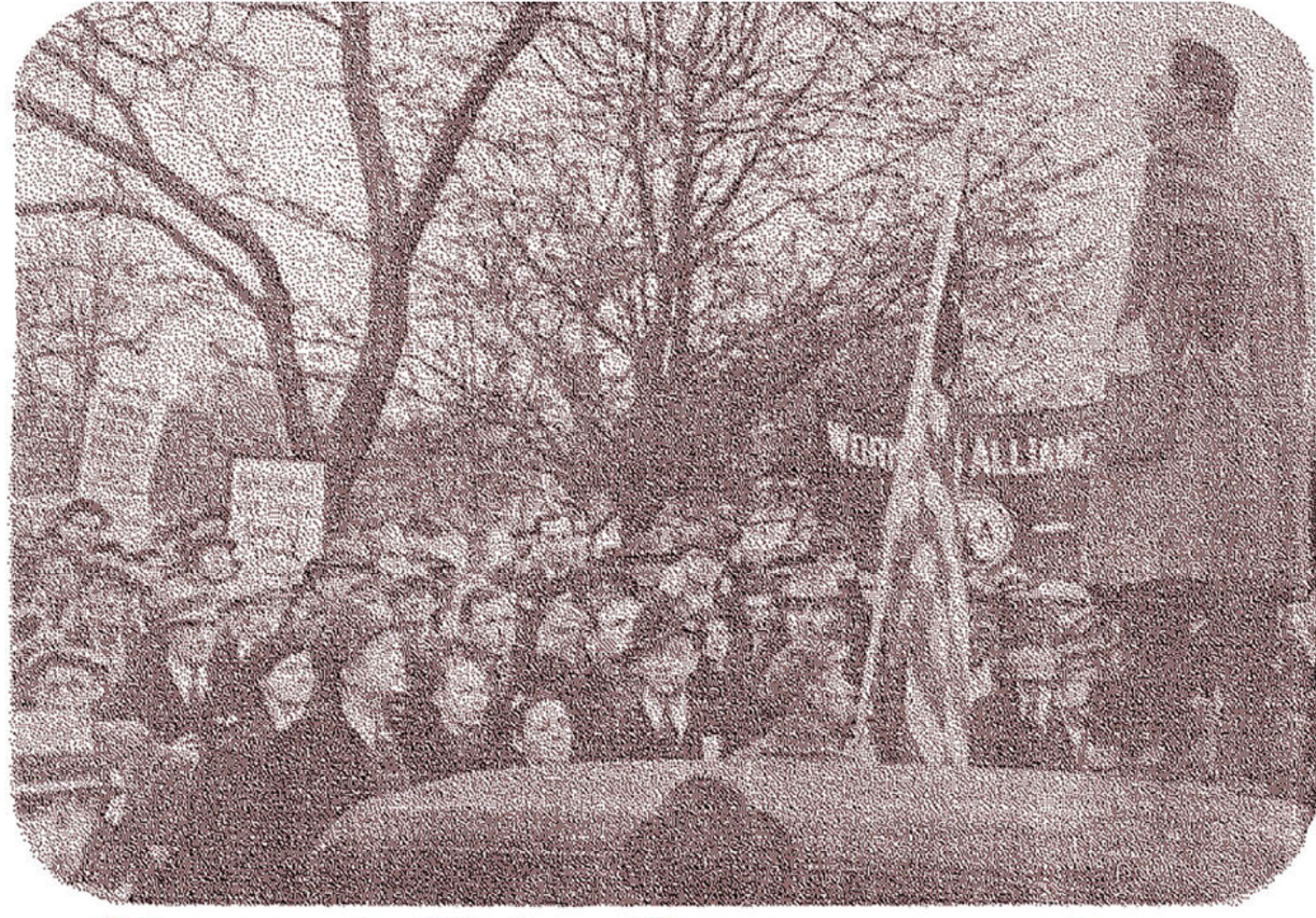


KEM
May 11, 1939
Government and the arts



The communist Workers Alliance perverts a worthy cause

A misfit communist minority with a "rule or ruin" policy now rules and is ruining the WPA arts projects through the ignorant indulgence of pork-barrel politicians. A sane labor policy which can make the WPA function as a democratic American institution must, and can, be evolved.

