

# Culture as Strategy



Scene from Minneapolis Theatre Union's 1937 production of Albert Bein's *Let Freedom Ring*

## Popular Front Politics and the Minneapolis Theatre Union, 1935–39

One August evening in 1935, a group of young people—some active in left-wing politics, some in theater—gathered at the Progressive Bookshop in Minneapolis to hear reports on the recent American Writers' Congress in New York City. Among the featured speakers was the youthful playwright and drama theoretician Michael Blankfort, who discussed the meaning of political theater as well as his own work with the fledgling leftist Theatre Union in New York. Blankfort apparently spoke to an audience primed for action: within a few weeks, a new group, the Minneapolis Theatre Union, emerged. In the three and a half years that followed, this spirited organization of some three dozen members would produce and perform 11 full-length plays in addition to many shorter, informal skits for labor and political organizations in the Twin Cities.<sup>1</sup>

Political theater was not a new phenomenon. Inspired by activity in Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and fueled by the experiments of a new generation of American playwrights, the theater movement of the 1930s brought together activists, writers, actors, and labor organizers who shared the belief that theater

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<sup>1</sup>Tom Jarvis and Tom Hove, "Theatre Chronicles," in *Midwest—A Review* (Minneapolis), Dec. 1936, p. 15; Ruth Shaw to Minneapolis Theatre Union, Sept. 5, 1938, in Theatre Union files, Billy Rose Theater Collection, New York Public Library, at Center of the Performing Arts, Lincoln Center. John Campbell and Elizabeth Faue provided helpful comments on drafts of this article, which relied on the generous assistance of Lionel Davis, Bernice Fossum, Ole Fagerhaug, and other members of the Minneapolis Theatre Union. The author is especially grateful to Dorothy Broms and the late Wilbur Broms for their contributions.

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could contribute to union campaigns and political movements. In unions, members produced shows to entertain and educate themselves. At workers' schools for rank-and-file activists, students performed short plays dramatizing oppressive working conditions and successful labor-organizing drives. Even the federal government's Works Progress Administration sponsored state theater projects for unemployed actors and writers beginning in 1935. Finally, independent groups such as the theater unions in New York and Minneapolis sought to educate broader audiences about the need to redress social injustice.<sup>2</sup>

While the Minneapolis Theatre Union belongs to this nationwide workers' theater movement, its story also belongs to a distinct, brief era in Minnesota history from 1935 to 1939, when a volatile coalition of liberals and Communists within the powerful Farmer-Labor party dominated state politics. This "Popular Front" alliance grew out of the international Communist party's explicit decision in 1935 to broaden its appeal and fight fascism by working for shared objectives with sympathetic non-Communists. Popular Front alliances varied widely, depending on the local or state political scene in which they developed.<sup>3</sup>

Integral to Popular Front politics were cultural activities—art, music, and theater—aimed at educating audiences and mobilizing their support for a prolabor, antiracist, antifascist political agenda. As war clouds formed in Europe and economic depression lingered in the United States, organizations such as the Minneapolis Theatre Union played a central, highly visible role in Minnesota in promoting the views of the Popular Front

wing of the Farmer-Labor movement through its well attended plays and skits.

From the beginning, the theater union and the Popular Front were firmly intertwined. Players and audiences frequently came from the informal but vocal Popular Front coalition; in addition, the theater union, as an organization, belonged to the Farmer-Labor Association. It was through this association that Communists and Popular Front allies exercised their greatest influence in the Farmer-Labor movement.<sup>4</sup>

A membership organization, the Farmer-Labor Association controlled the Farmer-Labor party, producing its platforms, endorsing its candidates, and conducting its election campaigns. As one historian observed, "The public saw the Association as the Farmer-Labor Party organization, and Association candidates usually won the Farmer-Labor Party's primary elections."<sup>5</sup>

Organized on a countywide basis, the association had dues-paying individual members, but it allowed union locals, farmer and consumer cooperatives, and other groups such as the theater union to be directly represented at conventions. In addition to sending delegates and voting for candidates and resolutions, the theater union performed at conventions and other gatherings, thereby furthering the Popular Front faction's message of economic reform and antifascism.<sup>6</sup>

The Popular Front was an unstable alliance, however. The Farmer-Labor movement's inclusion of avowed Communists left the coalition and its members open to charges of being controlled by Moscow. For example, Elmer Benson, the Farmer-Labor governor in 1937–38 who worked closely with Communists and Popular Front figures, came under heavy attack for his political leanings. Even within the Popular Front coalition, non-Communists apprehensively associated with Communists, who needed broad popular support to achieve their new political and social agenda. Minneapolis's Communists therefore looked eagerly to the theater union to help strengthen their base.<sup>7</sup>

The rise and fall of the Minneapolis Theatre Union in the city's turbulent political environment of the 1930s demonstrates how Popular Front politics successfully pushed beyond conventions and polling booths into cultural activities and at the same time exacerbated tensions within the Farmer-Labor coalition. It also demonstrates some of the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy of using cultural activities to organize political movements.

THROUGHOUT ITS BRIEF EXISTENCE, the Minneapolis Theatre Union experienced a dilemma common to other Popular Front organizations: how to maintain its close ties with the Communist left wing of the city's labor movement while building relations with

<sup>2</sup>On workers' theater in the 1930s, see Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theater of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) and Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985). For a discussion of the relationship between workers' theater and the labor movement, see Colette A. Hyman, "Culture as Strategy: Workers' Theatre and the American Labor Movement in the 1930s" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 167–85.

