

PRESENTING OREGON:
FORMATIVE FORCES OF
THE OREGON UNIT OF THE FEDERAL
THEATRE PROJECT

by

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A DISSERTATION

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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During the Great Depression President Roosevelt's New Deal brought relief to Americans through the Works Progress Administration (WPA). The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) was formed in 1935 under the WPA to lift spirits, educate, entertain, and put unemployed theatre artists to work. The FTP was national in scope, but administered at the state level. In the State of Oregon, former Portland Civic Theatre director, Bess Whitcomb, pulled together theatre professionals qualified for work relief to form the Oregon Unit. Ironically, the first productions of the Oregon Unit were not examples of Whitcomb's legitimate theatre work with the Portland Civic, but an expedient recouping of older forms. Vaudevillians were the first unemployed actors hired by the Oregon Unit because they qualified for relief and were ready to place their talents in front of an audience.

This study historicizes the productions of the Oregon Unit of the Federal Theatre Project from 1936 to 1939 and examines the way its leadership negotiated with three forces existing in Portland and the Pacific Northwest. The forces include: the tradition of vaudeville, made up of unemployed professionals; the Little Theatre movement, through Bess Whitcomb's relationship with the Portland Civic Theatre; and finally, the government, at the state and federal level, which used the Oregon Unit as a mechanism of propaganda, to produce regionally based theatre which promoted the

agenda of the New Deal while representing Oregon to Oregonians. Whitcomb negotiated through these forces to create a wildly popular vaudeville-based performance group. The vaudeville nature of the troupe conflicted with a need on the part of the FTP nationally to present “legitimate” scripted performances. The need to produce legitimate theatre brought Whitcomb to transform the Oregon Unit and start a “rehabilitation” program for the vaudevillians, effectively purging the vaudeville performance style. The legitimate mission placed Whitcomb in the middle of negotiations to create a WPA Art Center in Portland. This study places Whitcomb’s negotiation in context of the Great Depression, and calls for a re-centering of her position as a theatrical pioneer in Portland, Oregon.

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