

***Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times.*** By Susan Quinn. New York: Walker & Co., 2008; pp. 288. \$25.99 cloth, \$16 paper.

doi:10.1017/S0040557411000251

Reviewed by Chanelle Vigue, Bowling Green State University

Susan Quinn's ambitious work *Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times* is a narrative of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) from conception to wake. Quinn begins in 1934, describing an America still suffering from the aftershocks of the stock market crash, politically divided, and deeply affected by joblessness and drought. Quinn skillfully weaves together the cultural, political, personal, and theatrical events that shaped the course of the FTP, the project's leaders, and arguably, the future of American theatre at large. While *Furious Improvisation* is largely in agreement with previous studies covering the general theatrical accomplishments and achievements of the FTP, Quinn's unique conclusions pertaining to the causes of the project's demise offer both new complications and valuable insights to the accepted historical narrative.

Like Jane de Hart-Mathews and other scholars before her, Quinn places the FTP's troubles and triumphs within the political context of the New Deal and claims that partisan politics are to blame for eventually, and perhaps inevitably, killing what may have been America's one chance at a national theatre. Unlike her predecessors, however, Quinn does not place the blame for the political assassination of the project on radical left-wing political views promoted by plays like the *Living Newspapers* or *The Revolt of the Beavers*. Instead, Quinn claims that the House Un-American Activities Committee and the powerful Southern Democrats in Congress primarily chose the FTP as a target because of the project's progressive and, at the time, unique policies on racial integration.

Throughout *Furious Improvisation*, Quinn subtly notes the policies of racial equity that the FTP enforced not only for its actors but also for its audiences. In detailing numerous FTP productions featuring racially integrated casts, touring shows that were canceled due to racist policies of regional theatres, and a policy prohibiting any segregated audience seating, Quinn effectively shows that the FTP was conscientious and persistent in its efforts to challenge the accepted boundaries of racial politics in the New Deal era.

Quinn also addresses the ways in which productions such as the *Living Newspapers*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, and *It Can't Happen Here* engaged their audiences in current events. Moreover, Quinn enriches the prevalent narrative of FTP history, which tends to focus on their business and well-known works, with her thorough analysis of key events outside the theatres. Through her exploration of the dynamics and consequences of the elections of 1936 and 1938, the Steel Strikes of 1937, and the double lynching in Mississippi that prompted the introduction (and consequent filibuster) of the federal Anti-Lynching Bill, Quinn also makes a case for the project's relevance to American

history writ large. Weaving political, theatrical, personal, and social threads together throughout the study helps Quinn to summarize and evaluate rapidly the arguments of Congressman Martin Dies and other naysayers. In her persuasive conclusion, Quinn supplies excerpts of fierce and racially pointed congressional attacks as final evidence that the threat of racial equality and the fear of a push for civil rights in the South were core motivations to end the life of the FTP.

Quinn's study also provides concise biographies of Hallie Flanagan, national director of the FTP; and Harry Hopkins, director of the WPA. Through the personal histories and motivations of the two most prominent public faces of the project, Quinn depicts a nuanced struggle between these two dynamos, their goals for the project, and their battles to overcome the nation's political realities. Quinn also delves into the personal histories of Orson Welles, John Houseman, FDR, and Congressman Dies; though not so intimate as her chapters on "Hallie" and "Harry," these miniature portraits help to illuminate the project's history and context while lending additional support to Quinn's conclusions. Flanagan remains the linchpin of Quinn's narrative, however, as the almost daily personal letters from Hallie to her husband provide descriptions of many events from Flanagan's unique perspective in her own candid words. Additionally, excerpts from Flanagan's letters to Hopkins and other officials contrast a private Hallie, an individual doggedly pursuing her dream, with Flanagan's public performance as a skilled diplomat keeping the ill-fated project afloat for as long as she could.

*Furious Improvisation* is not meant to be an exhaustive history of the Federal Theatre Project's work. Rather than include information on all of the FTP's many productions, Quinn focuses on more risqué events and their inherent political ramifications. Thus, she frequently devotes more space to describing *One-Third of a Nation* or the *Swing Mikado* in terms of their social or political resonance rather than theatrical aesthetics or close textual analysis. Susan Quinn's study is a well-organized, well-written narrative of a theatre project at the mercy of the nation it serves. As such, *Furious Improvisation* is a welcome addition to Federal Theatre Project scholarship, not only for theatre historians but also for students of cultural studies and American history.



***Babylon Girls: Black Women Performing and the Shaping of the Modern.*** By Jayna Brown. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008; pp. 360. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.

***The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance.*** By Shane Vogel. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009; pp. 278. \$60 cloth, \$22 paper.

doi:10.1017/S0040557411000263

Reviewed by Sandra L. Richards, Northwestern University