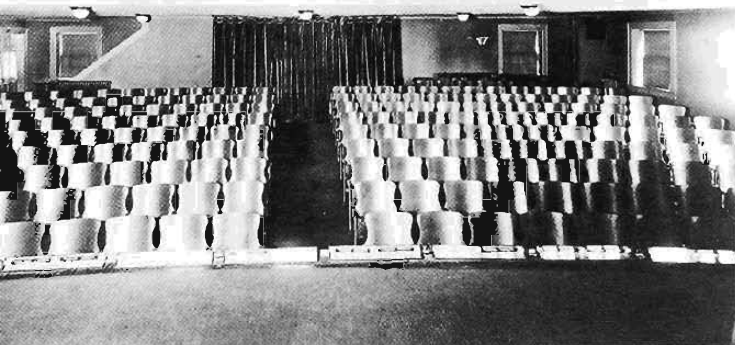
<sup>4</sup>On the Popular Front in the Farmer-Labor movement, see John E. Haynes, *Dubious Alliance: The Making of Minnesota's Democratic Farmer-Labor Party* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 9–46.

<sup>5</sup>Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 11.

<sup>6</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, June 3, p. 4, Dec. 16, p. 8—both 1938; "Women's Clubs of the Farmer-Labor Association, Statewide Conference to Build a Better Tomorrow, October 8, 1938," program, Oscar Hawkins Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).

<sup>7</sup>Steven J. Keillor, *Hjalmar Peterson of Minnesota: The Politics of Provincial Independence* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987), 147–53.

*Minneapolis's First  
Unitarian Society  
(right) at Sixteenth  
Street and Harmon  
Place in 1936 and  
(below) its auditorium  
seating about  
400 people*



liberals and centrist Farmer-Laborites. This delicate equilibrium was apparent from the very beginning. Two distinct groups came together to form the new organization: Communists associated with the Farmer-Labor Association's Popular Front coalition and members of the Assembly Players, a theater group associated with Minneapolis's liberal Unitarian Society.

Left-wing activists in Minneapolis had been discussing the possibility of forming a political theater group since the Minneapolis truckers' strike of 1934 had reinvigorated the city's labor and leftist groups. Among those gathered to hear New Yorker Blankfort speak were Janet Ross and Ruth Shaw. Ross, a young Communist and the wife of influential Communist Nat Ross, worked at the Progressive Bookshop on Third Avenue South. Shaw actively participated in the influential Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Women's Club and the Stenographers, Bookkeepers and Typographers Association, Local 17661. The wife of a Communist

party activist, Shaw helped organize a Popular Front faction among the Farmer-Labor women's groups. Impressed by New York Theatre Union productions they had seen, Ross and Shaw corresponded frequently with that organization and, in the first few months of the Minneapolis Theatre Union's existence, sought direction on scripts, costumes, and sets.<sup>8</sup>

Also moved by Blankfort's comments were representatives from the Assembly Players, a youthful amateur theater group of the Unitarian Society at 1526 Harmon Place in downtown Minneapolis. The Assembly Players, established in 1930, regularly performed in the Unitarians' Little Theatre auditorium, which seated some 400 people. Since early in the 20th century, the Unitarian Society, founded in 1881, had been known as a "center of most of the liberal activities in the city." John Dietrich, the church's distinguished minister for almost 30 years, was a pacifist and an active supporter of the Minnesota Birth Control League. In the 1930s, Dietrich and his associate minister, Raymond B. Bragg, engaged in antiwar activities and organized several peace programs at the Unitarian Society. In November 1936, for instance, they hosted a meeting at which three Spanish speakers presented "the case for the democratic government in Spain."<sup>9</sup>

Churchgoers actively pursued current affairs through the Women's Alliance and the Promethean Club, both of which were open to the public. Alliance

<sup>8</sup>Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 19; Klehr, *Heyday*, 259 and 457n17, n23; Thomas Ameson to Theatre Union, Aug. 12, 1935, Janet Ross to Margaret Larkin, Nov. 15, 1935, Elizabeth Lester to Theatre Union, Dec. 5, 1935—all Theatre Union files, Rose Collection.

<sup>9</sup>John H. Dietrich, *Humanism—A Religion for Today: Outline of the Thought and Activities of the First Unitarian Society* (Minneapolis: Minneapolis Unitarian Council of Ways and Means, [1930]), 23, 31; Carleton Winston, *This Circle of Earth: The Story of John H. Dietrich* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1942), 162–223, 249–63; *Minneapolis Unitarian*, Nov. 28, 1936, p. 3, MHS.

<sup>10</sup>Dietrich, *Humanism*, 27–28.

<sup>11</sup>Douglas P. Hatfield, "A History of Amateur Theatre in St. Paul, Minneapolis, and Their Suburbs, 1929–1963" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1969), 35; Dietrich, *Humanism*, 27–28; Wilbur Broms interview with author, Jan. 21, 1987, St. Paul, notes in author's possession; Martin Esslin, "Ibsen and Modern Drama," in *Ibsen and the Theatre: The Dramatist in Production*, ed. Errol Durbach (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 71–73; Einar Haugen, "Ibsen in America," *Norwegian-American Studies and Records* 20 (1959):1–23. The imprisonment of Mooney and Billings for throwing a bomb that killed six in a 1916 Preparedness Day parade in San Francisco became a cause célèbre. The campaign to have them released gained momentum in the 1930s, resulting in Mooney's pardon and Billings's release in 1939.