In Congress, the same group which voted to cut the WPA appropriation has decided that by June of this year, the arts projects are to be abolished. There is only one reason given for this: the obvious control of the arts projects by the communist party through its stooge, the Workers Alliance. If this death blow is given, it will be only one more evidence of the neurotic communist policy—"rule or ruin." It will also be another evidence of the let down which seems to be overtaking John L. Lewis, for his recognition of the Workers Alliance as a CIO affiliate has given them the axe with which they are chopping down the tree in which they live. This is especially true of the Federal Theatre, and many persons who have fought fiercely for continuation of WPA are nearly reconciled to the abandonment of the arts projects unless they can be given a future in which they will not be merely recruiting agencies for the communist ideology.

When the arts projects of the WPA were instituted, many capable and culturally progressive individuals throughout the country hailed them as a banner raised against the gloomy depression sky to form a rallying point for youthful and ambitious artists whose task it was to carry the torch of esthetic advancement on to that future time when we envisaged the return of "prosperity." To some of us, that time seems to be receding farther and farther into the future, despite the temporary lighting of forges and the humming of lathes for re-armament. This only makes the problem more pressing. Just what is wrong with these projects? Why have these projects which began with such enthusiastic support and such high hopes failed to make a place for themselves in our national scheme?

Of all the social factors in the arts projects (and promising to become the direct cause of their destruction) the stranglehold of the communist minority as exercised through the Workers Alliance is the most outstanding and dangerous. Through a short-sighted and inept policy on the part of Washington, this was allowed to grow until today no worker unwilling to accept the domination of this group is safe in his job.

Government and the arts

I am not proposing that these young communists be suppressed. I am not even proposing that they should be removed from WPA. But I am proposing that their numbers be kept somewhat related to their actual proportion in society, or in their professions as represented on WPA. And I am proposing that the administration in Washington end its blundering policy of recognition of a communist organized and dominated Workers Alliance as the preferred labor organization. That some bright young man in Washington convinced the administration of the advisability of such a policy as a vote-getter, there can be no doubt. But it is equally obvious that for every communistic vote so gained, two or three at least are lost. This effect is gaining in force until now on WPA there is a growing danger that the enemies of this lunatic fringe are being edged gradually over to a fascist sympathy in a natural—even though deluded—attempt at self-preservation.

To a person who regards the WPA as a temporary subsidy to enable him to rehabilitate himself in the real world of his chosen profession, the activities of these pertinacious misfits are disturbing and distasteful. And to anyone who has ever held a responsible position in the real world, the pettiness and futility of such a revolution in a teapot is ludicrous to say the least. The spectacle of persons striking on a job, the existence of which has no recognized commercial value and whose remuneration has been again and again declared by the WPA head to be primarily a relief-stipend, presents an example of tragic-satire, making one ashamed of his connection with it.

That WPA workers should be protected by the unions which represent the fields in which, presumably or actually, the workers functioned in real industry is hardly controversial material in a world dominated by the individualism of the profit system—and this in spite of the very few abuses resulting from such recognition. At the same time, to the sane, ambitious element in WPA it is equally unthinkable that an organization based upon avowed pauperism and dominated by Marxian dogmas should control the labor relations of men and women who consider themselves merely temporary recipients of a subsidy granted by the government in recognition of its function as a social agency in a period of catastrophic unemployment.

To this writer, the solution of this problem, and the setting up of a joint committee of *bona fide* labor unions representatives to work with a district committee (of civil service status), appointed from Washington and not subject to the coercion which intimidates and disrupts the programs of the weak-kneed and characterless individuals who in many cases hold supervisory positions in the Federal Theatre Project, would be so simple that the failure to solve this question is a constant source of amazement. This failure on the part of Wash-

3 Government and the arts

ington has alienated much of the natural sympathy of the non-communist majority on FTP and provided a ready political capital which could be enlisted by any progressive and intelligent Republican candidate.

It would be a crying shame to lose the arts projects which were so nobly conceived. But unfortunately the persons in Washington who were entrusted with WPA organization were not infallible or omniscient. In spite of their good intentions, the pork-barrel politician influence was, and is still, powerful enough to offset many of their labors. (We have now the new and exquisite spectacle of ladies sticking their permanents into the pork-poke.)

