

*Spirochete:*  
A “Living Newspaper” of  
the Federal Theatre Project’s Philadelphia Unit

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**INTRODUCTION**

This study will serve as the basis for a master’s thesis on *Spirochete*, a “Living Newspaper” produced in 1939 by the Philadelphia unit of the Federal Theatre Project. The play, which explores the history of syphilis, was intended to educate the public about the disease and encourage testing and prevention at a time when hundreds of thousands of Americans were being infected.

This paper provides a narrative for how the thesis will proceed, offering a brief history of the Federal Theatre, an overview of the circumstances which led to the original Chicago production of *Spirochete*, and a discussion of the difficulties which hampered its staging in Philadelphia -- including the city’s staunch conservatism and the local unit’s administrative troubles. The study also will explore the play as an example of the Living Newspapers produced by the Federal Theatre, as well as its repercussions and legacy both as education and entertainment.

The sources cited in this initial study are part of the working bibliography for the final thesis, and are just a fraction of the available material on the Federal Theatre, Depression-era politics, the use of propaganda in art, and the syphilis epidemic of the 1930s. Many of the cited

sources are from original documents in the Federal Theatre Projection Collection (FTPC) at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Significantly more primary source material will be utilized in the final thesis. The majority of sources in this study, however, are from published texts on the above topics. A pair of doctoral dissertations on federal arts projects in Philadelphia and on the Chicago production of *Spirochete* also provided background and bibliographic material. To the writer's knowledge, no studies specific to the Philadelphia production of *Spirochete* exist.

This paper includes a chapter list and outline which will provide direction for the thesis.

The key questions to be addressed in the thesis are:

- How was Philadelphia affected by the nation's syphilis epidemic?
- Why was Philadelphia chosen as one of the five U.S. cities which produced *Spirochete*?
- How did cultural attitudes, government bureaucracy, and internal conflicts affect Philadelphia's Federal Theatre?
- How did *Spirochete* lend itself to the Living Newspaper genre, specifically with regard to production techniques and "New Deal" propaganda?
- How did the Philadelphia play differ from other productions?
- What was Philadelphia's critical and public reaction?
- How effective was *Spirochete* in addressing the city's syphilis problem? What was its impact?
- What is the legacy of the Federal Theatre in Philadelphia?

This study is essentially a starting point for the thesis, and is therefore part of the work-in-progress.

## ORIGINS OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT

When Franklin Delano Roosevelt became president in 1933, he inherited a ruined national economy and a devastated workforce which included 15 million unemployed Americans.

Roosevelt's "New Deal" for the country in the midst of the Depression included a proposal for a "public employment program that would provide work for three and a half million able-bodied, but jobless, men and women" (DeHart-Mathews 8). His idea was to eliminate relief programs that had simply handed over money to those in need, and instead put Americans back to work by hiring them for public projects. In 1935, Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to accomplish this goal. Controversial from the start, it was based on the "novel proposal that the unemployed deserved socially useful jobs rather than the humiliation of handouts and bread lines" (DeHart-Mathews vii).

Among these out-of-work citizens were tens of thousands of artists, actors, musicians, and writers. Of the \$5 billion Congress invested in the WPA -- most of which was devoted to countless infrastructure and construction projects all across the nation -- less than 1 percent was provided to employ people in the arts. This modest fraction of the WPA budget was used to create Federal Project Number One, known commonly as "Federal One." It would serve as the umbrella organization for four arts agencies under the WPA: the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Music Project, and the Federal Writers' Project. Because it differed so drastically from the more utilitarian efforts that were undertaken by Roosevelt's new program, Federal One quickly became known as the "white collar division of the WPA" (O'Connor 2). Within its first year of existence, this unique union between government and the arts employed more than 40,000 previously out-of-work individuals.

At the peak of its four-year history, the Federal Theatre Project alone employed nearly 13,000 people. President and Mrs. Roosevelt had supported the idea of a “national theatre” which would function not just in the larger cities where the theatre had thrived before the Depression, but also in rural areas where citizens had never seen live performances (McDonald 496). This “free, adult, uncensored” theatre, as WPA Director Harry Hopkins envisioned it, provided work for actors, directors, writers, musicians, dancers, designers, stagehands, office staff, and other theatre professionals. Among the project’s more well-known rising stars were Joseph Cotten, John Houseman, John Huston, Burt Lancaster, Sidney Lumet, Arthur Miller, Clifford Odets, Paul Robeson, and Orson Welles, all of whom acted, directed, or wrote for the Federal Theatre (DeNoon 57).

