analysis that start much longer conversations not only about how and why labor drama failed, but also how it transformed and where contemporary artists and historians might find remnants and legacies of work by figures like Hazel MacKaye, Hollace Ransdell, Lee Hays, and others mentioned in this study. These areas include, but are not limited to, the rise in popular and mass cultural theatrical forms, the Federal Theatre Project, art associated with the Civil Rights movement, and the development of children’s theatre and drama programs for children.

Beyond the Red: Pop Culture Goes to the Theatre

Drama's popularity during the interwar period undoubtedly inspired its inclusion in labor colleges. During the early twentieth century, theatre approached its apex as a popular cultural form. In these nascent days of radio and film, theatre provided the most accessible and most popular avenues for entertaining the increasingly large middle-class masses. As Thomas Postlewait writes in *The Hieroglyphic Stage* about the period of this study, "American entertainment became one of the largest industries in the country, encompassing not only dramatic performances and musical theatre (from revues to opera) but also minstrelsy, vaudeville, amusement arcades and parks, circuses, and the new media of film and radio" (107-8). As theatre diversified, an interest in amateur dramatics also increased. Consequently, audiences were not only attending performances in unprecedented numbers, but they also created theatre in their newfound spare time. Throughout the twentieth century, recreational performances, from plays to skits to vaudeville-inspired variety shows, served as important pastimes of churches, cultural centers, schools, immigrant community groups, Little Theatres and community drama groups. Almost everyone was watching or making theatre.

Theatre and performance likewise developed much more diversity as it incorporated the desires of larger, more diverse audiences. These developments led to a democratization of aesthetic values and to a new popular culture. However, this shift was not without problems. For example, the high brow/low brow dichotomy grew increasingly salient. By and large, intellectuals eschewed the fluff of vaudeville and variety performance even as it grew wildly popular among the masses. This dichotomy presents itself as challenge time and time again in labor colleges. As intellectuals-cum-instructors take up the teaching of workers, they introduce plays they find intellectually stimulating. Then, workers find them inaccessible, and important negotiations ensue between student, instructor, school leadership, and the greater community

about what values to hold up in their particular brand of dramatics. This negotiation is evident in all cases examined in this dissertation. Often, the instructors yielded to their students' interests, and many of the enduring plays from these programs are odd political-variety-show-musical-melodrama hybrids that clearly reflected the students' interests, but also fall firmly into the "low brow" category. The low-brow nature of these works were a point of consternation for many instructors; by capitulating to their students' interests, they created, in their view, theatre of questionable quality despite its relevancy to those who created it.

These developments in popular culture also advance alongside a more widespread visual culture. As Thomas Postlewait also points out, "the history of the stage in the twentieth century is also the history of film" (162). It is also the period of spectacle, of pictures, of glossy magazines, of fancy stage technology, and of celebrities. In many ways, the interwar's popular entertainment might be thought of as the cotton candy period: light, fluffy, saccharine, easy to digest, and usually featuring lots of pretty colors. This trend was a natural adaptation of the masses, a group fatigued by economic woes, wars, international instability, and growing pains associated with making a go of society as a new and rapidly changing nation. In contrast, most pioneers in labor drama, like MacKaye and Ransdell, were not interested in cotton candy drama. They wanted to use theatrical techniques in order to think hard about labor issues, and they wanted the products to look real, gritty, honest, and truthful. These competing objectives regarding what instructors wanted and what worker/students enjoyed in conceiving of labor drama also presented challenges for these programs. Negotiating trends of the day alongside ideological objectives of labor drama is constant and fascinating refrain in each of these case studies, and future investigations might look more closely at connections between popular

culture performance forms and labor drama and consider how they influence one another.[135] Examining labor drama's connection to minstrelsy, vaudeville, amateur performance, and immigrant theatre all point to fruitful new studies.

The Federal Theatre Project

In a more specific connection to labor drama's legacies, one of the most obvious evolutions of labor drama can be found in the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). This well-documented government-funded initiative started in 1935, ended in 1939, and was the only federally funded theatre program in US history. Hallie Flanagan, a Vassar grad who also dabbled in labor drama during her early years, headed the project. Under her leadership, the FTP expanded theatre initiatives throughout the US, with outposts in the Southern, Midwestern, and Western states. The FTP also developed and produced works for previously under-served audiences including African Americans and children and pioneered new theatrical techniques, like the Living Newspaper, on a larger scale.[136] The FTP also met an infamously controversial demise, with a children's production of *The Revolt of the Beavers*, referred to as "Marxism a la Mother Goose" by *New York Times* theatre critic Brooks Atkinson, catalyzing outrage about the FTP's left-leaning tendencies (Atkinson, " The Revolt" 19). As theatre for youth scholar Drew

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[135] In a similar vein, Thomas Postlewait's suggestion for a lens "enlarged to encompass the role and place of women in American theatre, the contributions of African Americans, the place of ethnic and multicultural theatre, the importance of American comedy, and the central place of musical theatre" during this period, a task with which US theatre historians are still currently engaged (124).

