



# *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939)*

contexte & enjeux / context & issues



Émeline Jouve & Géraldine Prévot (dir.)

II. The Promise of It Can't Happen Here: Performances of History in Times of Crisis · Elizabeth Osborne

ISBN: 979-10-231-3031-7

Le *Federal Theatre Project (FTP)* constitue une aventure singulière dans l'histoire du théâtre américain, inédite à l'époque et jamais réitérée sous cette forme. Dirigé pendant ses quatre années d'existence, de 1935 à 1939, par l'autrice, dramaturge et metteuse en scène Hallie Flanagan, il s'inscrit dans l'ensemble des mesures mises en place par l'administration Roosevelt dans le cadre du programme du *New Deal*, au sein de la *Work Progress Administration (WPA)* dirigée par Harry Hopkins. *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939): contexte et enjeux* constitue la première étude française d'envergure sur cette période essentielle de l'histoire du théâtre américain. En mêlant approches transversales et études de cas, ce volume rassemblant les contributions de chercheuses, chercheurs et artistes se propose de mettre en lumière les angles morts et les figures oubliées de cette période de l'histoire théâtrale américaine, faisant le pari que ces oublis eux-mêmes racontent quelque chose de l'historiographie de cette période et, en retour, des regards contemporains que nous pouvons porter sur elle. L'ouvrage s'inscrit dans une perspective résolument transdisciplinaire, à l'image de ce que fut le *FTP*, en proposant des articles sur le théâtre à proprement parler mais aussi la musique et le cinéma.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) is a singular adventure in the history of American theater, unprecedented at the time and never repeated at such. Headed during its four years of existence, from 1935 to 1939, by the author, playwright and director Hallie Flanagan, it is part of the program set by the Roosevelt administration as part of the New Deal, within the Work Progress Administration (WPA) directed by Harry Hopkins. *Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939): Context and Issues* is the first French volume on this essential period in the history of American theater. By combining cross-disciplinary approaches and case studies, this volume, which brings together contributions from researchers and artists, aims to shed light on the blind spots and forgotten figures of this period of American theatrical history, considering that these omissions themselves tell us something about the historiography of this period and, in turn, about the contemporary views we can take on it. The book is resolutely transdisciplinary, as was the FTP, with articles on theater itself, but also on music and film.

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Ouvrage publié avec le concours de Sorbonne Université  
et des unités de recherche CAS (Université Toulouse Jean-Jaurès)  
et HAR (Université de Paris-Nanterre)



Les SUP sont un service général de la faculté des lettres de Sorbonne Université

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Couverture : Michaël BOSQUIER

Maquette et mise en page : Emmanuel Marc DUBOIS (Issigeac) / 3 d2s (Paris)

**SUP**

Maison de la Recherche  
Sorbonne Université  
28, rue Serpente  
75006 Paris

tél. : (33) (0)1 53 10 57 60

[sup@sorbonne-universite.fr](mailto:sup@sorbonne-universite.fr)

<https://sup.sorbonne-universite.fr>

## DEUXIÈME PARTIE

# **Le théâtre de la crise : croiser les échelles et les esthétiques**



THE PROMISE OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*:  
PERFORMANCES OF HISTORY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

*Elizabeth A. Osborne*  
*Florida State University*

[W]hen dictatorship threatens a country it does not necessarily come by way of military invasion, [...] it may arrive in the form of a sudden silencing of free voices.

Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, 1940

On October 27, 1936, the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) staged one of its greatest triumphs: twenty-one productions of Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt's *It Can't Happen Here* opened simultaneously in eighteen cities across the country.<sup>1</sup> It would be "the first nationwide production of any dramatic work in the history of theatre, and it became a widespread popular success."<sup>2</sup> More productions followed and companies from Boston (Massachusetts), Newark (New Jersey), Detroit (Michigan), Miami (Florida), Tacoma (Washington), and Los Angeles (California) toured nationwide. *It Can't Happen Here* ultimately played to hundreds of thousands of audience members over the equivalent of 260 weeks—five years—in what New York theatre critic Burns Mantle described as "justification of the organization as a

- 1 Participant companies were in question up to the day of opening due to late additions and last-minute cancelations, which explains why there are inconsistencies regarding the number of productions and the number of cities that participated in this opening night. As examples, Kansas City did not receive authorization to produce the show until October 20, and Brooklyn-Queens had an unanticipated issue that forced postponement; neither participated in the simultaneous opening in spite of plans to do so. However, even though Tampa still awaited translation of the script thirteen days before opening and Omaha delayed officially joining the opening until the day before, both Tampa and Omaha participated in the simultaneous opening night. This has unfortunately led to scattered records that indicate different things happening, and thus, confusion about events (Marjorie S. Korn, "*It Can't Happen Here*": *Federal Theatre's Bold Adventure*, PhD Dissertation, University of Missouri, Columbia, 1978, p.58).
- 2 "Program for *It Can't Happen Here* [Jefferson Theatre]," Birmingham, AL, October 27, 1936, p.5, Box 149, Federal Theatre Project, Vassar (College) Collection of Programs and Promotion Materials, 1935-39, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

people's theatre that is willing and able to discuss problems of social import boldly and freely."<sup>3</sup>

