Battling the Great Depression on Stage in Indiana

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The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) during the 1930s was, in many respects, a typical New Deal response to the economic crisis of the Great Depression. It was an experiment to create jobs for the unemployed—in this case theater people, including actors, directors, and technical crew. The federal government initiated, financed, and regulated the project, and the American public enjoyed its results in a variety of dramatic productions at minimal cost. In the end the FTP, like so many other New Deal programs, became embroiled in partisan controversy and expired before it could prove its potential or leave a significant legacy. Indiana's participation in the FTP was not unlike that of the other thirty states, and the District of Columbia, which hosted this New Deal experiment, but it did differ in two major ways. Whereas most state projects assumed an almost passive role and followed federal directives, Indiana's chartered an almost autonomous course often in conflict with national wishes. And whereas the original goal was to create a "national theater" with considerable standardization of American themes, the Hoosier FTP prided itself on staging works by Indiana authors about local subjects. While not openly defiant of federal goals and regulations, Indiana's FTP proved an example of state independence and provincial pride much in keeping with the state's tradition of individualism. As a case study, the Indiana FTP reveals a unique instance of the arts being used to combat economic depression, provides new evidence about the tensions between federal centralization and Hoosier "home rule," and exposes a philosophical contradiction within the New Deal itself.

Beginning in 1929, the Great Depression proved resistant to private and governmental remedies. Banks failed, factories closed, farmers could not find markets for their products. Unemployment reached a record high of thirteen million, an estimated 25 percent

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of the work force. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, starting in 1933, tried several new measures that proved only partly successful. The Bank Holiday and reform legislation stabilized the financial community, and farm programs helped to reduce agricultural surpluses. Unemployment, however, remained high as the private sector failed to absorb the jobless. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) distributed $3,000,000,000 in welfare benefits to millions of needy, including four hundred thousand people in Indiana. To provide jobs in late 1933 and early 1934, the Civil Works Administration (CWA) employed at its peak four million jobless, more than one hundred thousand of whom were Hoosiers. These emergency measures reduced some of the economic woes but were admittedly temporary. A larger, more systematic, attack on unemployment seemed to be needed; thus, the Works Projects Administration (WPA) was established in 1935 under the direction of Harry Hopkins, who had also directed both the FERA and CWA.

The WPA created a massive number of jobs and, at the same time, produced useable or lasting facilities for the public. When possible the WPA tried to match jobs with the skills of the jobless, not just hire people for make-work activities. The agency lasted until 1943 when World War II rendered it unnecessary, and it ultimately hired approximately nine million people and spent more than $11,000,000,000. Famous for road work, the WPA also built thousands of schools, parks, and bridges. In Indiana alone it employed ninety-nine thousand at its peak, spent a total of $302,000,000, and worked on 24,000 miles of roads, 3,000 bridges, 361 parks, and 78 schools.

A small and unique section of WPA employed artists, musicians, writers, and theater personnel. Known as Federal One, it never constituted more than 2 percent of the total WPA work force, but it generated more publicity and controversy than the other 98 percent. Federal One's employees painted murals in public buildings, performed musical programs, wrote such publications as the American Guide series, and staged hundreds of theatrical productions for an audience of millions. This extraordinary government subsidy for the arts was virtually unprecedented in the United

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4 WPA, Final Report, 111, 120, 135.
5 William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration (Columbus, 1969), 172.
States and produced as many opponents as it did advocates. Hopkins shrugged off criticism of artists-on-the-dole with the cryptic comment, "they've got to eat just like other people."

Darkened theaters across America in 1935 stood in mute testimony to the effect of the Great Depression and the need for Federal One. Unemployed workers did not purchase tickets; consequently, inactive box offices could not pay actors’ salaries. Broadway, the keystone of American theatrical life, had more than sixty legitimate theaters in predepression days but was reduced to fewer than forty operating houses in the mid-1930s. The “road” had also dried up; touring companies that took Broadway shows by truck and train to regional audiences had declined from eighteen to one or two. A leading theater in Denver had been used as a gathering site for a group predicting the imminent end of the world, and in Atlanta the major legitimate house had been dark for several years. Of the four theaters that hosted Indianapolis’s major live performances—the Murat, Indiana, English, and B. F. Keith’s—only the English was still functioning, and it presented infrequent road appearances.

Estimates of unemployed theater personnel vary widely; Actor’s Equity stated that eight thousand of its members were out of work, and the number swelled to thirty thousand if musicians, stagehands, and vaudevillians were added to the list.

Hopkins believed that the WPA’s response to the depressed theatrical situation needed to be national in scope, not merely to resuscitate Broadway. “This is an American job,” he stated, “not just a New York job. I want someone who knows and cares about other parts of the country.” He selected Hallie Flanagan to lead the FTP because she fit that description. Hopkins and Flanagan had known each other since their childhood in Iowa, and both had graduated from Grinnell College there. While he pursued a career of public service, she became a professor of dramatics. At the time of her appointment she was teaching at Vassar College not far from the Roosevelt home in Hyde Park, New York. Flanagan favored experimental theater rather than the popular commercial stage. Her travel in Europe and Russia had resulted in several publications.