[136] For more information about the FTP, see Hallie Flanagan's *Arena*, Jane de Hart Matthews' *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939: Plays, Relief, and Politics*, Barry Witham's *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study*, George Kazacoff's *The Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays*, the Library of Congress's Federal Theatre Project Collections, as well as a number of recent masters' theses and dissertations on the topic.

Chappell notes in his analysis *Revolt of the Beavers*, one of many studies of one the most notorious US children's theatre productions, that the play "helped bring national theatre to the attention of Congressman Martin Dies's Committee on Un-American Activities in 1939" (41). Shortly after the Dies hearings, the FTP was shuttered when Congress defunded the program due to worry about supposedly un-American class-conscious overtones in productions.

The now-infamous House Un-American Activities Commission (HUAC) was one of the most powerful agents in silencing left-leaning artists during and after WWII during the Second Red Scare. HUAC and the subsequent end of the FTP also marked an important moment for US theatre's evolution in the twentieth century. For the second time in less than fifty years, the US government made an explicit pejorative association between cultural entities and the supposed danger of Left-leaning politics and ideologies; however, for the first time, theatre and film artists were front and center in the investigations. As a result of this focus on US entertainers, the Second Red Scare decimated left-leaning artist communities in the US between 1939 and 1955 with HUAC-sponsored investigations and sworn testimony leading to the silencing, deportation, and blacklisting of countless artists.

Given this systematic silencing of theatre artists during this period, the work of the FTP and HUAC during and after WWII marks an important moment of transition in the lineage of labor drama as well. First, labor drama leaders had to contend with FTP's influence, a reality that poached some of labor drama's best artists, resources, manpower, and funding in the short-term. Second, labor drama artists and leaders had to reconcile their work with the realities of the HUAC-sponsored shuttering of the FTP. Given labor drama's explicit—even radical at times—left-leaning overtones, the performance genre was destined for its demise within a government that had ended the FTP, a less politically-minded and somewhat conservative national theatre

movement, for hints of class- consciousness in their productions. With HUAC, the pitched battle faced by labor drama during its first twenty years of existence officially became too dangerous to continue. Future investigations might consider how the FTP's leaders, like Hallie Flanagan, interacted with labor drama experiments. They might also explore how the FTP's demise directly affected labor drama programs in workers' colleges. Other studies might look at how post-FTP people's theatre programs and organizations, like the Producing Playwright's Cooperative, the Hedgerow Theatre, the Actors Studio, the Chelsea Theatre Center, the Living Theatre, and others, incorporated techniques pioneered in labor drama and integrated labor drama students into their programs.

The Civil Rights Movement

Another important site for the legacy of labor drama can also be found in the arts-based activism of the US Civil Rights movement between 1955 and 1970. The legacies of Lee Hays and Hollace Ransdell point to the movement's evolution away from theatre toward other forms of arts-based activism. Lee Hays made himself famous through his work with politically-minded folk band The Weavers, whose songs became anthems of the Civil Rights movement. His close friend, Zilphia Horton, also involved herself in the Civil Rights movement and her school and Hays's Tennessee alma mater, Highlander Folk School, evolved into an outpost for activism that still exists today as the Highlander Research and Education Center. Similarly, Hollace Ransdell's last articles about labor drama appeared in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) official publication, *The Crisis* (Ransdell "Soapbox" 122), suggesting an interest in labor drama's format evolving to meet the need of Southern African-American communities in the reality of a failed Southern labor movement.

Another important development in regards to labor drama's connection to the Civil Rights movement might also be found in the formation of the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) in 1937. SNYC, as noted by Carmen Kynard, served as the "ideological and psychic bridge of black student protest literacies" between the 1920s and 1960s (440). The organization also started activism-oriented theatre companies for Southern African-American communities during the 1940s and 1950s and also helped network politically mobilized students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), opening up new lines of communication and exchange through publications and conferences (Kynard 122; Smethurst 322). Future investigations of labor drama's legacies might examine connections between left-leaning labor organizations like the CIO, labor drama, the FTP's Negro Units, and African-American theatre movements like those out of SNYC including the People's Theatre of Richmond, the People's Theatre of New Orleans, and the Puppet Caravan Theatre. Other investigations might look at politically engaged arts programs out of HBCUs, particularly in the South, and out of the Black Arts Movement's Black Theatre and arts programs including the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and the New Lafayette Theatre, among others.