But *It Can't Happen Here* was more than the FTP's first nationwide opening. It was a political argument against fascism that opened one week before the 1936 presidential election—and it did so against a backdrop of economic turmoil from the Great Depression and the rise of fascist regimes in Italy, Germany, and other nations abroad that would ultimately lead to World War 2. First a popular novel (1935), and then a play, *It Can't Happen Here* imagined how the United States could transition from a democratic republic to a fascist state. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere, one of National Director Hallie Flanagan's primary goals for the FTP was local relevance.<sup>4</sup> Thus, many of the FTP units adapted the production to fit their local communities, demonstrating how *their* communities would be torn apart. This worst-case scenario played out repeatedly, thus performing and re-performing this dystopian future—adapted to local communities nationwide—in the hopes of demonstrating why Americans must remain vigilant to the fascist threat.

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In October 2016, Berkeley Repertory Theatre resurrected *It Can't Happen Here* in a new adaptation by Tony Taccone and Bennett Cohen. Another presidential election was in its final weeks. The candidate that many thought could not possibly win railed against the mainstream media and intellectual elite, inspired violence against Others, and promised to “Make America Great Again” for a specific subset of Americans in one of the most divisive elections since the Civil War. More than fifty organizations in twenty-four states joined Berkeley Rep in a series of free staged readings that opened one week before the election.<sup>5</sup> Berkeley Rep produced a new audio version for the similarly damaging 2020 election. Broadcast on *YouTube* amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, it gathered over one hundred participating organizations across twenty-seven states and Washington, DC.

In this article, I delve into the historical phenomenon that was *It Can't Happen Here* and its subsequent reappearance in 2016. I argue that the piece initially operated as a potential future that played out for audiences in the imagined space of the theatre as a preventive lesson, with the intent of activating individual and community responses to fascism. With their invocation of *It Can't Happen Here* (2016), Berkeley Rep brought a performance from a specific moment in history—the Great Depression and the lead-up to World War 2—

3 Burns Mantle, “‘It Can't Happen Here’ by WPA,” *Daily News*, October 28, 1936, p.65.

4 Elisabeth A. Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

5 “It Can't Happen Here at Berkeley Rep,” *Berkeley Repertory Theatre*, October 23, 2016. Accessed September 16, 2019.



into the present. As the nation looked to an uncertain future, the Berkeley Rep production invoked the Federal Theatre Project's nationwide opening as a performance of *history* that had been a performance of *futurity* in 1936. And, though it is beyond the scope of this essay, in 2020, as the nation's political future rested upon a razor's edge, the revisiting of *It Can't Happen Here* recalled a moment of innocence, when Americans believed that it could indeed *not* happen here in spite of abundant evidence to the contrary. As an impressive group of scholars of authoritarianism argued in an open letter of concern:

Regardless of the outcome of the United States' election, democracy as we know it is already imperiled. However, it is not too late to turn the tide.

Whether Donald J. Trump is a fascist, a post-fascist populist, an autocrat, or just a bumbling opportunist, the danger to democracy did not arrive with his presidency and goes well beyond November 3rd, 2020.<sup>6</sup>

To this point, much of the scholarship on *It Can't Happen Here* has focused on its national importance. This was an American play by a Nobel Prize-winning American author, dealing with an issue of concern to all Americans. Hallie Flanagan devotes a chapter to it in her famous memoir of the FTP, *Arena*.<sup>7</sup> Nearly all of the major FTP histories at least touch on it, including books by Jane DeHart Mathews, George Kazacoff, Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, and John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown.<sup>8</sup> However, relatively few focus explicitly on *It Can't Happen Here*. Lisa Jackson-Schebetta's article focuses on a single Spanish-language production in Florida, and two dissertations—one by Marjorie Korn and one by Macy Donyce Jones—deal more exhaustively with the production.<sup>9</sup> Korn carefully documents all of the nationwide iterations, while Jones uses *It Can't Happen Here* as a means to argue that the FTP was a propaganda-producing, Pro-American political machine. I enter the discussion by considering *It Can't Happen Here* as both a national phenomenon and a federation of local events, historically and in

6 Editorial Board, "How to Keep the Lights On in Democracies: An Open Letter of Concern by Scholars of Authoritarianism," *The New Fascism Syllabus*, October 31, 2020. Accessed November 1, 2020.

7 Hallie Flanagan, *Arena*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940.

8 Jane DeHart Mathews, *The Federal Theatre 1935-1939*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 1968; George Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre*, Bloomington, Xlibris, 2011; Tony Buttitta and Barry Witham, *Uncle Sam Presents*, Philadelphia, U of Pennsylvania P, 1982; John O'Connor and Lorraine Brown, *Free, Adult, Uncensored*, Washington, DC, New Republic Books, 1978.

9 Lisa Jackson-Schebetta, "Repertoires of the Asturian Diaspora: The Latin Unit's Production of *Eso no puede ocurrir aquí* in Ybor City," *New England Theatre Journal*, vol.22, August 2011, pp.53-78; M.S. Korn, *Federal Theatre's Bold Adventure*, *op. cit.*, note 1; Macy Donyce Jones, *Precarious Democracy: "It Can't Happen Here" as the Federal Theatre's Site of Mass Resistance*, PhD Dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2017.

the 2016 adaptation, and by comparing the two different adaptations to explore how they functioned in their respective times.