Between 1935 and 1939 the Federal Theatre staged 2,700 productions, including classical dramas, original comedies, “Living Newspapers,” children’s shows, marionette theatre, circuses, dance, vaudeville and variety shows. Its performers played in theatres, hospitals, schools, parks, prisons, churches, and circus tents, reaching more than 30 million people, many of whom had never seen live theatre before. Only a fraction of these audiences were charged admission (Brown, “Introduction”; “New Deal Stage”).

The project’s national director was Hallie Flanagan, who had made her reputation at Vassar College’s Experimental Theatre. Her vision for the project was a national theatre which would be socially conscious, regionally oriented, and meaningful to the communities it would serve (Brown, “Introduction” xiv). In *Arena*, her memoir of the Federal Theatre Project, Flanagan said:

[T]he arts are useful in making people better citizens . . . which is, after all, the aim of a democracy. . . . [The theatre] is a necessity because in order to make

democracy work the people must increasingly participate; they can't participate unless they understand; and the theatre is one of the great mediums of understanding. (372)

The goal of the project wasn't just relief, therefore, but also social reform (Mathews 307).

### **THE FEDERAL THEATRE IN PHILADELPHIA**

Although the Federal Theatre was successful in its primary mission -- putting people to work -- Flanagan's ideals were seen by many conservatives, particularly in the federal government, as radical in nature. Accusations of Communist influence and overspending would eventually take their toll on the project, which also saw a significant amount of resistance in some regions of the U.S. that were either ill-equipped or unwilling to support the Federal Theatre. The Philadelphia unit in particular experienced more than its fair share of conflict. The theatre had never been a strong institution there, and because the old-world mores of the City of Brotherly Love had survived long into the 20th century, the project found opposition in many circles which did not value "show people" as artists, and were therefore doubtful of the worth of the endeavor.

Several other factors had already crippled Philadelphia's theatre scene by the time the Depression struck. For one, Hollywood's "Golden Age" was in full swing, and since the movies were cheaper and more glamorous than stage productions, an escape-seeking public clamored to see them (Izod 9). In addition, Pennsylvania's "Blue Laws" prohibited any form of paid entertainment on Sundays, thus keeping theatres dark (Klein 484). Also, the city had a censorship board which had the power to close productions that did not conform to local morality (Weigley 593-94). To make matters worse, pressure from the Catholic church to

improve film content had resulted in a widespread movie boycott which also extended to the city's stages in 1934 (Dolan 350). As a result of these hindrances, Philadelphia fell out of favor with legitimate theatre producers and was left with second-rate vaudeville, burlesque, touring companies, or occasional try-out shows on their way to New York. The city's theatres were also being torn down at a rapid rate, and many that remained were converted into movie palaces (Izod 9). Add to these factors the city's corrupt, Republican-controlled, New Deal-fearing government, and these were the conditions that the local Federal Theatre unit had to overcome when it began operations in 1935 (Frazier 277-79).

Its own internal struggles would prove just as challenging. The project was plagued from the beginning with revolving-door leadership, ineffective administration, and a lack of cooperation from the state WPA office in Harrisburg. Flanagan acknowledged this situation in *Arena*, explaining how Jasper Deeter, the Pennsylvania project's first state director, had quit after the first year because of "political interference" (247). A Harrisburg area native and former member of the famed Provincetown Players, Deeter had founded the Hedgerow Theatre in Rose Valley outside Philadelphia in 1923 (American National Biography 335-37). Eccentric, unkempt, and used to working in an informal co-op setting, Deeter was frustrated by the patronage and ignorance he encountered among the WPA's administrators in the state capital; after "several frenzied encounters" with them, according to Flanagan, he delegated his duties to his assistant, Helen Schoeni, and acted in an advisory capacity only. "They tried in every way to wreck the program," Flanagan quotes Deeter as saying (247).