<sup>12</sup>Shaw to Theatre Union, Sept. 5, 1935, Theatre Union files, Rose Collection; Jarvis and Hove, "Theatre Chronicles," 16.

members were "public spirited women" who had "done valiant duty in battle for the great reforms of the day"—many of which could be found on the Farmer-Labor agenda. Similarly, the society's Promethean Club provided a forum for liberal and left-wing young people, who organized regular discussions on current events and issues, which drew from 75 to 150 people.<sup>10</sup>

The Assembly Players grew out of this youth club, offering another medium for Unitarians to explore and express their political views. By the time the theatrical group helped found the Minneapolis Theatre Union, it had staged ten full-length productions in its own theater, including I. J. Golden's *Precedent* (1933), which dramatized the highly politicized trial of labor activists Tom Mooney and Warren Billings, and Paul and Claire Sifton's *1931*–(1931), which traced the effects of unemployment on one young worker. Five of the Assembly Players' productions were by 19th-century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Scandinavian-American audiences liked Ibsen's plays, which also attracted attention for their social and political critiques. The choice thus reflected both Minneapolis's large Scandinavian population and the progressive leanings of many Unitarian Society members.<sup>11</sup>

While political activists like Shaw and Ross brought to the new theater union their contacts and savvy, members of the Assembly Players brought their theatrical skills as well as an exceedingly important resource for new theater groups: rehearsal and performance space. Because of the connection between the two groups, the Unitarian Society agreed, with some conditions, to grant the new organization use of its facilities free of charge.

TWO COMMITTEES quickly formed to lead the theater union. A powerful executive committee selected the plays to be performed, assumed all financial obligations for the productions, and took responsibility for advertising and "win[ning] the support of the trade unions, liberals, etc." According to one early account, the dedicated individuals worked at jobs by day and then did theater duties—including "mending scenery and scrubbing"—by night. The advisory committee, on the other hand, played little or no role in the organization, but the members' names contributed to the theater union's legitimacy in different circles. Performers and production crews came from the Assembly Players and from labor and political circles. Many of the enthusiastic youthful members were so poor that they had difficulty coming up with carfare to get to rehearsals.<sup>12</sup>

In makeup, the theater union's leadership committees comprised a remarkable cross section of the Popular Front wing of Minneapolis's Farmer-Labor coalition. In a September 1935 letter to the theater union in New York, Shaw boasted that the group "consisted of





*Theatre Union players, including Ole Fagerhaugh (standing with dagger) and executive committee member Janet Ross (standing at right)*

members of the Farmer-Labor Party, members of the Socialist Party, the Socialist Workers Party and the Communist Party." Evidence of Socialist Workers party participation in the theater union is extremely fragmentary, but Shaw's statement otherwise presents a faithful portrait.<sup>13</sup>

Although Shaw herself did not remain active in the organization she helped create, Communist representation on the theater union's executive committee remained strong. Joining Ross from the Communist party were Bernice Fossum, who volunteered with Ross at the Progressive Bookstore, Elizabeth Lester, wife of University of Minnesota professor and Communist party activist Donald Lester, and Stuart Lyman, a Young Communist League leader on the University of Minnesota campus.<sup>14</sup>

Farmer-Laborites Madge and Oscar Hawkins appear to have been the only members of the Socialist party extensively involved with the theater union, although only Oscar served on the executive committee. Another Farmer-Laborite executive committee member, Emma (Mrs. Alfred) Carlson, was also a Farmer-Labor candidate for the Minneapolis Board of Education in 1935, president of the Carpenters' Auxiliary, and chair of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Organization Com-

mittee. A lifelong member of the Unitarian Society, she participated in its Women's Alliance and served as vice-president of the American Federation of Teachers in 1936. Other Farmer-Labor women on the executive committee included Emily B. Bortnick and Mercedes L. Nelson. With Madge Hawkins and Carlson, they were members of the leadership cadre of the Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Women's Club. This organization played a key role in establishing eligibility stan-

<sup>13</sup>Shaw to Theatre Union, Sept. 5, 1935, Theatre Union files, Rose Collection. Participation of Socialist Workers party members in the theater union is highly unlikely, because the Trotskyist Socialist Workers opposed the Communist party's Popular Front policy. On Trotskyists and Communists in Minnesota, see Richard M. Valelly, *Radicalism in the States: The Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party and the American Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 127-30.

<sup>14</sup>Flyer for Minneapolis Theatre Union, 1936-37, in Minneapolis Theatre Union (MTU) scrapbook, in possession of Bernice Fossum, San Francisco; Bernice Fossum, telephone conversation with author, Dec. 9, 1987. No existing evidence explains the departure of Shaw, who worked as a secretary for Abe Harris, an important aide to Governor Floyd B. Olson; Klehr, *Heyday*, 457n23. Fossum's husband, Syd, figured prominently in Minnesota's WPA arts project.



Director Paul Rochette coaching Helen Sennette  
in *Waiting for Lefty*

dards for relief in Minneapolis and in developing public support for state relief measures. Spearheading this work was Selma Seestrom, who sat on the Minneapolis Board of Public Welfare and belonged to the same office workers' union local as Shaw. Seestrom never officially joined the theater union, but, according to one member, she worked "behind the scenes" for the group. Clearly, these women had a great deal of expertise and contacts to offer.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Fossum telephone conversation, Dec. 9, 1987; Elizabeth Faue, "Women, Family and Politics: Farmer-Labor Women and Social Policy in the Great Depression," in *Women in Twentieth-Century Politics*, ed. Patricia Gurin and Louise Tilly (New York: Russell Sage, 1990), 440-56; Ole Fagerhaugh and Douglas Hanson interview with author, July 16, 1985, Pequot Lakes, Minnesota, notes in author's possession; clipping, MTU scrapbook; Farmer-Labor Women's Federation, *Farmer-Labor Women's Federation Annual of Minnesota 1935-36*, Susie Stageberg Papers, MHS.