How did this performance of futurity, which shaped cultural memory through performance in its own time, appear again (and differently) in 2016, when it became *both* a performance of *history* and a performance of *futurity* for its audiences? How did the re-performance and adaptation in 2016 rely upon and ghost its own history in order to make meaning in the present? To address these questions, I look to the larger cultural history surrounding these performances by delving into scripts and production ephemera at the National Archives, Library of Congress, and George Mason University. I begin by setting the stage for the 1935 novel, a popular phenomenon that serves as a critical starting point for both adaptations of the script. I then connect the novel to the FTP's 1936 nationwide opening, giving particular attention to records that illuminate the mechanics and challenges of the work process. Finally, I blend this historical work with literary analysis in a case study that compares the FTP's version with Berkeley Repertory Theatre's 2016 adaptation, looking specifically at the different representations of women and the resulting shifts in meaning.

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*It Can't Happen Here*—at first a novel, then a play with a nation-wide audience, and then multiple iterations over the intervening eighty years—is particularly revealing in terms of these specific moments in time and their respective impacts on cultural memory. Berkeley Rep did not merely produce a historical show with some intriguing contemporaneous parallels in 2016. They also did not limit the production to their local audience in Berkeley (California). Instead, they created an opportunity for a national reading—with free rights, publicity blurbs, posters, and more—for any company interested in participating in the nationwide event and offering free admission. In so doing, they created a performance of history that ghosted the FTP's nationwide opening from 1936, itself a theatrical event that occupied a very specific historical moment and outcome. When more than fifty additional theatres, schools, and communities across the country opted into the program a week before the 2016 election, the repetition, with revision, was complete.

## SETTING THE STAGE: THE NECESSITY OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*

Sinclair Lewis penned his lengthy hit novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, in the summer of 1935, or so the story goes.<sup>10</sup> Demonstrating just how much of a concern the rise of

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10 J. Donald Adams, "America Under the Iron Heel: A Novel by Sinclair Lewis Pictures a Fascist Dictatorship," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1935, p. BR1.

fascist dictatorships in Italy and then Germany had become to Americans, the novel sped to the top of the *New York Times* Best Sellers list, where it remained for months. More than 1,500 articles on fascism appeared in *The New York Times* in 1934 and 1935. A lengthy article comparing communism, socialism, democracy, and fascism created a scorecard of sorts, documenting the “wins” and “losses” of the political rivals. As Europe devolved into chaos, it suggests, millions of frustrated, despairing people sought “a hero to solve [their] problems,” and thus embraced Mussolini’s nationalist vision.<sup>11</sup>

Historian Leo P. Ribuffo argues that Americans of many political persuasions “were eager to denounce European fascism but were almost at a loss to explain it.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as journalist George Seldes argued, fascism had already gained significant traction in the United States. It needed “only a Duce, a Fuehrer, an organizer and a loosening of purse strings of those who gain materially by its victory, to become the most powerful force threatening the Republic.”<sup>13</sup> Seldes and Sinclair Lewis were neighbors, and Lewis was married to journalist Dorothy Thompson, who had been expelled from Germany due to her incendiary investigative reporting on Adolf Hitler. Surrounded by their influence, Lewis dreamed of fascism rising in the United States, woke in a panic, and wrote *It Can't Happen Here*.<sup>14</sup>

Lewis’s novel imagines a nation in which a demagogue emerges, gains funds from wealthy business owners, and initiates a political transformation. It focuses on how a fascist coup would impact the people of one small American town in Vermont. A wide range of characters populate the town, including a vocal member of the Daughters of the American Revolution, a communist activist, a democratic socialist, a resolute liberal activist, business owners, and the reluctant hero, a small-town newspaper editor named Doremus Jessup. Few believe that fascism could arise in the United States, and it is clear that the idea is not initially of immediate concern because of an implicit faith in the power of American democracy.

Lewis’s fictional future bears an often-disturbing resemblance to the 1930s. Set in the Great Depression, the novel traces the rise of real-life Louisiana Senator Huey Long against a background of economic collapse, widespread unemployment, xenophobia, anti-intellectualism, class disparity, and polarizing political differences. Into this churning morass of hostility and frustration leaps Senator Berzelius (Buzz) Windrip,

11 Emil Lengyel, “Four World Ideas Vie for Domination,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 1934, p. SM4.

12 Leo P. Ribuffo, “*It Can't Happen Here*: Novel, Federal Theatre Production, and (Almost) Movie,” *Right Center Left*, New Brunswick (NJ), Rutgers UP, 1992, p.162.

13 George Seldes, *Sawdust Caesar*, New York, Harper and Brothers, 1935, p.xiii.

14 John Chamberlain, “Books of the Times,” *The New York Times*, October 21, 1935, p.17.

the “ringmaster-revolutionist” that millions hailed to lead them through this “critical hour of the nation’s hysteria.”<sup>15</sup> Windrip takes the Democratic nomination from President Roosevelt and quickly gains widespread support as he promises to solve all of the nation’s many problems. Once elected, Windrip solidifies his base of power. He outlaws dissent, trains and arms his own paramilitary force, and manipulates Congress into passing a bill that gives him complete control of legislation. When Congress resists, he declares martial law and arrests those who dissent.<sup>16</sup> Democracy rapidly crumbles in the punishing suppression that follows.