It would be especially unfortunate if, through political ineptitude, America were to lose the Federal Theatre Project. The value of the theatre as a cultural guide was obvious in past civilizations. But this educational value has long been overlooked. There are millions of Americans who have never been inside a theatre. There are also millions who have been, but who refuse to patronize the theatre further because it does not cater to their native tastes.

As a precipitant of national ideology the theatre is unequalled. But one of its most universal characteristics—without which it cannot live—is its community aspect, its function as a synthetic voice of the people it serves. To neglect this cultural mechanism would be to refuse a tool which seems to be one of the most basic natural means of mass-expression. And in the period which shall continue for at least another decade we can afford to overlook no social force of such value.

A survey of the commercial theatre leaves no possibility of doubt that it is entirely and hopelessly out of touch with America. The smug conclusion that a few cities can set the cultural trend of the country is (except for a few superficial and ephemeral details) ungrounded. Until the theatre finds a way to reach ten times its present audience it is merely an idle luxury.

The decadent pseudo-sophistication current among New York theatregoers finds no corollary anywhere in the country. This pseudo-sophisticated attitude produces nothing but antagonism in the bulk of Americans. This influence must be counteracted and destroyed, not by coercion, but by example. And the main task with which we are confronted is the task of directing into constructive channels, the genius of the growing generation of dramatic artists.

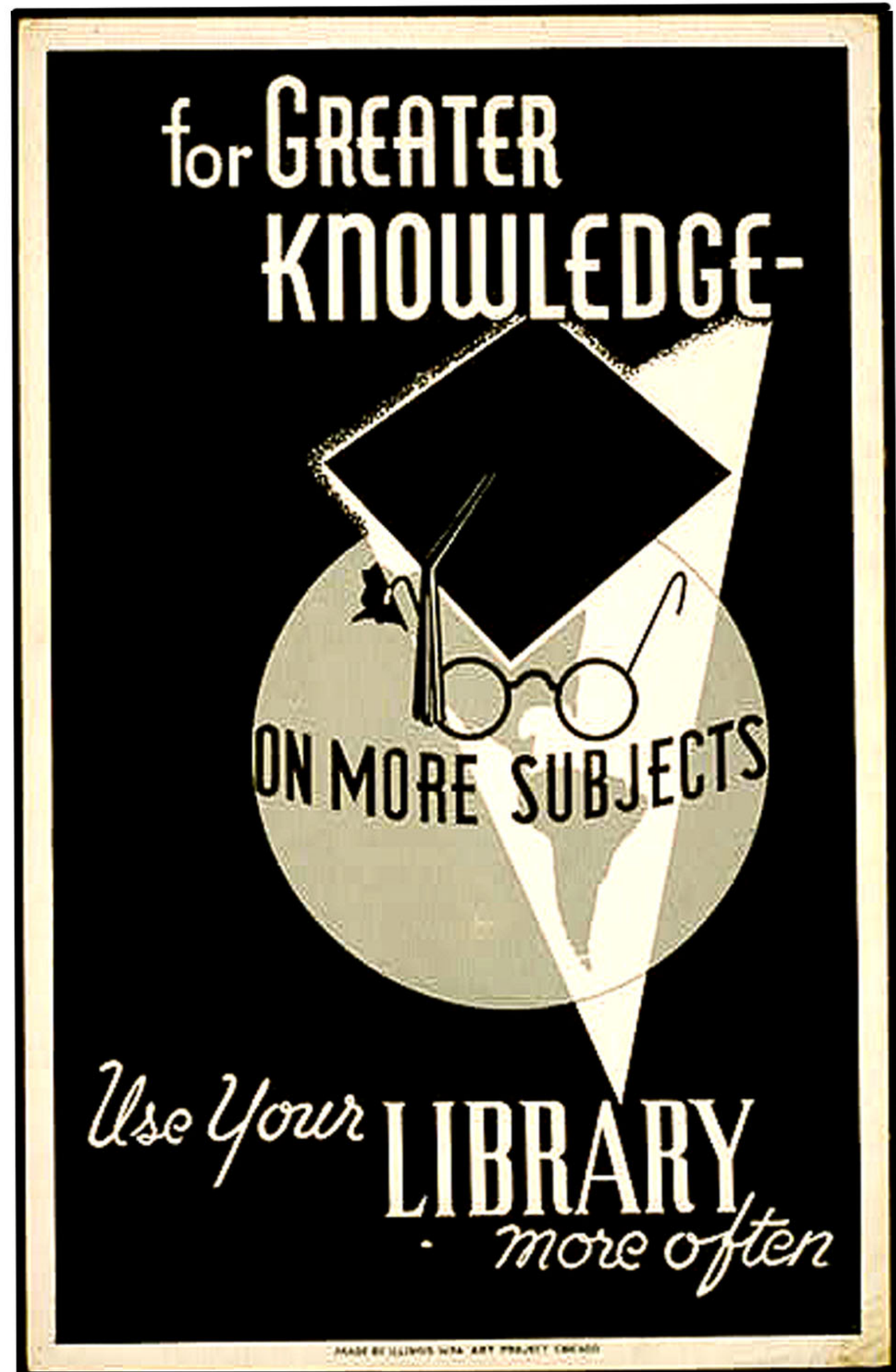
Up until now no nationwide corrective movement for the American theatre has been apparent. The greatest danger lies in the fact that the only groups at war with the stereotyped and hidebound conventions of the commercial theatre are those actuated and dominated by those Marxian political theories which do not find a ready welcome in American minds. They do not seem to realize that the same ideas can be expressed in the common terms familiar to Americans