Deeter's replacement, Lester Scharff, also quit the project after only one week in April 1936 upon viewing the unit's "low-calibre" productions (Lester Scharff memo, 29 Apr. 1936, Folder 1, Box 2443, FTPC). He was replaced by Lorin J. Howard, an experienced vaudeville

producer, but Howard's uncompromising leadership style alienated many individuals on the project, and he too was replaced (Jarvis 78). Stability would not come to the Philadelphia unit until the hiring of Herbert Humphreys in October 1937 (Hallie Flanagan memo, 1 Oct. 1937, Box 2442, FTPC). A respected district supervisor with the California unit, Humphreys was at the helm for Philadelphia's greatest successes in the next two years, alongside new play director James Light, who had been reassigned from the New York unit. Like Deeter, Light had worked with Eugene O'Neill at the Provincetown Playhouse, and had directed Paul Robeson in Federal Theatre productions of *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* (Philadelphia Tribune 22 July 1938; Philadelphia Record 10 Mar. 1938).

Prior to Humphreys and Light, the Philadelphia project had relied heavily on its marionette and vaudeville units, lacking enough talent for any legitimate productions. The most popular marionette show was *Pirates Ahoy*, which toured the city's schools and churches in 1937, appearing before nearly 20,000 people in 46 performances (*Pirates Ahoy* folder, container 1055, Prod. Title File, 1934-1939, FTPC). The marionette unit did not just perform children's theatre, however; it also addressed social and political problems for adult audiences, and participated in workers education programs for local trade unions ("First Six Months Report," Folder 1-1-5 of Box 1, FTPC). In August 1936, the unit's puppet workers found themselves in a union dispute of their own when they staged a one-day strike after their pay was delayed (*Philadelphia Bulletin*, n.d., qtd. in Jarvis 68).

Philadelphia's vaudeville units -- one white and one black -- had a particularly rocky start. Jasper Deeter cited the problem in a memo to the national office in Washington, DC: "The monologist who substituted Roosevelt's name in lyrics composed for President Wilson, and the vaudevillian who clung to his prohibition gags typified performers on the Pennsylvania Project"

(13 Dec. 1935, Region II records, FTPC). The black vaudeville unit -- which was also commonly called the “negro” or “colored” unit -- eventually proved to be the Philadelphia project’s most successful live theatre, staging lively revues and variety shows such as *Truckin’ Along* and *So What?*, attracting large audiences of mixed races, and virtually keeping the project afloat.

Because Philadelphia did not have enough dramatic actors, the Newark, NJ unit was brought in to perform one of the Federal Theatre’s most popular plays, *It Can’t Happen Here*, which depicted the rise of fascism. The show ran for two weeks in July 1937 at the Locust Street Theatre, and proved so popular with audiences that it convinced project officials to bring more legitimate shows to the city (Jarvis 76-77). It was followed by *The CCC Murder Mystery*, which drew large audiences and garnered praise from critics. Another vaudeville review, *Hits & Bits of 1937*, was well-received, but demonstrated the city’s continuing racism when the performers were segregated, with the white cast performing in the first half of the show, and the black cast performing in the second (Jarvis 82).

The turning point for Philadelphia’s legitimate stage finally came in November 1937 when an expanded black dramatic unit produced *Jericho*, a morality tale about a country boy who goes astray in the big city. The local papers called the show “impressive” and “dignified” (*Jericho* folder, Prod. Title File, 1934-39, Box 1026, FTPC). Over 8,000 people of mixed races attended 16 performances at the Walnut Street Theatre, demonstrating that white audiences were more than willing to attend a good production by a black cast, and that the Philadelphia unit was finally able to stage worthwhile theatre (*Philadelphia Bulletin* 2 Nov. 1937).

Following the success of *Jericho*, the project’s efforts to produce additional legitimate plays resulted in a cycle of one-act plays by Eugene O’Neill entitled *Steamship Glencairn*. In

1937, O'Neill and George Bernard Shaw released their plays to the Federal Theatre for a fraction of their normal fees, allowing the project to produce their works in cities around the nation. In March 1938 the Philadelphia unit staged O'Neill's sea cycle, which included *Moon of the Caribbees*, *In the Zone*, *Bound East for Cardiff*, and *Long Voyage Home*.

In October 1938, Philadelphia stretched its creative muscles even further by mounting a "Living Newspaper" called *One Third of a Nation*. The play, which dealt with the nation's housing crisis, had received critical acclaim in New York and other cities. The Living Newspaper genre had grown out of Russia's propaganda theatre and Germany's epic theatre, as exemplified by the work of Bertolt Brecht, who combined political realities with human stories to illustrate the era's social ills (Brockett 599; Rabkin 39). The Federal Theatre's Living Newspapers were essentially torn from the headlines of the day, and were intended to educate the public about a problem and move them to action. The plays typically consisted of a series of dramatic vignettes and comedic black-out scenes, using minimal sets and props, and employing such devices as lighting and sound effects, projections, musical interludes, and dance scenes, creating an embryonic version of what is now called a "multi-media" show. They also generally featured an "Everyman" character with whom the audience could identify -- a "puzzled little man who represented the public." The Living Newspapers were "an amalgam of motion picture, epic theatre, commedia dell'arte, and American minstrel show" (Living Newspaper file, FTPC). And yet they presented facts in a "fresh, vivid and credible way" and "compelled the audience to respond to real social ills" (O'Connor 92).