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9 Charles F. Schlegel to Senator James Van Nuys, September 17, 1935, box 74, WPA Collection. Schlegel was secretary of Stage Employees Local #30, International Alliance Theatrical State Employees.
that lauded new stage techniques and dramas of social protest. She was short of stature but seemed to compensate with high energy and strong opinions. Her husband and children permitted her this venture into federal service in 1935 because she envisioned the FTP as a major catalyst for change. The project could go well beyond the simple employment of actors, she believed. It could lead to "the establishment of theatres so vital to community life that they will continue to function" long after the New Deal measures were no longer necessary.\(^\text{12}\)

Under Flanagan's creative leadership the FTP fulfilled many of its goals between 1935 and 1939. The project provided jobs for an average of ten thousand unemployed theater people per year and paid them wages that averaged $20.00 per week.\(^\text{13}\) They presented plays, puppet shows, and vaudeville acts for an audience estimated at thirty million people, some of whom had never experienced live theater previously. Many of the performances charged no admission fee, and those that did had a top ticket price far below the going rate for regular commercial presentations. In Indianapolis, for example, the most expensive FTP ticket was forty cents compared to $2.75 for the best ticket to a commercial touring production.\(^\text{14}\) Many young actors such as Joseph Cotton, Arlene Francis, and Burt Lancaster kept their fledgling careers moving with FTP work, and several directors such as Orson Welles and John Houseman advanced their reputations with these government-sponsored ventures. Welles in particular gained notoriety by staging a version of Macbeth with an all black cast set in Haiti. The "Voodoo Macbeth" opened in New York, then toured the country, including a stop in Indiana. In keeping with Flanagan's experimental bent, the FTP incorporated new techniques and social protest in its Living Newspaper productions, which highlighted current issues with multimedia presentations. Perhaps the peak of the FTP's success came with the premier of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, an antifascist production based on Lewis's recent novel. Amid a barrage of publicity, the FTP mounted multiple versions of the play simultaneously in eighteen cities, one of which was Indianapolis.\(^\text{15}\)

Controversy and criticism matched the FTP's success. Its government subsidies and low ticket prices brought charges of unfair competition from some theater owners. Despite Hopkins's declaration that the FTP was to be "free, adult, uncensored" theater,\(^\text{16}\) several productions were delayed, censored, or closed by government.

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\(^{14}\) Indianapolis *Star*, March 1, 1936.

\(^{15}\) Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The History of the Federal Theatre* (New York, 1940), 6, 33, 74, 123.

officials who regarded their content too sensitive or troublesome. A Living Newspaper production of *Ethiopia* raised potential problems for United States foreign policy, so it closed. A children’s presentation of *Revolt of the Beavers* convinced some critics that it advocated worker rebellion and communal living; it, too, died a premature death. Some conservative politicians found the FTP a vulnerable target for their attacks on the New Deal and branded it a hotbed of radicalism, even communism. Congressional investigators accused the FTP of fiscal irresponsibility and ideological subversion although they substantiated few of these allegations. By 1939, however, President Roosevelt had to compromise with his critics, and the FTP was one of the New Deal measures to be jettisoned. Its innovation and visibility made it an easy scapegoat, then a sacrificial lamb.17

Indiana, like thirty other states, had enough unemployed theater personnel to justify a local FTP unit. With the exception of Kentucky all of the Hoosier state’s neighbors also established their own theater project. National FTP leaders selected state directors to survey WPA relief rolls to find qualified theater people—actors, directors, and technical crew—and transfer them to the FTP rolls. Although the WPA was, in a sense, the parent of FTP, the family relationship was unusual and strained. Semi-autonomous as a federal employee, the state FTP director would work with the state WPA director but not be accountable to him; he was responsible directly to the national FTP director and had a budget separate from the state WPA budget. This tortuous chain of command was destined to create political and budgetary conflicts.

The man selected to direct the Indiana FTP was well suited to manage a project for theater people but was not particularly well equipped to deal with the overlapping bureaucracy and regulations of both state and federal governments. Lee Norvelle came to the job with the right academic credentials. He was a professor of speech and theater at Indiana University and had successfully directed shows in makeshift spaces since 1925. He was also a man of unconventional background and firm opinions. A native of Kentucky, he had dropped out of elementary school, then resumed his education at age nineteen. Following a series of transfers in and out of several colleges, Norvelle finally entered Indiana University from which he graduated in 1922. He taught briefly in Iowa and Montana before returning to Bloomington in 1925 to teach and complete his doctorate. Some of his colleagues thought his degree in psychology was a strange choice for a theater director, but Norvelle believed the study of human behavior was a logical course to pursue.18 Even

17 Ibid., 67-68, 116-18, chapter 17, passim.
18 Lee Norvelle, *The Road Taken* (Bloomington, Ind., 1980), passim; Norvelle, “Interview with Richard Doud,” June 23, 1964, transcript, pp. 1-2 (Archives of Amer-
LEE NORVELLE
AS PICTURED IN THE 1933 INDIANA UNIVERSITY ARBUTUS

Indiana University Archives, Bloomington.
though Norvelle had not sought this FTP position, he accepted the appointment willingly and with full knowledge of the national goals and challenges. Indiana University granted him a leave of absence, and he took up temporary housing at the Lincoln Hotel in Indianapolis in November, 1935. Tall and somewhat dapper, Norvelle sported a bow tie and mustache and soon became a major player in a political and artistic drama in the capital city.\textsuperscript{19}

Norvelle's appointment as the state FTP director in 1935 set off a series of clashes between Indiana and federal politicians. These conflicts often caught Norvelle between two governmental forces and revealed the tensions between regional pride and federal power. The tension had been there through most of the Hoosier past but was more intense since citizen dependence on federal largess had accelerated during the depression. Between 1933 and 1935 Hopkins's FERA had distributed welcome relief revenues in Indiana, but the accompanying pressure to centralize and professionalize the welfare bureaucracy of the state was an unwelcome threat to old traditions. Township trustees had long operated with considerable autonomy in administering relief to the state's needy. Unlike most other states Indiana managed to win several battles in this welfare war, with Hoosier home-rule advocates maintaining much local control over the national relief funds. A similar struggle and compromise occurred in 1936 when the State Department of Public Welfare was established to accommodate the new national Social Security administration. Indiana again welcomed the federal revenues but insisted on controlling many aspects of their local implementation.\textsuperscript{20} Caught in this political crossfire, Norvelle found himself on unfamiliar ground and almost abandoned the FTP experiment.