While Windrip gains power through a combination of circumstances, Lewis suggests a chronic lack of education is one critical factor in the leadup to fascism. Lengthy critiques of the American failure to instill widespread education as a core value populate the novel. Indeed, the novel cites the words: *school*, 40 times; *education*, 25 times; *university*, 33 times; *think*, 167 times; and *thought*, 112 times.<sup>17</sup> In a particularly damning tirade, Doremus Jessup lists one example after another of easily manipulated Americans, prone to violence and hysteria:

Look how Huey Long became absolute monarch over Louisiana, and how the Right Honorable Mr. Senator Berzelius Windrip owns *his* State. Listen to Bishop Prang and Father Coughlin on the radio—divine oracles, to millions. Remember how casually most Americans have accepted Tammany grafting and Chicago gangs and the crookedness of so many of President Harding’s appointees? Could Hitler’s bunch, or Windrip’s, be worse? Remember the Ku Klux Klan? [...] Remember when the hick legislators in certain states, in obedience to William Jennings Bryan, who learned his biology from his pious old grandma, set up shop as scientific experts and made the whole world laugh itself sick by forbidding the teaching of evolution? [...] Why, where in all history has there ever been a people so ripe for a dictatorship as ours!<sup>18</sup>

In the novel, Lewis’s political sting is barbed, and the consequences dire. In 1935, it was but a short intellectual step to see how easily the United States could slip into dictatorship if a charismatic leader stepped forward. And as the 2016 election wore on and Donald Trump’s popularity reached new heights, the parallels to

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15 Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, New York, P.F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1935, p.62.

16 *Ibid.*, pp.170-175.

17 For the purposes of clarity, I combined instances in which plurals and similar versions of the same word appear, such as “university” and “universities”. Stéfan Sinclair and Geoffrey Rockwell, “*It Can’t Happen Here* Word Cloud,” *Voyant Tools*, n.d.

18 S. Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n. 16, pp.21-22.

Lewis's imagined world seemed more and more prescient. With Trump's election, Lewis's novel leapt to the top of Amazon's Classic American Literature best-seller list as Americans struggled to cope with their new reality.<sup>19</sup> As Rick Searle noted: "Perhaps it's best to look upon *It Can't Happen Here* less as a novel and more as a sort of political compass, for my guess is, as long as our American Republic lasts, we will return to it whenever we feel ourselves lost and in danger of wandering in the darkness towards dictatorship."<sup>20</sup>

## PERFORMING THE FUTURE: THE FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT PRODUCTION

The Federal Theatre Project's (FTP) opened *It Can't Happen Here* nation-wide one week before the 1936 presidential election. Roosevelt would win in one of the most decisive victories the nation had ever seen, with more than sixty percent of the popular vote and 523 electoral votes, carrying every state except for Vermont and Maine.<sup>21</sup> The nation was certainly not united though, and to say that Roosevelt and his signature New Deal were universally popular within the Republican party would be akin to saying that contemporary Republicans heartily endorse President Barack Obama's Affordable Care Act (a.k.a. ObamaCare).

As the FTP worked to open the production of *It Can't Happen Here*, fascism continued to take hold in Europe. The interim between the publication of Lewis's novel in October 1935 and the FTP opening the following October saw an exacerbation of conditions in Europe. In 1935, Italy invaded and annexed Ethiopia in an action that was condemned by the League of Nations. The following year, Hitler and Mussolini joined forces to support the Nationalist coup in Spain, catalyzing the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the decades-long rule of General Francisco Franco. The US government seemed to take these threats seriously; when Italy's invasion of Ethiopia inspired the FTP's first living newspaper, *Ethiopia*, the government closed the production before it

- 19 Tracy Mumford, "Sinclair Lewis' 'It Can't Happen Here' becomes a bestseller after Trump's win," *MPR News*, November 23, 2016.
- 20 Rick Searle, "How Sinclair Lewis Predicted Trump, and How He Didn't," *Utopia or Dystopia*, May 21, 2017.
- 21 In 1936, Maine had 5 electoral votes, Vermont had 3, and the total number of electoral votes available nationwide was 531 (S.L. Lohr and J.M. Brick, "Roosevelt Predicted to Win: Revisiting the 1936 *Literary Digest* Poll," *Statistics, Politics & Policy*, vol.8, no.1, June 2017, p.66; "U.S. Electoral College: Historical Election Results 1789-1996," *National Archives and Records Administration: U.S. Electoral College*, n.d.). <https://www.archives.gov/electoral-college/1936>

opened, stipulating that: “No one impersonating a ruler or cabinet officer shall appear on stage.”<sup>22</sup> Director Elmer Rice resigned in protest but the regulation remained in force, perhaps because the federal government could not be seen criticizing leaders who were growing more and more powerful abroad.