Government and the arts

—that the philosophy of industrial democracy does not have to be a foreign thing presented in terms repugnant to American ears. Few of them seem to know that Emerson, in his closing paragraph on the life of Napoleon, voiced this philosophy perfectly before the personal Esperanto of Karl Marx had been made known to us. That this dogmatic movement has enlisted the aid of many of our young writers is due to the fact that young artists maturing in a changing world are given no opportunity to express themselves constructively. In such a condition the weak turn inward and live briefly by devouring their own vitals. The explicit appointment of the Workers Alliance as the preferred "labor" organization on the arts projects has driven the weaker spirits into its fold in fear of dismissal.

Until we can rear and harvest a generation of creative artists whose minds react, and whose hearts beat, in deep sympathy with the hopes and aspirations, the ideals and underlying mores, of the vast inarticulate mass of Americans for whom they serve as voice—there can be no genuinely American art. And until we can give expression to a generation of political dissidents who do not react blindly and neurotically to their social environment like so many frightened cats in a bag, we can have no genuinely American radical political creed. All pathologic substitutes for these are futile.

The head and all the executives of a consolidated government arts project must be persons capable—in character, intelligence,



idealism, and background—of enforcing this principle as the working basis of all activities.

We must teach our growing writers to re-live the scenes of our racial infancy and growth, and to search therein for the vital threads of our existence as a people, to realize fully that the tradition of America is the property of all Americans, irrespective of racial and national antecedents. In short, to cease butting their already muddled

Government and the arts



heads against a brick wall. And they should be encouraged to experiment in any new avenues of expression which the subject matter may indicate to them. Obviously this is impossible in a commercial theatre or in a theatrical group dominated by those who have expended a lifetime in bowing to expediency; or (as the present Federal Theatre) in a group dominated by persons who are not theatrically competent. It is a job for young men and women—for men and women who have not yet lost their inheritance from those ancestors who, with a rifle, axe and plow, transformed a wilderness into the richest single nation on earth today. Given the proper guidance, these rebellious youngsters who are, after all, blood of our blood and flesh of our flesh, can be trusted to carry on our tradition—once they are assured the tradition still lives—even though the fates lead them along strange new paths to the future. With inspired leadership they can be relied upon to cast aside the counsels of this frantic group of Marxian neurotics whose activities are increasing the growth of fascist sympathy in geometric proportion.