Theatre for Youth

Although this research adds complexity to studies of twentieth century US theatre history, I also intend for my project to inform and complement extant studies about Theatre for Youth (TFY), my primary area of research. As researchers in a young field of scholarship, US TFY historians have only begun to explore the historiographical complexities associated with

documenting the genealogies of theatre with, by, and for young people.[137] Currently, the field continues to evolve as scholars engage with a myriad of ideologically charged concepts, from definitions of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood to understandings of performance paradigms for young people to explorations of power dynamics between adults and youth in the creation of art for young people. These fluctuating understandings continue to shape the ways in which scholars approach the field. Within these negotiations and explorations, the relationship between TFY and education is central, and this dissertation project adds one alternate view regarding how drama and education mixed with one another in the United States.

This alternate view complements extant historical studies that look at performance that developed alongside trends in education, from Charles Stearns's religious dialogues for children designed to reinforce Biblical teachings and develop the "moral child" in 1792 (Levy, "Theatre" 66), to the work of creative drama pioneers like Alice Minnie Hertz, Constance D'Arcy MacKay, and Winifred Ward in the early twentieth century. These pioneers, all women, employed pedagogic drama in their work with immigrant children at settlement houses, many who worked with these organization as part of the women's service organization, the Junior League. Many children's theatre and theatre for youth companies still operating today maintain historical roots

[137] While I opt for the term "Theatre for Youth" to discuss this field, my usage should be considered in context of a myriad of other terms used to define the field of theatre with, by, and for young people in the United States. Drama in Education (DIE), synonymous with Creative Dramatics, refers to process-oriented pedagogic drama without a formal presentation or performance of work. Theatre in Education (TIE), often situated under the larger heading of Applied Theatre, refers to formal productions including a large educational component, produced for and with young people for a specific pedagogic purpose (i.e. bullying, hygiene, racism, etcetera). Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) refers to professional theatre by adults for children that include less explicit pedagogical goals, but which may have aesthetic goals and often has hidden or implicit educational components.

with these Junior League programs and with Settlement House initiatives of the TFY pioneers.[138] Since few historical investigations of other experimentation in pedagogic drama during this period exist, scholars justifiably, but steadfastly, conceive of the field as shaped and constrained by its focus on young children and its reliance upon appropriate and normative subject matter that reinforced a limited set of values and ideologies grounded in the work of these important figures in the field. However, this focus on the normalizing force of drama in the lives of children suggests that the field developed out of a very narrowly defined set of material conditions in which few, if any, radical or experimental ideologies influenced work with drama and young people.

This study functions as only one of many possible alternative studies of US TFY histories. By examining new spaces in which young people engaged in dramatics curriculums in order to learn, this dissertation nuances understandings and conceptions of TFY forms. It also emphasizes one example from the many alternative dramatic projects that engage with and potentially counteract these dominant constructions of US TFY's narrowly defined history. By investigating these drama experiments in labor colleges, I not only illuminate an often forgotten period of US theatre history, but I also intend to craft an alternative historical narrative that expands discussions of TFY and its connection to broader artistic and cultural developments. As

[138] See van de Water's articles, "Constructed Narratives: Situating Theatre for Young Audiences in the United States" and "Constance D'Arcy MacKay: A Historiographical Perspective;" Roger Bedard and John Tolch's *Spotlight on the Child*; Roger Bedard's "The Cultural Construction of Theatre for Children and Young Audiences: A Captive Eddy of Recursive Harmonies;" Stephani Etheridge Woodson's "(Re) Conceiving 'Creative Drama': An Exploration and Expansion of American Metaphorical Paradigms" and "Creating an Educational Theatre Program for the Twenty-First Century;" and Drew Chappell's "Constructions of Revolt of the Beavers and Notions of the Child Audience: Controversy in the Federal Theatre Project" for examples of essays that look critically at the historiographical conservatism present in studies of TFY.

mentioned in my first chapter, my study highlights the two developing trajectories of drama in educational contexts during this period— one toward Winifred Ward's creative dramatics and the Junior League's booming children's theatre programs and another toward communist drama, the Federal Theatre Project, and artist blacklisting. The connections between these two lines of study are ripe for future investigation and point to other avenues for thinking about drama, education, and young people.

Conclusion

By connecting educational trends, political movements, and performance innovations, this study demonstrate the value of looking closely at marginalized voices, failed experiments, and dangerous art in order to develop more interconnected, more nuanced, and more democratic histories of US theatre. Although this dissertation tells many tales of woe, it reminds me, a young historian, to look beyond boundaries and to reconceive of aesthetic, political, educational and artistic value in evaluating historical records around performance. It also encourages me to think carefully and critically about the past and how it shapes understandings of the present. Above all, this research drives me to look for silenced voices, to carefully and respectfully evaluate why those voices were eliminated from the histories of US theatre, and to help reconstruct the moments in which they spoke, worked, experimented, failed, succeeded, and collaborated in order to make more rich understandings of our collective past.

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