Thus, it is not surprising that the FTP production of *It Can't Happen Here* was more politically moderate than the novel.<sup>23</sup> Rather than highlighting its attack on fascism, Lewis described the play as “pro-American and nothing more,”<sup>24</sup> and he announced that he selected the FTP as his producer because he could “depend on the Federal Theatre for a non-partisan point of view.”<sup>25</sup> FTP publicity documents supported this assertion by directing units to avoid all “controversial issues—political angles of any degree—special appeals—racial or group appeals—or inferences in any of these directions, since Federal Theatre is interested only in presenting good theatre.”

**204** The approach suggests intentional depolarization, and required all press and publicity documents be coordinated through and approved by a centralized office. Central to this strategy was the excision of phrases like: “What Will Happen When America has a Dictator?”—a well-known tagline in the novel’s publicity campaign—and, as expected, any references or comparisons to foreign powers.<sup>26</sup>

This “pro-American” approach becomes particularly clear in the production posters. They include no names, no overt references to communism or socialism, and no exciting taglines. The Adelphi Theatre in New York created a poster that features the Statue of Liberty, silhouetted in blue while red smoke pours from her torch; while the smoke suggests a major problem, the great symbol of the nation still stands as a beacon of hope amidst the patriotic red, white, and blue color scheme (**fig. 1**).

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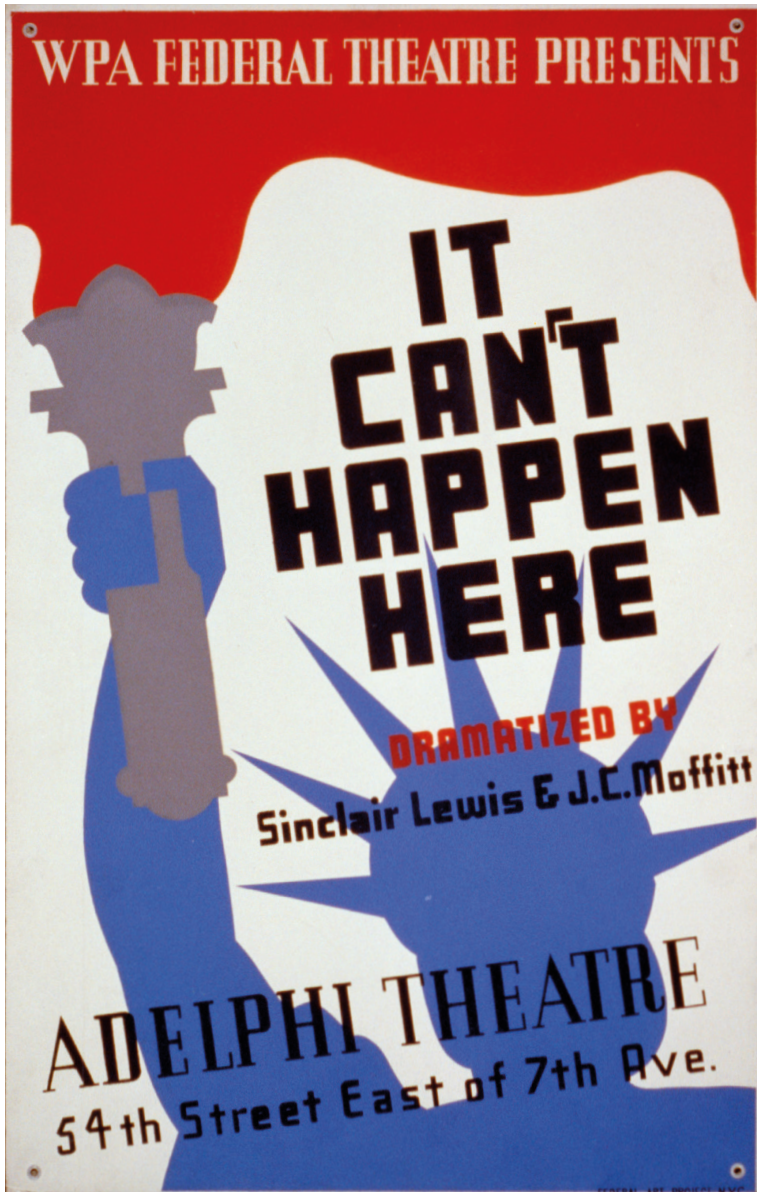
22 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, n. 8, p.66.

23 Lewis revised *It Can't Happen Here* independently in 1938, when it was published by Dramatist Play Service. Since there are no records of the FTP producing this version, I focus here on the Lewis/Moffitt version available in the FTP collection at the National Archives.

24 John Chapman, “Mainly About Manhattan: From a Playground Director,” *Daily News*, September 28, 1936, p.36.

25 “WPA Theatre to Produce ‘It Can't Happen Here,’” *Courier-Post* (Camden, NJ), August 22, 1936, p.4. This quote appears in numerous newspaper articles, as the story went out through the Associated Press, though I have only cited one here.