National FTP director Flanagan and regional FTP director Thomas Wood Stevens in Chicago had selected Norvelle for the job, established his salary, and briefed him on the procedures for setting up the state unit. Indiana Governor Paul V. McNutt and state WPA administrator Wayne Coy were fully apprised of these developments, but when press releases from Washington announced Norvelle's appointment, Indiana politicians took umbrage at what they regarded as usurpation of their responsibility. Although Coy was a federal WPA official, his loyalties were to Indiana and his mentor, McNutt. He had been the governor's aide before being appointed to the WPA position, and his traditional political instincts compelled him to protect state prerogatives and McNutt's

\textsuperscript{19} Indianapolis Star, November 13, 1935; FTP, “Personal History Form,” box 59, WPA Collection.

reputation. As a result, Norvelle got no cooperation from Coy's office in setting up the FTP unit. Norvelle later remembered that one of Coy's assistants "had been told to give me the smallest available office and the least qualified secretary . . . and let me cool my heels until I learned who should give out the news releases."21 After weeks of foot-dragging by the state WPA organization and the resultant inactivity, Norvelle was finally able to select FTP personnel from WPA relief rolls and was ready to begin; but he found state WPA officials reluctant to release the necessary funds. The frustrated Norvelle threatened to resign, telling his federal superiors that he was tired of being "indefinitely delayed through the political maneuvering of persons who are not in sympathy . . . ."22 Several hasty telephone calls and wires from federal to state administrators broke the impasse, and Norvelle moved ahead; but state leaders displayed a lingering fear and mistrust that this new enterprise might prove an embarrassing boondoggle over which they had little control.23

This extended tug-of-war was not a partisan struggle; all the participants—federal, state, and Norvelle—were some shade of Democrat. The conflict also had little to do with clashes of personality or ego. McNutt generally cooperated with the Roosevelt administration because he wanted the presidential nomination for himself in the near future. Norvelle cooperated with McNutt because of a long mutual friendship.24 The clash was, instead, a power play between two levels of government. It sprang from generations of distrust over federal and state jurisdictions, the lines of which were shifting rapidly during the 1930s.

A similar but briefer power play took place concerning the selection of a theater building for the Hoosier FTP. Norvelle had negotiated rental terms for B. F. Keith's theater, a site he considered suitable for his project. This venerable vaudeville house, located at 117 North Pennsylvania, dated back to 1875. It had changed names and functions several times, then remained dark during the early depression. Keith's had a lighted marquee, gilded balconies and boxes, an orchestra pit, special effect machines, adequate dressing rooms and office space, seating for almost 1,400, and an ideal downtown location close to several popular restaurants.25 United Theatres Company owned Keith's and was willing to see the building put to good use for reasonable terms. The FTP would pay

21 Thomas Wood Stevens to Lee Norvelle, November 5, 6, 1935, file 1920–1939, Lee Norvelle Collection (Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington); Norvelle, Interview I, 7-8.
22 Norvelle to Stevens, January 27, 1936, box 59, WPA Collection.
23 Stevens to Norvelle, January 29, 1936, box 59, WPA Collection; Stevens to Hallie Flanagan, January 31, 1936, box 99, ibid.; Lee Norvelle, "Interview with K. Wickre," November 18, 1979, transcript, p. 6, FTP Collection (George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia). This interview is hereafter cited as Norvelle, Interview II.
24 Norvelle, The Road Taken, 249-50, 286.
B. F. Keith's Theatre, 1916
(Keith's Looked the Same in the 1930s)

75 percent of its gross receipts, and the theater owners would use 25 percent of that to publicize the group’s productions. Coy was reluctant, however, for the FTP to rent Keith’s. He doubted that the project would succeed and wanted Norvelle to find a smaller auditorium. Coy questioned whether a company of unemployed actors could attract large crowds, and empty rows of seats in the cavernous Keith’s would just draw attention to the skimpy attendance. Indiana could be humiliated by this failure. Coy’s reservations were justifiable. FTP projects elsewhere were getting a rocky start with resignations, censorship disputes, and bad publicity, all of which had been reported in Indiana newspapers. A desire to protect Indiana from similar failure could explain Coy’s lack of enthusiasm for grandiose plans. Norvelle won on this battle, however; and the FTP opened in Keith’s on schedule, although a little less ready than the theater group had hoped because of the various obstacles that had been placed in its way.

Norvelle had few illusions about the professional quality of his local troupe of theater people. They all came from the ranks of the unemployed. He also never forgot that the FTP was a relief project first and foremost. What emerged from Norvelle’s survey of the state WPA relief rolls was an eclectic mixture of talent and experience. From a pool of approximately eighty eligible individuals, he assembled a professional stage director, twenty or so actors, two electricians, a carpenter, wardrobe mistress, assorted stage hands, and a janitorial staff. “None of these people were extremely talented,” he recalled, “but they’d done all kinds of work.” For instance, Jack Duval was an actor of considerable experience and competence but currently down on his luck, and Joseph Shea had once worked as a properties man for the Metropolitan Opera. Early in the process of developing the casts for plays, Norvelle lamented to the national FTP the dim prospects of mounting viable shows with the “frail reeds” that he had assembled. This problem was not unique to the Hoosier state; it was common to FTP units across America. Consequently, federal guidelines permitted state directors to supplement their troupes with nonrelief personnel to enhance the quality of productions so long as these extras did not exceed 10 percent of the total payroll. On occasion, then, Norvelle would hire some of his students from the Bloomington campus, and the national FTP would “loan” extra actors. For example seven actors from New York transferred to Indianapolis, eight to Detroit, and nine to Atlanta.