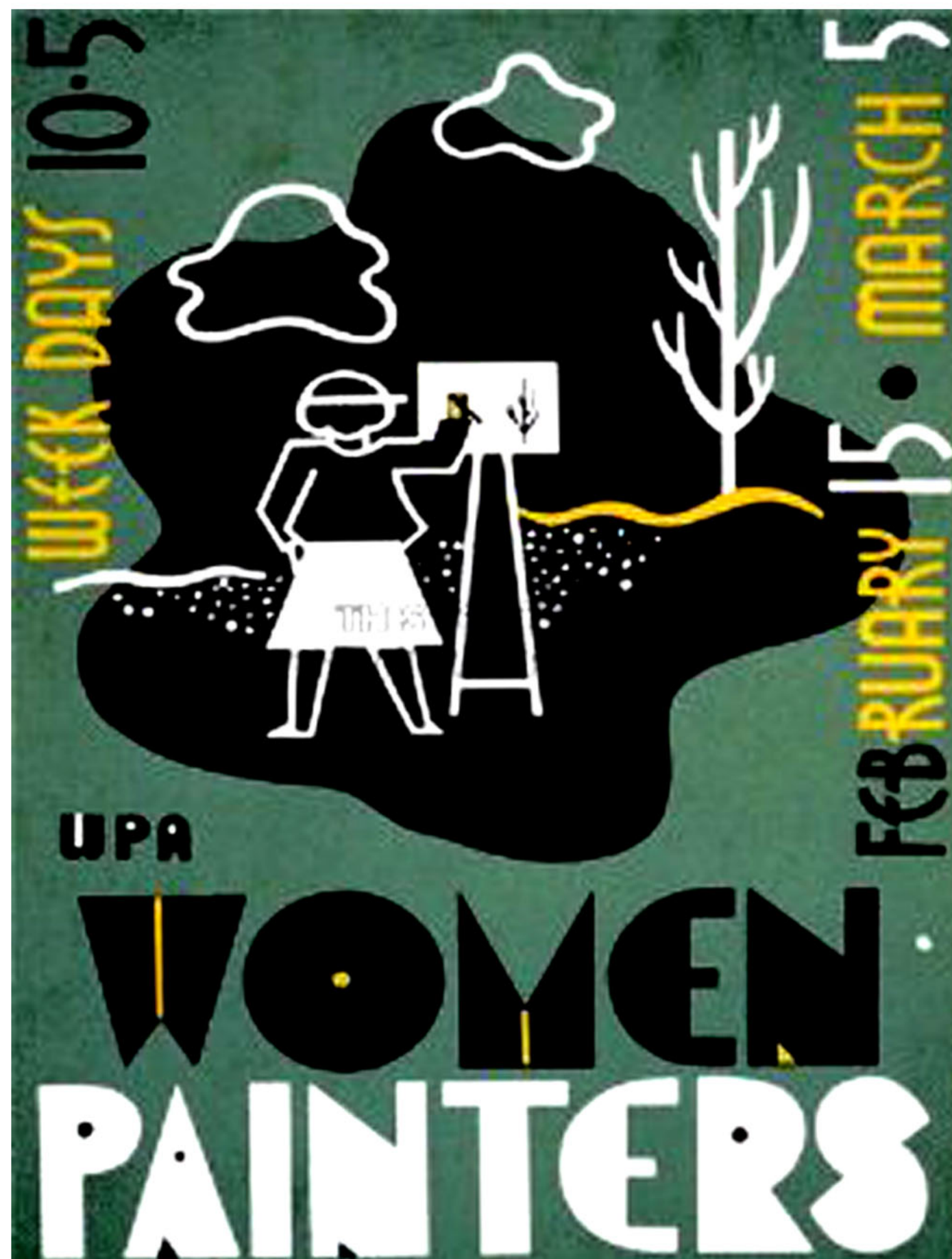
The arts projects, in strong and capable hands, could, in the time guaranteed by the present appropriations, so firmly establish this principle that its work would certainly continue, irrespective of future governmental changes.

Here we are brought up short! Can the Federal Theatre and other arts projects, as presently constituted, accomplish it? Are the proper persons guiding its destinies? Only a simple examination of the record is necessary to reach the conclusion that a thorough administrative house cleaning is imperative. A replacement of the bureau-parasites by persons capable (both in character and intelligence) of leading a pioneer movement and of controlling the lunatic fringe which has fastened like a fungus upon the arts projects, is a vital necessity.

The Muses do not consort harmoniously with pork-barrel politicians and ward heelers who would send them out onto the streets to solicit for the machines. Neither do they function as the servants of frantic totalitarian ideologies.

The writer, by diligent searching, has had access to more than a hundred of the Federal Theatre Project's readers' reports on plays submitted by unknown authors and (in a few cases) anonymously by known authors of undoubted ability. Many of these, although well written in many other

Government and the arts



respects, were unsuitable for Broadway production. About 25 were controversial, and about a dozen were undoubtedly the material of which Broadway hits are made. These last—unless barred by sheer ill-fortune—might some time be rewritten and run from several months to a year in a highly commercialized theatre.