26 E.E. McCleish, “Instructions Governing Exploitation (*It Can't Happen Here*),” October 15, 1936, pp.1-2.

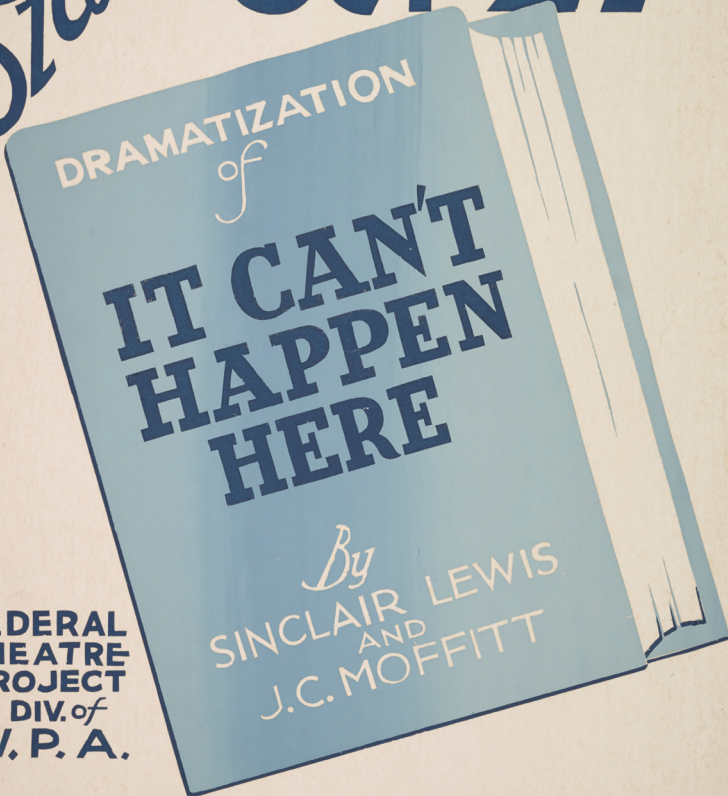


1. Poster for *It Can't Happen Here*, Adelphi Theatre, 54th Street, New York City  
(Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

The poster for the Los Angeles Mayan Theatre production centers on a rendering of Lewis's novel, a strategy that effectively circumvents this directive by evoking what potential audience members recall about the novel (fig.2).

**MAYAN** THEATRE  
HILL *at 11<sup>th</sup>*

*Starts* **TUES. OCT 27**



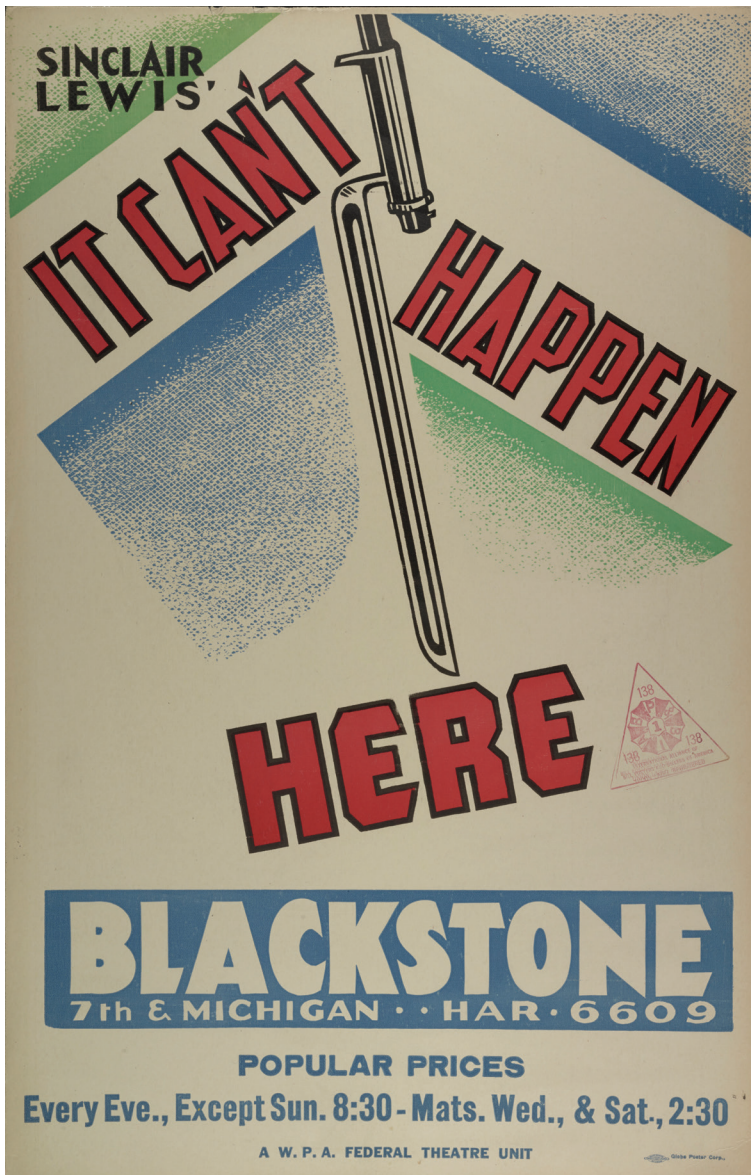
**FEDERAL  
THEATRE  
PROJECT  
DIV. of  
W. P. A.**

**NIGHTLY EXCEPT  
MON. 8:30 P.M.  
SAT. MAT. 2:30 P.M. 25¢ 55¢  
TAX INC.**

2. Poster for *It Can't Happen Here*, Mayan Theatre, Los Angeles, CA  
(Library of Congress, Washington, DC).



Chicago's Blackstone Theatre pushes furthest, picturing a single bayonet surrounded by the title. The bayonet's sharp tip is a hair's breadth from piercing the final word of the title—"Here"—suggesting that violence could soon destroy the nation (fig. 3).