Despite the uneven levels of talent, these employees impressed

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26 Norvelle to Ivan Paul, August 1, 1936, box 59, WPA Collection.
27 Norvelle, Interview I, 9-10; Indianapolis News, February 17, 1936.
28 FTP, Technical Survey, April, 1937; Norvelle, Interview II, 5.
29 Indianapolis Times, June 22, 1936; Norvelle, Interview II, 20.
30 Norvelle to William Farnsworth, March 20, 1936, box 59, WPA Collection; John McGee to Hallie Flanagan, April 26, 1937, box 37, WPA Collection.
Norvelle with their eagerness to succeed. They were proud and did not want to be regarded as indigent; they worked hard and long and did not demand overtime wages. And they developed a hearty group morale which Norvelle encouraged and enjoyed.31

Included in the approximately eighty Hoosiers employed in the Indiana FTP were two groups who did not normally perform at Keith’s in Indianapolis. From the ranks of the unemployed Norvelle inherited two vaudeville ensembles, one white and one black, which performed skits and musical numbers. These ensembles worked independently and accepted bookings around the state where they frequently entertained, at no charge, enthusiastic audiences at schools, civic organizations, and many Civilian Conservation Corps camps.32 Norvelle also established a children’s theater in Gary. Prior to the arrival of the WPA, Gary resident Betty Lyman had conducted a children’s theatrical workshop in the city, and the FTP incorporated this group into a project that continued and accelerated its momentum. A few adults received pay for directing and technical work, and children from the Calumet region learned and performed.33 This children’s unit and the two vaudeville ensembles were intriguing facets of the Hoosier FTP. They both merit further scholarly investigation.

Selecting plays for his troupe to perform at Keith’s placed Norvelle at odds with national FTP goals. Part of Flanagan’s vision was to create a national theater that would provide bold, high-quality productions. She was tired of commercial Broadway shows that toured or were mounted by local companies in watered-down versions of their New York originals; consequently, she encouraged state directors to innovate rather than follow old traditions. As admirable as this policy might have been—and as in keeping with other New Deal experiments—Indiana’s FTP did not pursue this course as often as Flanagan wished or as well as other state units. At times Norvelle’s selections of plays directly conflicted with Flanagan’s suggestions. Some of the conflict sprang from their philosophical differences. Flanagan advocated the avant garde in drama and wanted to educate and stretch the audience. Norvelle, on the other hand, was more comfortable with entertainment than inspiration. Although both were academics, she was world-traveled and worked at an elite eastern school; his experience was rooted in mid-America with its more conservative taste. Flanagan and Norvelle also differed in their perception of the audience’s role. She accepted the unique reality of a government-subsidized theater in which audience reaction and box office receipts were secondary; artistic merit was the primary goal. Norvelle, to the contrary, never departed from the rule that the public had to be pleased, that ticket

32 FTP, Technical Survey.
33 Flanagan, Arena, 152-54.
sales and audience applause were synonymous with success. Their personal differences also reflected contrasting economic beliefs. Flanagan was a true New Dealer, who believed that people and federal programs to help them were more important than balanced budgets. Norvelle’s penurious youth had made him cautious with money, and his adopted state of Indiana lived under a constitution that forbade deficit spending.

These differences in background and philosophy manifested themselves in divergent attitudes about what shows to produce. The national FTP established the National Play Bureau to evaluate and recommend to state directors suitable scripts for production. This group of professionals judged plays on their technical and acting difficulty, their content and message, and their potential cost and audience reaction. Although the bureau could recommend and discourage, it did not have mandatory powers; consequently, it had virtually no impact on what appeared on the stage at Keith’s in 1936–1937. Norvelle walked an independent line and ignored the advice of the bureau most of the time. “I did it on my own,” he recalled later, and put together a “good mixture of farce, comedy and tragedy.” He selected plays that he had produced earlier at Indiana University or ones with which his stage director felt comfortable. Charles Berkell, Norvelle’s first stage director, had managed stock companies for many years in Indiana and worked well with older, traditional fare. James Cameron from New York replaced Berkell in late 1936, but play selection changed little. Standard fare continued despite the bureau’s encouragement to be more modern and experimental. A review of the forty-one locally produced shows indicates that an overwhelming number of them were older, conventional, familiar pieces. From The Old Maid to Sis Hopkins to Penny Arcade, Hoosier FTP selections did not aspire to challenge or stretch the audience. On two occasions Norvelle relented to bureau pressure and mounted Noah and Laughing Boy, new plays with unusual treatments. Neither could be regarded as successful, judging from reviewer comments and small audiences. If anything, this rare departure from the familiar must have confirmed Norvelle’s position about appropriate fare for Hoosier tastes.