*One Third of a Nation* called for 164 speaking parts, the most of any Living Newspaper. In Philadelphia, 67 performers played all of the roles (*One Third of a Nation* Prod. Bulletin, Prod. Title File, 1934-1939, Box 1052, FTPC). The show featured script revisions to place the

action in Philadelphia rather than New York, including local street names and housing code regulations. More significantly, it also changed the opening slum fire scene to portray a highly realistic building collapse. This scenario was based on a well-known incident which had occurred in Philadelphia the previous year, killing seven people (*Philadelphia Tribune* 29 Sept. 1938). The production also integrated Philadelphia's stage for the first time, uniting members of both the black and white units (Jarvis 95).

Total attendance for the show was nearly 25,000 over nine weeks and 63 performances (Herbert Humphreys memo, 26 Jan. 1939, Box 2445, FTPC). In *Arena*, Flanagan cited a reviewer who had said the production "frequently smacks you between the eyes with its dramatic force. If you're interested in stage-craft or housing, it's an experiment worth your money" (217).

Following *One Third of a Nation's* success, the Philadelphia unit next staged another Living Newspaper entitled *Spirochete*, which examined the history of syphilis, often in a humorous fashion, and encouraged audiences to seek testing and prevention measures. Syphilis had become an epidemic in the U.S. during the Depression, and was the nation's primary health problem. A cure had been available for nearly 30 years, but fear and secretiveness about the disease had prevented scores of Americans -- who believed that "nice people" didn't get it -- from receiving treatment. The play's goal was to bring the fight out into the open (Herbert Humphreys publicity letter, 15 Feb. 1939, *Spirochete* file, FTPC).

### **THE CREATION OF *SPIROCHETE***

During the Depression, one out of 10 adults in the U.S. was infected with syphilis. Approximately 100,000 adults and 60,000 babies were dying from the disease each year. Thousands more were left crippled. But because the illness had become so stigmatized and was

considered inappropriate for public discussion, few were willing to talk about it (*Spirochete* folder, Phila. Prod. Notebook, FTPC).

In 1936, Wisconsin was the only state in the U.S. with a law requiring couples to be tested for syphilis before they were married. Two years before, Illinois had considered the same legislation, but the measure had failed (Sundgaard, *Spirochete* folder, Chicago Prod. Notebooks, FTPC in Gysel 2). Ironically, in January 1937 -- seven months before the law would finally take effect in Illinois -- U.S. Surgeon General Thomas J. Parran announced that Chicago would be the launching point for a new national campaign against syphilis. The local effort was to include citywide blood tests to be used by the U.S. Health Service as a syphilis "census," and to demonstrate Chicago's status as a model city in the fight (*Chicago Tribune* 4 Jan. 1937). At the time, nearly 19 percent of the city's black population was infected with the disease, compared to 3 percent of whites (de Kruif 24-25).

Susan Glaspell, a playwright who had co-founded the Provincetown Players, was the director of the Federal Theatre's Midwestern Play Bureau. Recognizing that syphilis was a timely topic, she felt that a play about the problem would give the struggling Chicago unit a much-needed boost and make an impression on local critics who had criticized their previous efforts. It would provide a story with local interest, and possibly even earn national recognition thanks to the U.S. Health Department's campaign (Gysel). She offered the idea for a Living Newspaper about syphilis to Arnold Sundgaard, a 25-year-old play reader on her staff. A promising playwright, Sundgaard had graduated several years earlier from the University of Wisconsin, and had received a Rockefeller Foundation Playwriting Fellowship for Graduate Study at Yale. Living Newspapers were normally written by a committee of reporters and researchers who would comb the newspapers and put them together with a "managing editor" for

use on stage; Sundgaard researched the issue himself, however, and wrote the play over several weeks at the end of 1937 and the beginning of 1938.