Only one of these last received a partial recommendation, and in this case, the author was asked to remold his social views to harmonize with those of the reader! The most sympathetic reviews were given those which, although containing fine writing, were technically unsuited for production. Seemingly, the readers had no conception of the physical, mechanical limitations of the theatre. Of the 25 perfectly producible plays, several had been favorably reviewed by some of the minority of competent readers, and then rejected by the heads of the department. By far the majority of the rejections were based almost entirely on the readers' contrary political and social views. New Deal philosophies, socialist, liberal, and even radical views were criticized as "antique," "pre-war," "reactionary," and a dozen other appellations which have nothing whatever to do with a Federal Theatre in this New Deal era. At least 60 to 70% of the reviews were characterized by the vicious destructiveness and the bitterness engendered by envy, which one always finds in the comments of frustrated or unconfident persons who sense that their own aspirations fly higher than their gifts warrant.

Intrigued by these findings, I asked several writers of my acquaintance to take me to restaurants and cafés where I could mingle with the personnel of the National Service Bureau professional reading staff. What I discovered is little short of astounding. The majority of the staff, I found, is composed of Greenwich Village bohemians, most of whom have had absolutely no experience in the profession, and few have had even a brief experience in amateur theatres. The women were worse than the men, in the

Government and the arts

sense that only one woman seemed qualified, whereas several men were undoubtedly capable. I estimated that about 75% of the staff is ridiculously incompetent. Not being egotistical enough to rely upon my own unsupported judgment, I canvassed Broadway, and found that this conclusion was much more liberal than the one generally accepted among the professionals. Another pertinent fact is that the Workers Alliance has gradually eased out most non-members from the divisions which require as a basis of employment that the worker be an active playwright. In spite of this, the Alliance fights bitterly to avoid having the recognized union of playwrights—The Dramatists' Guild—take any part in influencing the choice of playwrights on the project. If the Guild will give its aid gratis, it will be accepted, but even in the dismissals fight, the Alliance has bitterly opposed opening the door to employment of needy Guild members.

The big thing to bear in mind, in evaluating the importance of all these bickerings, is that they are endangering the efficiency and even the life of the largest and potentially the most influential theatrical organi-

DON'T

WASTE

WATER

WPA

zation in the world, the Federal Theatre Project. This is too big a thing to be buried in a pork barrel. Too big a thing to be degraded to the level of personal and political favors. To be smothered under the scurryings of bureau lice. Or to be battered punch-drunk in an ideological ring. The hunted, frightened expression common to most FTP supervisors, harried and threatened by the spokesmen of the communist paupers-union which Washington allows to dominate FTP, must be removed. Men and women of character and vision must replace these persons before they are frozen into Civil Service. A sane and just labor policy which can make WPA function as a democratic American institution must be evolved. Let the Marxians form their own groups to function openly as Marxian groups and remove from WPA activity the organization which, more than anything else, conspires