Flanagan and Norvelle argued frequently about play selection. He insisted that since the local FTP had no stars with which to attract an audience he had to present shows of popular appeal. The highly publicized It Can’t Happen Here, which drew small audiences and lackluster reviews, provided further proof of his contention. The experimental, topical, and satirical Living Newspaper productions were popular in such major cities as New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia; but Norvelle was reluctant to try

34 Norvelle, Interview II, 21; Norvelle, Interview I, 13.
one at Keith’s for a supposedly less sophisticated audience. Flanagan convinced directors at several smaller cities—Seattle, Detroit, Dallas, Cincinnati, Milwaukee, New Orleans, and Portland, Oregon, for example—to mount Living Newspaper shows, but she could not persuade Norvelle to experiment with the new medium. Although he offered to resign if she could find a replacement for him, nothing came of this offer, and Flanagan had to accommodate his less than innovative approach. Later Norvelle took great delight in recalling, frequently and correctly, that box office receipts in Indiana paid for more of the production costs than did those of any other state FTP unit except the one in Illinois.36 An artistic and fiscal conservative to the end, Norvelle enjoyed applause of a different kind.

Norvelle and Flanagan disagreed even more strongly about production schedules than about play selection. He wanted to present a different show each week to keep the bill changing rapidly, thereby encouraging audiences to develop a habit of attending the theater regularly.37 The first five productions of the Indiana FTP ran for one week each with the next show in rehearsal. Berkell, the stage director, had long experience with stock companies and weekly changes of bill, so Norvelle’s policy had some local precedent. Doubting that Norvelle could produce plays of sufficient quality in so short a time, Flanagan questioned this routine early on. In April, 1936, only a month after the Hoosier unit opened, she wrote him: “I am wondering whether it is necessary to change the bill every week . . . . It is difficult for me to believe that any standard, after only a week’s rehearsal can be very high . . . .” She reminded him that all the other FTP projects devoted more time to rehearsal and presentation and that dark days with nothing playing were of little consequence. “Nowhere else in the country,” she insisted, “have we any company offering so rapid a turnover.”38 Although a complete listing of rehearsal times for all FTP units is not available, a comparison with two others is revealing. The average time spent in preparation for a play in Los Angeles was about six weeks; in Chicago it was two months.39

Whether or not Flanagan knew it, reviewers for the three Indianapolis newspapers often confirmed her doubts. Critics from the Star, News, and Times covered all the local FTP productions, and for the most part they wrote professional reviews that commented on both strengths and weaknesses, acting as well as technical work. A recurring theme from these reviews was that the cast could use more rehearsal time or that the opening night show was not quite ready.

36 Norvelle, Interview I, 10-11; Norvelle, Interview II, 8; Flanagan, Arena, 435.
37 Norvelle, Interview I, 10-12.
38 Flanagan to Norvelle, April 9, 1936, box 15, WPA Collection.
In apparent response to these criticisms Norvelle modified his routine. Some plays began to run for two weeks, but only once in the first year of production did Norvelle allow the theater to sit dark. Flanagan's assistant, John McGee, continued to pressure Norvelle for more quality and less quantity. He advised, "I think you ought not to open a play until you definitely know you are ready, even if it means dark weeks." Regardless, after a few more shows with two week runs, Norvelle returned to his weekly change of bill. Small audiences and weak box office receipts did not seem to justify extended runs. Finally FTP suggestions turned into regulations, and Norvelle's independence presumably was one of the reasons for the change. In April, 1937, the FTP Play Policy Board ruled that "weekly stock has no place on the Federal Program and that such companies as are now playing weekly stock shift to a production basis . . . more generally in line with FTP policies . . ." McGee informed Flanagan that this new ruling could possibly "break the Indiana project" and suggested to Norvelle that fewer and better shows might attract larger audiences than the "continuous and rather mediocre performances" at Keith's. The Hoosier unit subsequently did produce fewer shows alternating with dark weeks, but the resulting productions were not necessarily better because of the scheduling changes. Said Pasha, the only musical offered by the Indiana FTP, opened to uniformly negative notices following ample rehearsal time.

The national FTP scheduling victory over Indiana was somewhat Pyrrhic. The Hoosier FTP ceased operation in July, 1937, for reasons partly related to scheduling. Norvelle knew that the quality of his productions was not very high; that hallmark had never been a primary goal. He also knew that attendance was declining, a fact that was of some concern. Other factors also led to the demise of the project. Because of a WPA funding cutback all FTP units had to reduce personnel in mid-1937, a reduction that Norvelle felt his small group could not survive. These conditions, combined with his desire to remain in Bloomington full time, spelled the end of the Indianapolis unit. The Indiana FTP jettisoned future productions and ceased operations with the final performance of Bill of Divorcement, their forty-first production. That play had a run of ten days. Norvelle remained independent to the end.

Flanagan's vision for the FTP included an American theater to focus on national themes, but this part of her conception was doomed by a variety of factors. Regional art had become a powerful phenomenon in the 1920s, a circumstance that continued during the Great Depression. Such painters as John Steuart Curry
(Kansas), Thomas Hart Benton (Missouri), and Grant Wood (Iowa) had gained popularity beyond their geographical constituency, and the famous Hoosier Group preceded them by several years. Some of the state FTP directors tapped into this cultural phenomenon. They discovered that puppet shows and patriotic pageants which highlighted local history were easy to mount and generated audience enthusiasm. A few states staged full-scale dramatic productions to instill pride in local heritage. North Carolina’s *The Lost Colony* dramatized its sixteenth-century settlement; Oregon produced a show about flax production in its Willamette Valley; and Illinois hosted productions about its favorite son, Abraham Lincoln, in both Peoria and Springfield. FTP companies in major urban centers sometimes paid tribute to their local ethnic populations with performances in Spanish or Yiddish, and there were several shows by and about African Americans. Flanagan also found that many directors chose to ignore her interest in national themes for reasons of finance or expedience. Shakespeare was in the public domain, so his works appeared frequently and reduced royalty costs. Local adaptations of such classics as *Cinderella* and *Hansel and Gretel* also appeared with regularity for young audiences.43