<sup>16</sup>Ole Fagerhaugh interview with author, Aug. 4, 1985, Pequot Lakes, Minnesota, notes in author's possession; flyer, "Hilliard H. Smith, Alderman Second Ward," Farmer-Labor Association Papers, Minnesota State Archives, MHS.

<sup>17</sup>Flyer, Minneapolis Theatre Union, 1936-37, MTU scrapbook.

<sup>18</sup>Ruth Shaw to Theatre Union, Sept. 5, 1935, Theatre Union files, Rose Collection.

The presence on both the advisory and executive committees of prominent figures in the local labor movement suggests the strength of the ties that the Minneapolis theater union cultivated with organized labor. Ole Fagerhaugh, an executive-committee member and an actor in theater union productions, organized for the Communist-led Local 665 of the Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union, which he also represented on the Hennepin County Central Labor Union. (A member of a Norwegian folk dance group, he also recruited several dancers to the theater union.) Advisory committee member Sander Genis served as business agent for the Twin Cities Joint Board of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, and fellow-member Hilliard Smith organized for the militant International Association of Machinists, Local 382, as well as serving on the Farmer-Labor Association state committee.<sup>16</sup>

The theater union also attracted prominent intellectuals of varied political persuasions to its advisory board, including Joseph Warren Beach and Meridel Le Sueur. The association with Beach, a prominent University of Minnesota professor of English, might reassure playgoers primarily interested in theater of the intellectual and artistic merits of the productions. The presence of Le Sueur, already known for her writings in *New Masses* and her participation in the Writers' Congress of 1935, assured the support of the Twin Cities' left-wing intelligentsia.

Assembly Players Tom Caddis and Tom Hove sat on the executive committee, and Unitarian minister Bragg joined the advisory committee. While there is no evidence that Bragg played any active role, his presence suggests the pivotal position occupied by the Unitarian organization.<sup>17</sup>

FROM THE BEGINNING, the theater union needed to balance the experience and resources contributed by its different constituencies, a task that proved most delicate when it came to its relationship with the Unitarian Society. By performing at the Unitarian facility, the theater union would attract church members and others who attended functions there. Accepting the Unitarian Center's resources, however, meant distinct constraints on overt political advocacy.

Not all members of the Unitarian Society shared the progressive views of the Women's Alliance or Promethean Club. Conservative church members had long opposed Dietrich, despite the rapid growth of the congregation under his leadership. Shaw wrote to contacts in New York's Theatre Union in September 1935 that the society did not give the Minneapolis group carte blanche in the use of its facilities but only allowed it to perform in its auditorium on the condition that it not be a "labor theatre."<sup>18</sup> This terse reference suggests that even though the Unitarian Society was willing to host



Sailors of Cattaro set, designed by executive committee member Bernice Fossum's husband, Syd

events promoting various Popular Front positions, such as support for the Spanish Civil War Loyalists, it sought to avoid the implication that it unequivocally supported workers' claims against employers. The condition that the theater union not address itself exclusively to labor issues thus protected the society, as well as the theater union, from Unitarians with opposing views.

The theater union's dependence on the Unitarian Society was both an encumbrance and a boon. The requirement that it not be a "labor theatre" affected the way it assembled its governing bodies, presented itself to the public, and chose at least its first play. On the other hand, the stability of having a place to rehearse and perform and the access to a wider audience must have seemed worth the compromises.

In its initial statement of purpose, the theater union took great pains to avoid identifying itself with any specific issue. The program for its first production, Albert Maltz's *Black Pit*, introduced the organization in November 1935 as "a non-profit organization formed by progressives who believe the drama, at moderate prices within the reach of all the people, should be used

to portray the economic, emotional and cultural problems that confront society today."<sup>19</sup>

This statement could be read several ways. Left-wing audiences would probably realize that theater union progressives would not be content merely to portray social and economic problems and the "narcotized floss candy of Hollywood." But Unitarian Society conservatives could assume that it would address a broad range of issues, not just labor problems.<sup>20</sup>

The theater union's strategy in dealing with the Unitarian Society is also evident in the selection of a first play with an ambiguous message. While *Black Pit* rapidly became part of the workers' theater repertoire across the country after its New York Theatre Union premiere in the spring of 1935, the drama also attracted severe criticism in the left-wing press. The main character, Joe Kovarsky, is a blacklisted coal miner who becomes a stool pigeon for the mineowner as a condi-

<sup>19</sup>Program, *Black Pit*, Nov. 15-17, 1935, MTU scrapbook.