Originally called *Dark Harvest*, the play consists of connected vignettes which follow the disease over 400 years, from its spread through Europe after Christopher Columbus' sailors returned to Spain, to the present day. Along the way, it dramatizes real-life case histories and medical discoveries made by scientists who had tried to battle the disease through the ages. Several scenes also portray the Illinois legislators who were too ashamed to deal with the problem in 1934 and were determined to keep it quiet.

*Spirochete* is similar to other Living Newspapers because it presents audiences with facts about a social problem, and then encourages them to take action. Flanagan said it was a "hazardous undertaking to trace the history of the most deadly of social diseases, to show its unsatiable spread over the earth, to recount the unremitting battles of scientists to isolate the germ and to effect the cure" (*Arena* 144). Reaction to the production was positive, however, with high praise coming from the press and members of the medical profession. Even the *Chicago Tribune*, which was "generally hostile" toward the Federal Theatre, called *Spirochete* a "valuable contribution" ("History of the Merle Reskin Theatre"). Its highly successful six-week run at the Blackstone Theatre attracted 18,000 people over 32 performances, and inspired the national office to mount additional productions in four more cities. Between April 1938 and March 1939, a total of 40,000 people would see the play in Chicago, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Portland, and Seattle (Gysel iii). The latter four productions all opened within two weeks of each other in February 1939 -- National Social Hygiene Month.

### ***SPIROCHETE IN PHILADELPHIA***

The Philadelphia production of *Spirochete* was well-received by local critics. The *Inquirer* said the show “packs plenty of punch” (21 Feb. 1939). The *Evening Public Ledger* noted that “the government players are to be commended for bringing this much-shied-at problem into the open, and for their temerity, their forthrightness and the thoroughness with which they have gone into the matter” (21 Feb. 39). The *Daily News* proclaimed that the play “should be seen by every well-thinking, serious minded, foresighted man and woman” (n.d., *Spirochete* Prod. Bulletin folder, Box 1074, FTPC).

*Spirochete* ran for 35 performances at the Walnut Street Theatre between February 20 and March 25, 1939, topping Chicago’s run of 32 shows. Its total audience was lower, however, at about 10,000 -- a rather disappointing figure which was attributed to several factors aside from the reality that this was a taboo subject for many Philadelphians. Again, the culprit was controversy within the local Federal Theatre unit (Prod. by Title, Box 75, FTPC).

According to project officials, *Spirochete* could have had larger audiences if it hadn’t been for a lackluster effort -- and perhaps a case of sabotage -- by the local promotions department. Allegedly, promotions director Jack Rose had concealed the topic of syphilis in the publicity campaign by making no mention of it in newspaper advertisements, nor in the posters he put up in low-traffic areas such as barber shops in some of the city’s rougher neighborhoods (M. Manisoff memo, 9 Mar. 1939, Box 2445, FTPC). Worse yet, Rose was reportedly a member of the Knights of Columbus, and allegedly informed the organization that the play defamed their namesake, portraying him and his crew as the perpetrators of the syphilis outbreak in Europe (*Spirochete* Prod. Bulletin, Phila., FTPC). News of the pending production resulted in the immediate protest of Cornelius C. O’Brien, the local Knights of Columbus leader, who said

it was un-American to claim that the disease had originated here. O'Brien met with project administrators as well as officials from the American Social Hygiene Association and the Mayor's Theatre Censorship Board, telling them that he was determined to stop the production (Blanding Sloan meeting notes, FTPC). O'Brien also had the support of the Philadelphia Catholic Diocese, which believed that the script was part of a Communist plot to "overthrow the Government by insidiously destroying American faith in its popular heroes" (*Spirochete* Prod. Bulletin, Phila., FTPC).

To prove that Columbus' crew had indeed taken syphilis back to Europe with them, Sundgaard provided the organization with the scientific research he had used in the play's creation (Sundgaard memo, Box 66, Correspondence of the National Office with Regional Offices by State, 1935-1939, Illinois, FTPC). He also presented his three-page bibliography, which contained articles and statistics from various publications and medical journals backing up every fact and case history in his script (Glaspell memo, *Spirochete* file, Box 26, National Office General Correspondence, FTPC). A few days before the show's preview performance -- to which numerous local government and church leaders had been invited -- Emmet Lavery, director of the national project's play department, asked Sundgaard to change the references to Columbus in light of mounting pressure. Sundgaard refused at first, but relented when Lavery suggested that they refer to him simply as an unidentified explorer who returned to Spain in 1493, thus allowing the audiences to pick up on the reference without naming names (Sundgaard transcript). In the end, the unit deleted the play's references to Columbus, with Sundgaard's permission, and instead referred to him as a "sea captain" (*Spirochete* file, Box 26, National Office General Correspondence, FTPC). The local newspapers picked up on the story, noting that the Knights of Columbus had called for the change. One article quoted regional director

Blanding Sloan as saying that the project had “complied gladly,” and reported that the deletions were made “just a few hours before the curtain went up,” thus satisfying all involved and ending the controversy (*Philadelphia Record* 18 Feb. 1938).