Norvelle departed further from Flanagan’s national emphasis than did most state FTP directors, and his obvious regionalism pointed out a major contradiction in her vision. Indiana distinguished itself by promoting state playwrights, Hoosier settings, and local connections. Although a few state units mounted an occasional production to capitalize on local pride, Norvelle made concerted attempts to move in this direction. Indiana authors wrote five of the forty-one locally produced shows, and these productions received heavy promotion on that angle alone. Had the Indiana FTP not ended in July, 1937, the next scheduled play would have been another Hoosier offering. Norvelle had earlier informed the national headquarters that he was seeking additional scripts by state authors, and an invitation to Hoosier playwrights to submit their manuscripts for consideration drew a large number of potential plays.44 Audience reaction proved Norvelle’s regional focus a valid one. The best attendance for any one-week run was for *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, written and dramatized by Hoosiers about a local subject; and the record holder for attendance at a two-week run was *Do Unto Others*, likewise written by an Indiana playwright and with a Hoosier setting.45 This almost provincial focus in Indiana was actually more in harmony with the WPA’s vision of public works than was Planagan’s concept of a federal theater; her nationalism contradicted a strong regionalism in Hopkins’s agency and caused tensions between New Deal planners and local administra-

44 Indiana Narrative Report, December 1, 1936, box 96, WPA Collection.
tors. The WPA's project for writers employed thousands of Americans to research and publish books on state and local heritage for the American Guide series. Likewise, the project for artists encouraged painters to emphasize local themes for gallery exhibits and murals for public buildings. What might have appeared at the time to be obstinance or parochialism by Norvelle was more nearly in keeping with the WPA's goals than was Flanagan's personal agenda.

Norvelle knew from the outset that the opening show for the Indiana FTP would be a Hoosier offering. Which one was problematic because of the political and financial roadblocks in his way, but he was determined to inaugurate the state project with something local on the boards. With only two weeks left prior to opening night he was still unsure about the precise title, but he assured the Indianapolis Star that Keith's would present "a play with some regional interest" in order to build local pride and a vested interest in the enterprise. He had toyed with the idea of producing The County Chairman by Indiana humorist George Ade. This show had been a hit when it opened on Broadway in 1903, and it featured a topic dear to the hearts of many Hoosiers—politics. Just the year before it had been adapted for the screen, and the movie had starred Will Rogers. Ultimately, and at the last moment, he selected Clarence by Booth Tarkington.

The selection of Clarence, according to Norvelle, was "not by happenstance"; it was planned with publicity in mind. Tarkington was a famous native son and still lived in the capital city. His novels had been popular for decades, and he was the recipient of Pulitzer prizes for The Magnificent Ambersons and Alice Adams. Clarence had been one of Tarkington's major stage successes when it opened in 1919. It had starred Alfred Lunt and Helen Hayes, whom the author had had in mind as he wrote the play, and both critics and audiences had enjoyed the production. Although Clarence had not yet been released for stock companies, Tarkington generously allowed Norvelle and the FTP to use it for their opening, and Norvelle emphasized Tarkington's largess in the pre-production publicity. For the gala opening night Norvelle enticed Governor McNutt and Indianapolis mayor John Worth Kern to welcome the audience before curtain time, and according to an observant FTP official, Norvelle managed to pack the house by handing out numerous free passes. An editorial cartoonist for the Indianapolis Times, Russell Berg, captured well the mix of politics and art in his

46 Indianapolis Star, February 15, 1936.
47 Stevens to Flanagan, January 31, 1936, box 99, WPA Collection.
48 Norvelle, Interview I, 10.
50 Indianapolis Times, February 26, 1936.
51 Stevens to Flanagan, March 4, 1936, box 59, WPA Collection.
visual tribute to the occasion. His cartoon depicted Uncle Sam attired in formal silk hat, long coat, and boutonniere entering the theater to see Tarkington’s *Clarence* by the “Federal Players.” The local press was generous with its reviews, regarding the opening as much a social and political success as an artistic one.

For all of its success as an opening show, *Clarence* was an ironic choice twice over. Having wrung all possible publicity from Tarkington’s name and local connection, the FTP was left with a play that offered no other support for Hoosier chauvinism. Indiana had no role in the plot, locale, or characters. Clarence, a veteran, osten-

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52 Indianapolis *Times*, March 2, 1936.
ibly fresh from the Great War, ingratiates himself into the affairs of the Wheeler family in New Jersey until his true identity is revealed near the end of the final act. And if judged on its quality as a script for FTP audiences, *Clarence* might have been in trouble with the professional play evaluators at national headquarters. Those appraisers gave the play a mixed verdict. One found it an amusing vehicle for amateurs, but another declared it dated and "out of joint with Federal Theatre."53 Norvelle was obviously immune to these ironies, and *Clarence* successfully launched the Hoosier FTP with a self-consciously provincial tone.