<sup>20</sup>Jarvis and Hove, "Theatre Chronicles," 15.

tion of being hired. When Joe eventually admits his duplicity to his co-workers who are trying to organize a union, they banish him from their community. While the play remains somewhat sympathetic to Joe's plight, approving conservative audiences and critical Communists both interpreted Maltz's story as justifying treachery to the union. For politicized theater union members, the anticipated success of the mine union no doubt outweighed sympathy for Joe's circumstances.<sup>21</sup>

Directed by Thomas Russell, drama coach of the Minneapolis public schools' adult education department, *Black Pit* proved a successful first production. A "very enthusiastic audience" attended its half-dozen performances, wrote executive committee member Lester to the New York Theatre Union in 1935. This reception and, of course, assurances of future free performance space enabled the theater union to sell season tickets promising three more plays: Friedrich Wolf's *Sailors of Cattaro* (1934), Clifford Odets's *Till the Day I Die* (1935), and Valentin Katayev's *Squaring the Circle* (1928). Its optimistic second season began in October 1936 with Odets's *Awake and Sing* (1935), causing Minneapolis critic John K. Sherman to note that the theater union was "the only group alert enough to give Clifford Odets a hearing." The actors then moved on to Susan Glaspell's *Inheritors* (1921), Albert Bein's *Let Freedom Ring* (1936), and Paul Vulpus's *Help Yourself* (1936). Heady with the theatrical enthusiasm of the era, the group for a time also took on new class, rehearsal, and office space in the Gateway Building at Washington and Hennepin avenues. Here the theater union scheduled classes in "theatre history, play analysis, body movement (dancing, fencing), diction and voice, acting technique, and the study of social plays."<sup>22</sup>

THE MINNEAPOLIS group, like the workers' theater movement as a whole, challenged mainstream drama for being both inaccessible and irrelevant to working people. High ticket prices placed many productions beyond the means of most workers, and popular entertainment often obfuscated pressing social issues or diverted audiences' attention from them. The theater union's sale of season tickets—four plays for one dollar or 35 cents a play—allowed the organization to keep prices low and to prepare new kinds of productions.<sup>23</sup>

However carefully the group began its career, its more politicized members, including unemployed and amateur actors, soon found a voice in theater activities. A note in the second-season program for *Inheritors* extended the theater union's hand "in particular to representatives of the working class who have not had the opportunity to express themselves in drama, and who would like to exercise that ability." For Paul Fagerhaugh, who appeared in several productions, the plays were "very important to getting a message across" about the most pressing political and labor conflicts. For his brother Ole, a veteran of numerous labor struggles in the 1930s (and later), the plays "helped immensely" in labor organizing because they "force[d] people to think about things . . . and . . . get emotionally involved."<sup>24</sup>

*The nature of contemporary drama, as seen by  
partisans of the workers' theater movement*



<sup>21</sup>Communist opinion on the play diverged. While theater critics Carl Reeve, writing for the Communist party's *Daily Worker*, and Joseph North, writing for the Communist *New Masses*, objected to Maltz's sympathetic portrayal, party officer Jack Stachel gave the play his stamp of approval because it portrayed workers' struggles; see Goldstein, *Political Stage*, 71.

<sup>22</sup>Hatfield, "Amateur Theatre," 37; Elizabeth Lester to Theatre Union, Dec. 5, 1935, Theatre Union files, Rose Collection; Sherman, "Theater Union Gives Odets' 'Awake and Sing,'" clipping, MTU scrapbook; Jarvis and Hove, "Theatre Chronicles," 16–17.

<sup>23</sup>*Black Pit* program note and *Sailors of Cattaro* flyer, MTU scrapbook. While Minneapolis daily papers printed brief announcements for plays produced by the theater union and other organizations, they only reviewed professional productions in downtown theaters.

<sup>24</sup>*Minnesota Leader*, Dec. 12, 1936, p. 3; *Inheritors*, program note, quoted in Hatfield, "Amateur Theatre," 37; Paul Fagerhaugh and Douglas Hanson interview with author, Aug. 23, 1985, Minneapolis, notes in author's possession; Jarvis and Hove, "Theatre Chronicles," 15; O. Fagerhaugh interview.



The theater union appealed directly to different elements of the Popular Front coalition. While the group sold subscriptions to middle-class members of the Unitarian Society, it also targeted unions and political organizations. In addition, interested unionists, such as hosiery worker Dorothy Fagerhaugh, Ole's sister-in-law, sold tickets through their locals. Theater union members also performed scenes from new productions at organization meetings to sell blocks of tickets. Pitching performances of Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* (1936), for example, two members "took a little skit . . . to all the unions, especially the big ones. [They] sold 100 tickets to the Painters Union, and 100 to the Building Laborers." One observer commented on this success: "Before, we sent people around who made very dry speeches about the play and maybe sold \$5 worth of tickets. But now they go for the play in a big way." On a few occasions, groups purchased the whole house for one performance, as did the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union for the opening night of *Bury the Dead* in April 1937.<sup>25</sup>

On occasion, performances benefited specific causes. Proceeds from the March 20, 1936, performance at Minneapolis's Phyllis Wheatley House of Elizabeth England's *Take My Stand* (1935) and Odets's *Till the Day I Die*, for instance, raised money for the Scottsboro defense fund, which supported the group of African-American men accused of raping two white women in Alabama. According to *Midwest—A Review*, this version of Odets's play was the first theater union production to "get a wrist-hold on the public," and it played to capacity houses in Minneapolis with two extra performances at the Jewish Educational Center on Holly Avenue in St. Paul.

Theater union productions played a dual role in the Twin Cities' Popular Front alliance: they strengthened individual organizations and reinforced links between them. In buying the house for a performance, the garment workers' union raised money and developed union loyalty by associating itself with leisure and entertainment. In addition, *Bury the Dead*, about young working men killed in battle, called unionists' attention to the relevance of the antiwar movement.

Just as the theater union brought together women and men of varied liberal and left persuasions, so did its productions unite audience members with different political agendas. The England-Odets double bill at the Jewish Educational Center addressed conditions of black and white workers in textile mills and the ruthlessness of Nazis who hunted down leftists as well as Jews. In addition, the Scottsboro defense fund's sponsorship highlighted the treatment of blacks in the South. Playgoers attracted by any one issue could not help but see common problems and the importance of joining together to overcome them.