Due to the play’s subject matter, director James Light found it challenging to get his actors to talk about syphilis, just as they too would be encouraging the public to discuss it. His production notes stated that “the director must break down the same sort of prudishness which the play attempts to remove from the audience.” He also said that the play was written with “such honesty and directness, and is so lacking in any prurient or sensational intentions, that the problem is solved half by the script itself.” He believed it was the project’s objective to make the play personal for theatregoers and invite them to become participants in the war on syphilis. He accomplished this by making the production interactive, having cast members sit in the audience, and bringing up the house lights during the legislative debate scenes to make it seem as if the viewers were in the galleries. He said, “We feel that the audience in this manner became part, and were fully aware and as enthusiastic as we were with this fight against syphilis, and that it was a part of their personal experience rather than a spectacle existing only behind the proscenium arch.” Light was assisted in his efforts by an eminent local physician, Dr. John A. Kolmer, who offered the actors lessons on bloodletting techniques and coached them on how to handle microscopes for the scientific scenes (*Spirochete* Prod. Notebooks, Container 1074, FTPC).

The Philadelphia production employed 42 actors, a dance director, stage director, supervising director, music director, and 20 musicians. It also included two modern dance numbers by the unit’s local troupe. The same musical score that had been used in the Chicago production was also used in Philadelphia.

### A SYNOPSIS OF *SPIROCHETE*

A synopsis of *Spirochete* follows the production's Everyman character, known simply as "the Patient," as he travels through four centuries in search of a cure for syphilis. The play opens at marriage license bureau where a young couple, Peter and Frieda, are refused a license because they haven't obtained a medical certificate stating that they are free of venereal disease. An unctuous man-on-the-street radio interviewer named Lenny, who had stopped them outside moments before, explains why the certificate is necessary and then narrates a series of vignettes which explore the history of syphilis (12-15).

First, Christopher Columbus (identified as a "sea captain" in the Philadelphia production) implores a Spanish physician to help his returning crew, which has been victimized by a "plague" from the New World. He speaks of "native women with full warm bodies" who "welcomed" him and his men, but "left a mark beyond quick forgetting." The stumped physician calls the sickness a "just penalty for sin," and recommends that they return home to Italy to be with their wives (16-19).

From there, syphilis quickly spreads throughout Europe and Asia, primarily due to marauding soldiers, and "the Patient" is introduced. The play follows the little man through the ages as he experiences numerous attempts and failures to treat him, including several comedic scenes with real-life figures who sought cures for the illness: the 16th century Italian physician Girolamo Fracastoro, who named the disease syphilis (meaning "lover of swine") and tried to treat it by rubbing mercury into the skin; John Hunter, an 18th century doctor who wrongly assumed that syphilis was a type of gonorrhea; and Phillipe Ricorde, a 19th century Parisian who confirmed that syphilis was a separate disease (27-34).

Next, the play shifts into melodrama with an actual case history from the 1860s in which

a young Frenchman named Jean Louis discovers he has syphilis, but refuses to call off his engagement to his fiancée Collette. His doctor warns the young bride, who, out of love for Jean Louis, decides to help him seek treatment; before she can, however, the disease cripples his mind and he shoots himself in front of them (35-46). A laboratory scene follows, depicting Dr. Fritz Schaudinn's 1905 discovery of the spirochete that causes syphilis. Surrounded by his colleagues, the German zoologist looks through a microscope, and the audience sees what he does thanks to a magnified overhead projection of a pale, bacterial corkscrew in a drop of blood (47-51).