A dramatization of Edward Eggleston's famous novel, *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, was the second presentation at Keith's of an Indiana playwright. Whereas *Clarence*'s ties with the state were strictly through its author, *Schoolmaster's* locale and subject were both truly Hoosier. Eggleston had grown up along the Ohio River, first in Vevay, then, at various times, in New Albany and Madison. The novel depicted the rural backwardness of southern Indiana as viewed by an itinerant teacher. When the book appeared in 1871, some Hoosiers took umbrage at the negative image of Indiana portrayed therein, especially in the illiteracy of the Flat Creek citizens and their roughhewn dialect.54 Norvelle had grown up in northern Kentucky just a few miles from the story's location, and his background as a dropout from grade school undoubtedly gave him a strong empathy with the story. There had been previous attempts to dramatize the novel for the screen and stage, but Norvelle felt they were not successful because they departed too much from Eggleston's original. He therefore crafted his own version, using as much of "Eggleston's dialogue as possible" and insisting that the "characterizations are, for the most part, identical with those created by Mr. Eggleston."55

Norvelle had premiered an earlier version of his *Schoolmaster* in Bloomington in 1935, so he knew what would work on stage from that experience. Because the fictional Flat Creek citizenry outnumbered the available actors, Norvelle recruited and costumed back-stage crew to fill the smaller roles. When the FTP production opened on March 16, 1936, local newspaper reviewers commented favorably on the elaborate sets of log cabin and schoolhouse interior scenes, and they were amused by the actors' attempts to duplicate nineteenth-century rural dialect. By general consensus one highlight of the play was the same as in the novel, the tense and humorous spelling bee, which brings most of the community together and reveals much about the personalities and motives of the leading

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53 *Clarence*, readers' reports, FTP Collection.
55 Norvelle, *The Road Taken*, 228; *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*, program notes, March 16, 1936, FTP Collection.
National FTP script appraisers were less favorable in their reactions. Some liked the quaintness of the story; others objected to stilted speeches and lack of action. Whatever reservations earlier readers might have expressed about the novel or later federal appraisers felt about the dramatization, audiences in 1936 turned *The Hoosier Schoolmaster* into one of the most popular of all the state FTP offerings. It drew almost five thousand people to its seven performances, or an average house of seven hundred, the best attendance for any one week run at Keith’s. Hoosier audiences obviously enjoyed the depiction of their bucolic past regardless of its negative imagery.

Meredith Nicholson’s *The Campbells are Coming* gave the Hoosier FTP another opportunity to lionize a local writer and publi-

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57 The Hoosier Schoolmaster, readers’ reports, FTP Collection.
THE FEDERAL THEATRE

HALLIE FLANAGAN
National Director

DR. LEE R. NORVELLE
State Director

PRESENTS

WEEK COMMENCING MONDAY NIGHT, JULY 6, 1936

The Federal Players

IN

"THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMING!"

A BRAND NEW COMEDY BY ROBERT PEEL NOBLE BASED ON A SATURDAY EVENING POST STORY BY MEREDITH NICHOLSON

Staged Under the Personal Direction of Charles Berkel
Assisted by Rica Scott Titus
Settings Painted by Richard Cox

PLAY PROGRAM FOR "THE CAMPBELLS ARE COMING"

Federal Theatre Project Collection, George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.

cize an Indiana setting. The play had originally appeared as a short story in the Saturday Evening Post and had attained its dramatic form through an adaptation by Nicholson's nephew, Robert P. Noble. Nicholson's fame and reputation were solid in the state. Often called the dean of Hoosier writers, he had published poems, stories, essays, and novels, most prominent among which were The Hoosiers (1900) and The House of a Thousand Candles (1905). In 1936 he was serving as minister to Venezuela and thus missed the production at Keith's, but he later visited with Norvelle and roundly endorsed the FTP. Regarding the government arts project "a splendid thing both for the theater and the public," he affirmed that he was "strong for the Federal Theatre Project." Nicholson's nephew, also from Indianapolis, was a writer who, at the time of the production of Campbells in his home city, was working on

59 Indiana Narrative Report, January 5, 1937, box 96, WPA Collection.
scripts for the motion picture industry in California. Publicity for
the play emphasized the Hoosier roots of both the writer and adap-
tor, and Corbin Patrick from the Indianapolis Star agreed with
Norvelle that "native drama ought to be encouraged."60

The plot of this Nicholson-Noble play focuses on the efforts to
lure the Campbell family to a mythical Hoosier town of Kearns-
ville in hopes that it will develop new industry and revive the fail-
ing local economy. Although Kearnsville could have been anywhere
in the Midwest, the authors localized the story with frequent geo-
graphical and historical references such as the Wabash River, liter-
ary societies, and relatives named Marshall. Also appearing in the
cast of characters was an aviatrix with obvious similarities to
Amelia Earhart who was on the staff of Purdue University at the
time.61

In a rare display of unanimity local newspaper critics, the audi-
ence, and the national FTP evaluators all agreed about this play
and its production. Indianapolis reviewers found little to praise; the
FTP readers regarded The Campbells are Coming as "unimportant"
and with appeal only to an audience in "the sticks"; and Hoosier
audiences stayed away from the theater.62 Negative reviews of the
production could account for some of the scant attendance, but the
prolonged midwestern heatwave in the summer of 1936 also con-
tributed. Keith's was not air-conditioned and temperatures rose
above 100 degrees for days in a row. During the run of the play one
stretch of pavement in downtown Indianapolis buckled from the
heat. Attendance averaged fewer than two hundred per perfor-
mance and indicated that a Hoosier connection by itself was not
enough to draw audiences to a lukewarm show in a hot auditori-

When Do Unto Others opened at Keith's on April 20, 1936, it
was not just a play with a Hoosier setting written by an Indiana
author; it was also a world premiere. The FTP had two auspicious
phenomena to publicize, and its newspaper advertisements were
larger and contained more visual illustration than for previous
plays. The playwright, Henry K. Burton, was a well-known theatri-
cal personality around the state. A native of Indianapolis, he had
played in summer stock as a youth, managed theaters, produced
shows, and operated a booking agency with his brother. In this lat-
ter capacity he had brought to Indianapolis and befriended such
theatrical luminaries as Will Rogers, Sarah Bernhardt, and Ignace
Paderewski. He had also written articles on entertainment for the
Indianapolis Star and composed campaign songs for the state

60 Indianapolis Star, July 7, 1936.
61 The Campbells are Coming, script, FTP Collection.
62 Indianapolis Star, News, and Times, July 7, 1936; The Campbells are Coming,
readers' reports, FTP Collection.
Republican party. In 1936, as house manager for the FTP, he assisted Norvelle with a variety of chores, including publicity. Burton wrote Do Unto Others as a vehicle for his old friend Charles Althoff, a veteran performer on stage, screen, radio, and vaudeville tours. Although Norvelle was not enthusiastic about the script, he agreed to produce the play only if Althoff could arrange his schedule to appear as its star. Althoff canceled several vaudeville engagements and appeared free of charge as a favor to Burton.