WHILE FULL-LENGTH PRODUCTIONS were a mainstay for the theater union, it also performed shorter pieces on behalf of other organizations. The workers' theater movement of the 1930s believed in the value of "mobile" performances at meetings, rallies, and picket lines, as well as "stationary" theater in conventional auditoriums. In New York a division of labor existed between mobile theater groups such as the famed Workers' Laboratory Theatre and stationary companies such as the Theatre Union. In Minneapolis the theater union did its best to fill both needs. It provided politically oriented entertainment for Minneapolis labor-school socials, Communist party section meetings, Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Women's Club conferences, and occasions such as a relief banquet of the Hennepin County Workers' Alliance.<sup>26</sup>

Actors in the Minneapolis Theatre Union also lent their skills to particular issues and actions. "Studio groups," under the direction of Tom Hove and Janet Ross, helped experienced but unemployed actors train amateurs in one-act plays presented free or for "a trifling sum" to unions, leftist gatherings, and clubs. In the summer of 1936, for instance, several members performed skits around the state dramatizing the impact of the Great Depression on youth as part of a campaign to establish a state-level agency modeled on the National Youth Administration. Although the organization did not endorse strikes, in deference to the Unitarian Society, individual members joined picket lines and performed skits for strikers, including one at the Minneapolis-Moline Power Implement plant in Hopkins.<sup>27</sup>

The majority of the union's full-length plays and shorter skits were part of the rapidly emerging repertoire of the workers' theater movement across the United States. The Minneapolis group stayed informed about new plays through correspondence with its New York counterpart and the magazine *New Theatre* (later *New Theatre and Film*), which focused on the New York scene but also published notes about productions in other places. Within months, plays premiered in

<sup>25</sup>Here and below, see Ole Fagerhaugh interview; P. Fagerhaugh and Hanson interview; *Bury the Dead* program note [1937], MTU scrapbook; *New Theatre and Film*, April 1937, p. 39; *Take My Stand and Till the Day I Die* program notes, Mar. 20, 1936, MTU scrapbook; Jarvis and Hove, "Theatre Chronicles," 16.

<sup>26</sup>*Minneapolis Labor Review*, April 22, p. 18, June 3, p. 4, Dec. 16, p. 5—all 1938; program for Communist party section meeting, n.d., MTU scrapbook; Hennepin County Farmer-Labor Women's Club, Minutes, Sept. 2, 1938, Stageberg Papers, MHS.

<sup>27</sup>Jarvis and Hove, "Theatre Chronicles," 16; *Midwest-A Preview of a Review*, Aug. 1936, p. 3; P. Fagerhaugh and Hanson interview; Broms interview, Jan. 21, 1987; Bernice Fossum telephone conversation with author, Aug. 25, 1985.



*A moment of levity during rehearsal, with director Thomas Russell (center, holding script)*

New York were given performances in Minneapolis. Sometimes the Minneapolis group could not perform a new play because the author requested a royalty. On one occasion, Susan Glaspell, who directed the Midwest play bureau of the Works Progress Administration, requested a royalty for performances of her *Inheritors*. When told that the theater group had an outstanding, unpaid trucking bill, however, Glaspell wrote, "[I] would feel rather awful in insisting on the \$20.00 royalty. . . . so by all means pay the truck, and let my play be my contribution to your theatre, in which I am so keenly interested."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Glaspell to Ross, Nov. 17, 1936, Jan. 8, 1937, MTU scrapbook. For examples of notices, see *New Theatre and Film*, Mar. 1937, p. 52, April 1937, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup>Ruth Shaw to Theatre Union, Sept. 9, 1935, Theatre Union files, Rose Collection.

ASSOCIATION WITH the Unitarian Society assured the theater union a substantial liberal middle-class audience. Moreover, of the 11 full-length plays the group produced, three focus explicitly on middle-class characters forced to make difficult political choices: Odets's *Awake and Sing*, Glaspell's *Inheritors*, and Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*. The theater union also wanted to produce Paul Peters's and George Sklar's *Peace on Earth*, a play about a college professor who joins a dockworkers' strike for freedom of speech and the right to organize. The first play produced by the Theatre Union in New York in 1933, it had been widely acclaimed by audiences and reviewers alike. To the great disappointment of Minneapolis Theatre Union members, however, it was unavailable because the New York touring group was performing it.<sup>29</sup>

In *Awake and Sing*, Ralph, the son of a lower-middle class family, is pulled between his grandfather's vi-

sion of a just society where life "isn't printed on dollar bills" and his mother's fierce determination to maintain the family's dignity in the difficult circumstances of the depression. In the final scene, after his grandfather has killed himself in order to leave Ralph his insurance money, the young man gives it to his mother and vows to improve the world, beginning with conditions in the unheated warehouse in which he works.<sup>30</sup>

While Ralph does not make his progressive commitment until the end of Odets's play, the decision to join the struggle for social justice lies at the center of *Inheritors*, by midwesterner Susan Glaspell, who frequently wrote about farm life. The action takes place at a college founded on land donated by one of the area's original settlers for the purpose of furthering freedom and democracy. At the time of the play's action, the college has become a recruiting ground for strikebreakers at a steel mill and the site of xenophobic, 100-percent Americanism. Madeline, the granddaughter of the college's founder and niece of its board president, finds herself defending the rights of foreign students supporting revolutionary movements in their own country. Eventually she is forced to choose between her liberal values and her privileged class status: she can either face imprisonment for striking a police officer who attacked the foreign students or let her uncle use his influence to get her released.<sup>31</sup>

*Inheritors* showed educated, middle-class audiences that they had an important role to play in furthering social justice within their own institutions. For the middle-class members of the theater union the play reaffirmed their choices to dedicate themselves to left-wing activism.