3. Poster for *It Can't Happen Here*, Blackstone Theatre, Chicago, IL  
(Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

Each of these images either relied on the novel for political meaning or evoked an explicitly pro-American perspective, as opposed to one that championed anti-fascism or derided dictators. As Macy Jones argues in her dissertation on *It Can't Happen Here*, “the FTP was a political machine engaged in providing pro-American propaganda.”<sup>27</sup> For *It Can't Happen Here*, this pro-American policy emerged in the visual record, paving the way for audience members to engage with the show as essentially “pro-American propaganda.” It also appeared in the Department of Information’s press releases, which describes the play as Lewis expounding “his idea of what would happen to the United States and its people, when, if ever, a dictator captured control of this country.”<sup>28</sup>

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Though this shift in focus might seem curious in light of the clear anti-fascist intent in the novel, the adaptation from novel to play—co-authored by Lewis himself—suggests the FTP was following Lewis’s intentions. The words *America* and *American* appear twenty times in the play and more than two hundred times in the novel. The word *dictator* appears eight times in the play and more than thirty times in the novel. However, Lewis uses “democracy” and variations on *fascism* forty times—each—in the novel. They all but vanish in the FTP play, with *democracy* arising only once early in the third scene. Doremus and his family gather to watch a parade featuring the Corpus—a nationwide proto-military organization established by Windrop to enforce his rule—when local businessman Frank Tasbrough joins them to get a better view of the parade. He compliments the “great sight” of the marching Corpus and reminisces about “the days our boys marched off to save the world for democracy.”<sup>29</sup> Tasbrough’s remark, following a scene in which the audience observes several Corpus beat an outspoken grocer to death, indicates both a remarkable ability to ignore unpleasant truths and a nostalgic wistfulness regarding the good old days when young American men saved democracy not only for the nation, but also the world. This juxtaposition—between a group that engages in unwarranted violence and established community leaders imagining the Corpus as noble inheritors of those who defended democracy—suggests that Lewis and Moffitt are focusing on a perspective that is embodying pro-American ideals rather than explicitly anti-fascist.

While Lewis softened his messaging, he was clearly interested in reaching a wide audience, and the FTP had the potential to generate a far more expansive audience than any other US theatre in existence—then or now. As Pierre de Rohan explained in

27 M.D. Jones, *Prekarious Democracy*, *op. cit.*, n.10, p.24.

28 Department of Information, “*It Can't Happen Here*: Press Release,” New York, October 28, 1936, p.1.

29 S. Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, note 12; *id.*, and John C. Moffitt, “*It Can't Happen Here*,” New York, September 18, 1936, p.30.

*Federal Theatre*: “We could carry [Lewis’s] warning to sleepy America in villages and hamlets where the spoken drama was unknown until the Federal Theatre was born. This national audience was the deciding factor in the end [and...Mr. Lewis] was willing to risk considerably diminished royalties in order to reach more people.”<sup>30</sup> The gamble paid off for Lewis; in city after city, *It Can’t Happen Here* played to sold-out houses in theatres that saw some of their best sales ever, and more than half a million people ultimately witnessed the FTP productions.<sup>31</sup>

With *It Can’t Happen Here*, the FTP brought Lewis’s concerns for the nation’s future to the forefront of a piece that was adapted for a hyper-local focus. The dystopian future that Lewis imagined in response to the unrest in Europe was thus a lesson—a means to ward off the danger that fascism represented to US democracy. *It Can’t Happen Here* would be the FTP’s first real test as a decentralized “federation of theatres” with local relevance.<sup>32</sup> As the August 22nd announcement demonstrates, the FTP privileged local interpretations: “WPA officials said each production of ‘It Can’t Happen Here’ will be keyed to the section of the United States in which it is being shown.”<sup>33</sup> These interpretations shaped both the productions and the play’s content. The Denver production was set in Salida (Colorado), rather than Fort Beulah (Vermont), with revised local references throughout the script. In Tampa (Florida), a Spanish-language version of the play—*Eso no puede recurrir aquí*—offered clear support for the Spanish Republican government.<sup>34</sup> The Yiddish production in New York included a violent and degrading scene in which Doremus arrived in a concentration camp; this was cut from most of the other productions. The Seattle Negro Unit created a racially integrated production with white actors playing the dictator and his aides, and African American actors playing all of the other roles. Their goal was to demonstrate the impact of fascism on racial minorities, so they relocated the production to a Seattle African American community and adjusted the script accordingly.<sup>35</sup>

30 Pierre de Rohan, “It IS Happening Here – And Everywhere!,” *Federal Theatre*, vol.2, no.2, 1936, p.9.

31 Department of Information, “*It Can’t Happen Here*: Press Book,” New York, October 28, 1936, pp.1-9.

32 H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, n. 8, p.23.

33 “WPA Theatre to Produce ‘It Can’t Happen Here,’” *art. cit.*, n. 26, p.4.