Government and the arts

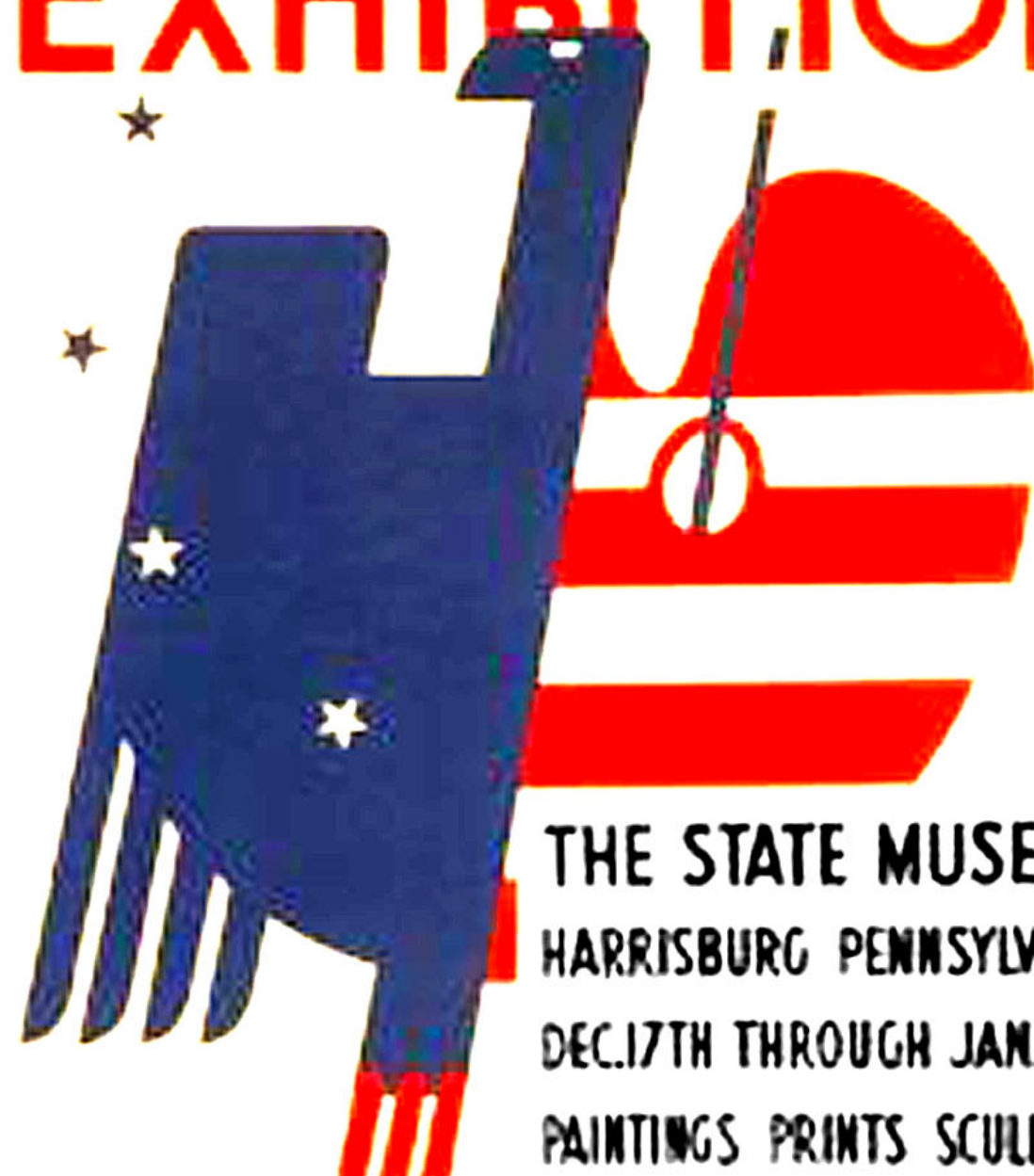
to destroy self-confidence in the individual and to reconcile him to a lifetime of pauperism.

There is a union which can represent each type of worker on WPA. So far as the Theatre Project is concerned, Equity, Stagehands, AFRA, and the Dramatists' Guild are well able to supersede the Paupers' Alliance and help re-establish confidence and a sense of co-identity with the employed workers. The nuisance value of this communist organization which the Administration has deliberately used to frighten reluctant congressmen into larger appropriations is nearly liquidated.

After an efficient administration is provided for the arts projects—perhaps one as unassailable as that given to PWA—and a sane and satisfactory labor policy is established, one more and vital thing remains. The brutal, sadistic atmosphere of insecurity which has permeated all WPA must be destroyed. Workers must be made to feel that so long as there is no other place for them, their place on WPA is secure. Cease using the misery of these industrial casualties as a political football. If, in order to make WPA secure on a sane basis, it is necessary to weed out those whom age and other incapacities have rendered most unlikely to be re-employed in commercial life, and place them upon a more liberal government-aided relief—sensible persons will find nothing in this to combat. (Local relief, however, it must be constantly reiterated, is at present brutally inadequate.) This weeding out, in the hands of persons immeasurably more capable than those now administering the arts projects presupposes a definite standard of ability on the part of workers.

On this basis the arts projects can become a constructive force in American life—can become a yardstick for determining American tastes and cultural advances. Can the Muses be taken out of the pork barrel? Can that brave banner be raised from the dust in which it trails? If so, in the hands of capable, high-minded persons, these projects can repay us a thousandfold for what few dollars and meager labor we can possibly expend on them.

EXHIBITION



THE STATE MUSEUM
HARRISBURG PENNSYLVANIA
DEC. 17TH THROUGH JAN. 13TH
PAINTINGS PRINTS SCULPTURE

FEDERAL ART PROJECT

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

OldMagazineArticles.com