In the second act, the ubiquitous Patient returns, and goes to see Dr. Elie Metchnikoff at the Pasteur Institute in Paris. There, Metchnikoff is visited by a medical student who insists on receiving the same experimental treatment that the doctor has tried on apes, and is given the disease, then cured. A "Reformer" soon barges into the scene, railing that syphilis is the "penalty for sin" and insisting that the treatment must be withheld from the public. "The real sin," Metchnikoff tells the woman, "would be to keep this discovery from the world" (53-63). The play then shows additional advances by Dr. Bordet, who has been seeking a blood test to identify the disease, and by Dr. Wasserman, for whom the modern test for syphilis would be named (63-70). Next, Paul Erlich's 1909 discovery of salvarsan is depicted. The drug, a compound of arsenic which kills the spirochete but doesn't harm the patient, is the long awaited cure for syphilis -- the "magic bullet" (70-72).

In the following scene, which takes place in 1933, a state legislator proposes a measure which would require couples to be tested for venereal disease before they can be married. He is very nearly run out of the House chamber, however, when his colleagues object to the "vulgarity" of the topic (74-76). Next, in 1936, a worker named John is fired from his job for

inefficiency, and discovers that syphilis is the reason he's felt tired and ill. He also finds out that he infected his wife years before, and is responsible for the deaths of two of their children and the blindness of their surviving son. "None of us had a chance, Martha, none of us had a chance!" he wails to her in another melodramatic scene. Later, a doctor explains to John's boss that he never knew he had the disease, and convinces him that by testing his employees on a regular basis, the company can actually save money by preventing the disease. A cured John is then permitted to return to his job (77-87).

The scene then shifts to the state Legislature again. It is now 1937, and the galleries are full of citizens who favor an amendment to require testing for venereal disease before marriage. Resistance from a few politicians on the floor is drowned out by a chorus of "ayes" from other enlightened legislators as well as the people, and the amendment passes (88-90). The House speaker calls the victory "a battle just begun," and in an epilogue addressed to the audience, says: This fight must go on until syphilis has been banished from the face of the earth. It can be done and will be done if you and you and you wish it so. The time has come to stop whispering about it and begin talking about it . . . and talking out loud! (90)

### ***SPIROCHETE'S LEGACY &***

#### **THE END OF THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT**

Sundgaard noted that "conversation about syphilis in those days was just about . . . unthinkable" (Sundgaard transcript). However, his play had helped to break the wall of silence that had surrounded the disease for hundreds of years. When Spirochete had its debut in 1938, there were only 10 states which required pre-marital testing for venereal disease. The following year, there were 20. In 1939 there were 14 states which required prenatal examinations as well.

State health laboratories reported that the number of blood tests for syphilis increased from 2 million in 1936 to over 5.5 million in 1939. Nearly 250,000 people sought treatment in 1939 alone, a 67 percent increase over 1938 (Parran, "Lifting the Shadow"). The evidence showed that ordinary citizens were no longer afraid or ashamed to take the blood test, and that many who were infected followed through with their treatment (de Kruif).

Unfortunately, despite such success stories, the Federal Theatre Project and its sister arts programs were considered by many taxpayers and politicians to be a government-funded "boondoggle." The programs were accused of extravagance, bureaucracy, subversive activity and radical politics, and as a result, many of the officials who ran the arts agencies were called to Congress in the late 1930s to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). The project's national director, Hallie Flanagan, was among them.

According to historian Lorraine Brown, the Federal Theatre was an "irresistible target" to the committee, which believed it to be a "Communist-controlled project racked by controversy." "HUAC members were quick to learn that attacks on theatre made good press; they appealed to a long-standing bias in America against theatre and to growing popular and congressional disenchantment with New Deal relief programs" (Brown, "Introduction" xxii). During a debate on the merits of the federal arts projects, Congressman Dewey Short said that good art comes from suffering artists, while "subsidized art is no art at all" (McKinzie 154). Even *Life* magazine reported that the Federal Theatre was full of radical propaganda because it backed New Deal programs and advocated social change (22 Mar. 1937 22-23).

On June 30, 1939, the Federal Theatre Project was legislated out of existence, ostensibly as a cost-saving measure. "The arts projects used less than three fourths of one percent of the total WPA appropriation, and that appropriation was not cut one cent by terminating the Federal

Theatre Project,” Flanagan said in *Arena* (334).

The woman who had once envisioned a national theatre growing out of the project also quoted two Philadelphia newspapers which called its death “a tragedy,” and noted that “the best argument for the Federal Theatre was the record made by the theatre itself” (*Philadelphia Ledger* and *Philadelphia Record*, qtd. in *Arena* 364).

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