The theater group also produced one Ibsen play, *Enemy of the People* (1882), at Minneapolis's Labor Lyceum Hall, 1426 Sixth Avenue North. Evelyn Steele of the University of Minnesota directed the modernized version of the play, which tells the story of a doctor at a spa who discovers that the water source for the town's baths is contaminated. At first the doctor wins praise from civic leaders, but when it becomes apparent that his discovery will threaten the town's economy, residents brand him "an enemy of the people." Although they urge him to retract his report, he is not dissuaded from his stance.<sup>32</sup>

As an indictment of a system that valued the economic well-being of the few over the physical well-being of the many, *Enemy of the People* was an appropriate selection for the theater group. At the same time, because the play was written by the well-known Ibsen and the Unitarian Society's Assembly Players had performed it before teaming up with the theater union, the production might have calmed fears about the group's radicalism.

Although Popular Front activists focused primarily

on domestic issues, they were also concerned with the rise of fascism and nazism in Europe and the threat of another world war. These problems found their way into the workers' theater movement, in plays such as Odets's *Till the Day I Die* and Shaw's *Bury the Dead*. The 1937 production of *Bury the Dead*, sponsored by the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, followed an "International Rendez-vous" organized by the league and other peace and labor groups at the Unitarian Center. The event included pageants, folk dancing, and music, but peace organizations also set up literature tables. The political message of *Bury the Dead* thus had the support of most of the elements of the theater union coalition and fit well with Unitarian views on war and international relations.<sup>33</sup>

Throughout its career, however, the Minneapolis Theatre Union tested the Unitarian Society's requirement that it not be a "labor theatre" by producing several "strike plays." In addition to *Black Pit*, these included *Let Freedom Ring*, *Sailors of Cattaro*, and *Take My Stand*. In a letter to Glaspell requesting permission to produce *Inheritors* and asking for suggestions for other plays to perform, executive committee member Ross expressed the opinion that strike plays were the group's most successful productions. Such plays followed a similar format, in which individuals are caught up in struggles for higher wages and better living conditions and must choose between standing alone and accepting their oppression, or joining with other workers and achieving power over their lives.<sup>34</sup>

Strike plays relied for their impact on the identification of audience members with the protagonists. New York dramatist Blankfort described the process: "The class-unconscious worker identifies himself with the hero. The hero turns left; therefore the worker turns left. Q.E.D." While this oversimplifies the interaction between spectators and performers, the plays' enthusiastic reception suggests that audiences did identify with characters and actions on stage. This was most apparent in the militant response to productions of Odets's *Waiting for Lefty* (1935), the most widely performed

<sup>30</sup>*Awake and Sing* program note, [1936], MTU scrapbook; Odets, *Awake and Sing*, in *Six Plays of Clifford Odets* (New York: Modern Library, 1939), 48.

<sup>31</sup>*Inheritors* program note, 1936, MTU scrapbook; *Minneapolis Leader*, Dec. 12, 1936, p. 3.

<sup>32</sup>*Enemy of the People* program note, Feb. 12, 18 [1938], MTU scrapbook; *Minneapolis Labor Review*, Jan. 21, 1938, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup>*Minneapolis Unitarian*, Feb. 27, 1937, p. 3.

<sup>34</sup>Glaspell to Ross, Jan. 8, 1937, MTU scrapbook. Like *Black Pit*, the plays *Let Freedom Ring* and *Sailors of Cattaro* were first produced by the Theatre Union in New York, while *Take My Stand* was premiered by the Brookwood Labor Players, a touring student group from Brookwood Labor College, Katonah, New York.



*A strike-meeting scene from *Waiting for Lefty*, performed at Minneapolis's Labor Lyceum*

play of the entire workers' theater movement. Fifty years later, Wilbur Broms recalled a spontaneous demonstration generated by the closing lines of the play about a taxi drivers' strike. According to Broms, the Minneapolis audience poured out onto Olson Highway repeating Odets's cry: "We're the stormbirds of the working class!" and "Strikel Strikel Strikel!"<sup>35</sup>

The original production of the play in New York had caused similar disturbances, leading to the banning of