The plot of Do Unto Others was simplistic yet entertaining. Althoff played elderly Uncle Jimmy Waterbury, a wisecracking fiddler who is rescued from a Jasper County poor farm and taken to an Indianapolis mansion by relatives interested in his recent financial windfall. Uncle Jimmy moralizes, jokes, fiddles, and engineers just rewards—good and bad—for the other characters. FTP script eval-

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65 Norvelle, Interview I, 12; Norvelle, Interview II, 9; Indianapolis Star, April 19, 1936.
Battling the Great Depression on Stage

uators agreed with the Indianapolis Times reviewer who said that Do Unto Others "confirms our belief that its author . . . is an excellent theatre manager."66 Criticism to the contrary, the play was held over for an additional week and broke all attendance records for the local FTP.67 Hoosier audiences apparently enjoyed this frothy escape from the realities of the Great Depression. Homegrown world premieres did not have to aspire to artistic greatness in order to please, and Norvelle was always happy with a healthy box office.

Another world premier, One Night at Brenda's, was the fifth and final production of a Hoosier playwright. Its author, Miles Tiernan, was, at the time, assistant city editor of the Indianapolis Star. He had graduated from Shortridge High School in Indianapolis and studied at Butler University before serving in the military during the Great War. He joined the Star as a reporter in 1919 and remained with the paper in various capacities for the rest of his life.68 Long interested in the theater, Tiernan had never had a play produced prior to this one. It received the same boosterish publicity as the other four plays by Indiana authors, and the Indianapolis Star joined in the celebration in a manner that displayed much pride in one of its staff but little professional objectivity.69

The Brenda in question in Tiernan’s comedy-drama operates a roadhouse and nightclub where a group of high school classmates hold a twentieth reunion. There they encounter a group of unsavory characters, some of whom—Willie the Ox and Weepsie Joe—bear more than passing resemblance to characters created by another current newspaperman, Damon Runyon. Although the script was still under revision at the time of production and the setting had nothing to do with Indiana, Tiernan received celebrity attention on opening night. He also received encouraging notices for his "Baptism of fire" on stage and reasonably good attendance.70 Tiernan continued his love of the theater and wrote Man Bites Dog, a play about newspaper work, which the local FTP had scheduled for production when the project closed in July, 1937. Because One Night was still a work in progress and his second effort was not produced, the national FTP script appraisers had no opportunity to evaluate them. Considering their negative record with other Hoosier plays, this silence might have been a good thing for Tiernan’s still optimistic ambitions as a writer in 1936–1937.

66 Indianapolis Times, April 21, 1936; Do Unto Others, readers’ reports, FTP Collection.
69 Indianapolis Star, August 9, 10, 1936.
Indiana's FTP closed before the major criticism of the national FTP damaged its reputation with a taint of radicalism. Norvelle's selection of traditional and nonpolitical plays would have exempted the Hoosier project from most of that criticism anyway. The Indiana FTP was a brief and small episode during the depression, and it did not aspire to greatness or originality as did its national model. It existed to create jobs for the unemployed and to provide entertainment at a low cost. In those two goals it succeeded admirably. Approximately seventy people drew decent wages for plying their craft at Keith's to an audience estimated at 150,000.71 Many of those employees would continue their careers after the FTP closed in 1937, some as actors, some in broadcasting, some in technical work. A few returned to college, and a few retired or returned to relief rolls.72 As short-lived and modest as it was, the Hoosier FTP provides another example of individualism and regional pride to add to the long list that characterizes Indiana history. Pursuing an independent course despite federal wishes to the

71 Flanagan, Arena, 156; Indianapolis News, June 25, 1937.
72 Norvelle, Interview 1, 18; and Indianapolis Star, July 8, 1937.
contrary, and boosting Hoosier playwrights in the face of national conformity, the FTP in Indiana shone uniquely in the national spotlight.

In a broader context the Indiana FTP serves as a microcosm of the political tensions that had kept federal and Hoosier officials wary of each other for generations. The Great Depression heightened those tensions, especially when relief and public works activity created additional disagreements over funding and administration. Norvelle’s interpretation of the FTP—jobs and regionalism—was closely allied with that of the WPA vision. When Flanagan added her own aesthetic and national dimensions to that vision, an inconsistency of goals emerged. This philosophical contradiction further strained relations between Washington and Indianapolis.

Since the 1960s some historians have argued that the roots of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) reach back to Federal One, which included the FTP. Indeed, President Lyndon B. Johnson’s political career began in the 1930s and his Great Society measure can be seen as a continuation of the New Deal’s subsidies for the arts. A closer parallel for the Indiana FTP, however, would be the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1973. CETA provided employment, wages, and training on the job, a less sophisticated concept than the NEA but one more in line with what Norvelle and his company were doing at Keith’s Theatre in the 1930s.