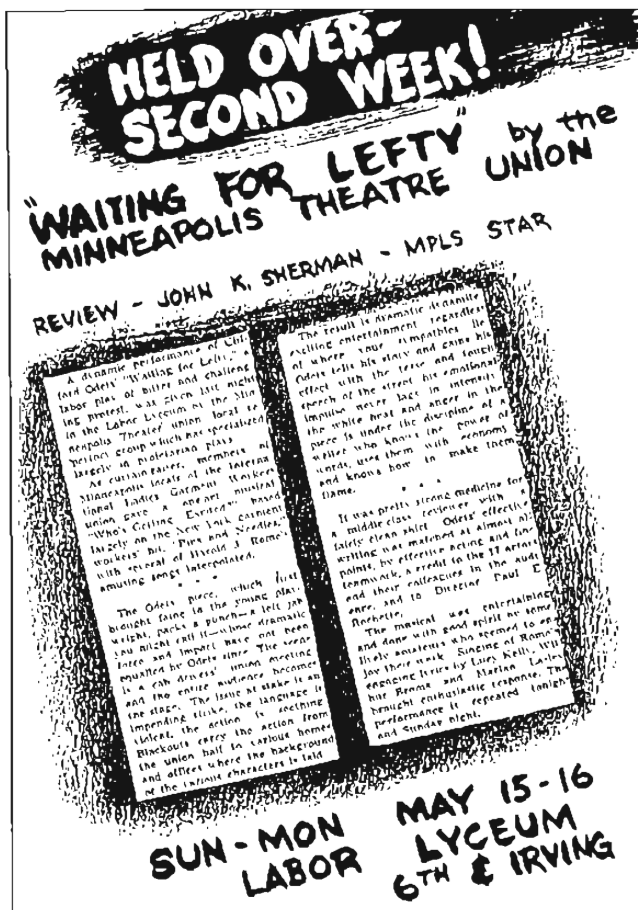
performances in cities including Boston. The Minneapolis Theatre Union performed it, not at the Unitarian Center, but at the city's Labor Lyceum, in a working-class neighborhood and on a program cosponsored by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. Unlike the other strike plays, *Waiting for Lefty* calls directly for action from the audience when actors playing the leaders of the taxi drivers' union address the audience itself, which becomes the union membership. When the news arrives that Lefty, the rank-and-file union leader, has been killed, the militant members of the strike committee overrule the conservative union leader, turn toward the audience, and call for a strike.<sup>36</sup>

HOWEVER SUCCESSFUL, *Waiting for Lefty* proved to be the theater union's swan song. The group continued to perform shorter pieces at least through December 1938, but Odets's play was its last full-scale production. Tensions between Popular Front and more

<sup>35</sup>Michael Blankfort, "Facing the New Audience," *New Theatre*, July-Aug. 1934, p. 15, Nov. 1934, p. 25; Wilbur Broms interview with author, July 25, 1985, St. Paul, notes in author's possession; *Waiting for Lefty* and "Who's Getting Excited?" program notes, [1938], MTU scrapbook.

<sup>36</sup>Richard Pack, *Censored!* (New York: National Committee Against Censorship of the Theatre Arts, 1935), 15-21. For an account of the first performance of the play in New York, see Jay Williams, *Stage Left* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 144-46.





Flyer for the well-attended *Waiting for Lefty*

conservative elements of the Farmer-Labor movement by then broke out into open factionalism, and attacks on the Popular Front wing's association with Communists increased. Because of the involvement of several prominent Popular Front Farmer-Laborites in the theater union, it could not avoid the political maelstrom that enveloped the Farmer-Labor movement.<sup>37</sup>

Backlash within that movement affected the theater union directly, because it was a voting member of the Farmer-Labor Association. Although the theater union apparently participated in the association's affairs only by performing for events and by sending delegates to conventions, the involvement of leftists such as Hilliard Smith and Emma Carlson clearly branded the theater union as belonging to the Farmer-Labor movement's more radical wing.

As a result, the Minneapolis Theatre Union was among the groups targeted at the Farmer-Labor Association state convention of January 1939, when the anti-Communist bloc voted to restrict organizational memberships to unions, cooperatives, Farmer-Labor youth groups, and veterans' and women's clubs. This vote effectively eliminated delegates from cultural, eth-

nic, and other organizations that represented the Popular Front coalition. Farmer-Labor activist Oscar Hawkins, originally listed as the representative from the theater union, thus also found himself on the list of delegates purged from the convention.<sup>38</sup>

The theater union survived neither these party battles nor the more far-reaching political events taking place around the world. When the Popular Front lost its power within the Farmer-Labor party, there seemed no more place for a Popular Front cultural organization. The theater union's fate was sealed shortly thereafter with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact in August 1939, which tore apart the Popular Front. In the end, international politics reverberated throughout state and local politics just when opponents of the Popular Front in Minnesota's Farmer-Labor movement were consolidating their victory over Communists and their allies. The Minneapolis Theatre Union had lost its *raison d'être*.<sup>39</sup>

THE GROWTH AND DECLINE of the Minneapolis Theatre Union suggests some of the strengths and weaknesses of cultural and artistic groups as agents for education and organizing. Despite strictures imposed by one of its most influential constituents, the theater union embodied the potential of coalition politics by exposing a wider public to the ideals shared by members of the Popular Front coalition. In the end, though, its dependence on the power of the Popular Front, which, in turn, owed its existence to developments in national and international arenas, meant the theater union's demise. The history of the theater union also shows that cultural organizations can gain access to resources that would not be available to more overtly political groups. While the use of such resources might be conditional, the experience of the Minneapolis Theatre Union suggests that the advantages far outweigh the restrictions they impose.

<sup>37</sup>Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 24-43; Millard Gieske, *Minnesota Farmer-Laborism: The Third Party Alternative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 254-62.

<sup>38</sup>Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 38-39; "Official List of Delegates Elected at the Hennepin County Convention for Service at the State and District Conventions," and "Delegates Who Were Unseated by the Delegates to the State Convention by a Vote of 383 1/2 to 158 1/2," both in Farmer-Labor Association Papers, Minnesota State Archives, MHS.

<sup>39</sup>Haynes, *Dubious Alliance*, 49-50; Klehr, *Heyday*, 386-409.

The illustration on p. 296 (top) is from the Minneapolis Public Library, Minneapolis Collection; on p. 296 (bottom), from the MHS; on p. 301, from *New Theatre*, September 1935, p. 3. All others are from the Minneapolis Theatre Union scrapbook, courtesy Bernice Fossum, San Francisco.



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