34 It is possible that the political power of the Ybor City production eluded censors due to the fact that it was produced in Spanish’ and few of the FTP’s local administrators were bilingual (L. Jackson-Schebetta, “Repertoires of the Asturian Diaspora,” *art. cit.*, n.10, p.58).

35 Pierre de Rohan, “It IS Happening Here...,” *art. cit.*, n.32, pp.10-13; M.S. Korn, *Federal Theatre’s Bold Adventure*, *op. cit.*, pp.56-57 and pp.137-138.

Such adjustments meant that the dystopian scenario Lewis imagined—and that worst-case scenario quickly escalated to violence, sexual assault, and firing squads—played out repeatedly in *local* communities rather than abstract, far-away cities. In this way, the local focus raised the stakes: it was not a generic New York City that was being taken over, it was each audience member’s hometown or the town next door, and the show was adapted to those circumstances by people who were embedded in the community.



4. Windrip addresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production (Library of Congress, Washington, DC).

New York City audiences also benefitted from this strategy. The city offered four different productions—plus a fifth in New Jersey—, all of which focused on specific communities in the city. These choices gave the show even more resonance for audiences that saw events unfold onstage. The Minute Men—Windrip’s unofficial vigilante soldiers—beat their grocer to death, executed their town doctor in front of a firing squad, and assaulted their neighbor’s daughter. And their young men *became* Minute Men as fascism infected the country.

The FTP script is a stark contrast to the novel’s clear and compelling indictment of social ills. New York newspaper critics highlighted numerous shortcomings. Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* argues that the play “hardly fulfills the opportunity Mr. Lewis has given to the stage, for the characters are meagerly defined, the dialogue

is undistinguished and many of the scenes dawdle on one foot.”<sup>36</sup> John Mason Brown of the *New York Post* bluntly states: “The excitement of the original is gone. So are its detention camps. So are its human values.”<sup>37</sup> Similar complaints emerge from those who actually worked on the productions. FTP production books from at least thirteen of the different ICCH productions are extant in the archives at the National Archives and Library of Congress, and many of these contain cast information, director commentary, production photographs, design renderings, programs, newspaper clippings, and other production ephemera.<sup>38</sup> For a production that is frequently hailed one of the FTP’s greatest triumphs, it is surprising to see the almost uniformly unenthusiastic comments from the people who participated in the actual creation of the work. As Michael Andrew Slane, director of the Denver production, explained in the director’s note in the production book for the Denver unit:

Enthusiasm was high as we read the novel of “IT CAN’T HAPPEN HERE” in which we saw excellent material for a play. It was a sore disappointment when we received the first script of the play. Much of the good material in the novel had been completely disregarded, characterizations had been changed beyond recognition, even the original idea had been altered...<sup>39</sup>

Other directors echoed Slane’s critique. They pointed to problems with everything from the play’s length to the focus on exposition rather than action. Several noted that they found it impossible to make headway on the production without referring back to the novel. Indianapolis director John Cameron wrote that “before the play be cast the novel itself should be read as it gives an excellent insight to the characters who are most prominent in the play.”<sup>40</sup> Others complained the script was melodramatic,

36 Brooks Atkinson, “Sinclair Lewis’s ‘It Can’t Happen Here’ Gets a Federal Theatre Hearing,” *The New York Times*, October 28, 1936, p.30.

37 Quoted in Department of Information, “Press Book,” art. cit., n. 33, p.3.

38 The Library of Congress contains production books from Los Angeles and San Francisco (CA), Denver (CO), Bridgeport (CT), Indianapolis (IN), Des Moines (IA), Omaha (NE), Cincinnati (OH), Tacoma and Seattle (WA), and multiple productions in New York City. The National Archives has duplicated many of these productions, as well as ephemera for additional productions, such as directors’ reports, designs, and production photographs.

39 “Synopsis and Production Notes for *It Can’t Happen Here* Production Report [Denver],” Denver, CO, October 28, 1936, p.2, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

40 “Production Report for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Keith’s Theatre, Indianapolis],” Indianapolis, IN, November 7, 1936, p.4, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, *loc. cit.*

lacked comedy, or had too many scene changes.<sup>41</sup> Chicago director Harry Minturn was frustrated enough by the unending revisions that he decided to ignore most of them, selecting only a few based on what he thought worked rather than what the writers wrote.<sup>42</sup> Even the otherwise reasonably positive report from San Francisco, director Scott McLean concluded: “The performance was played hard and fast—and every effort was made to create an honest picture of the human characters of the story. The chief obstacle was the script itself—because of its hurried and superficial writing.”<sup>43</sup>

To be fair, the novel faced many of the same criticisms: it was too long, too reliant on caricatures, too melodramatic, and unrealistic in the rapid escalation of violence.<sup>44</sup> Lewis had written the novel in just a few months and, as reviewers repeatedly noted, that haste showed. The FTP playscript developed on a similarly expedited timeline. Written (and re-written) by Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt in an acrimonious and very public process between August 21, when the FTP secured the rights,<sup>45</sup> and the nationwide opening on October 27, it was widely considered to be a subpar dramatic adaptation of an exciting and timely novel. As *L.A. Evening News* critic Frank Mittaur succinctly put it, “if there is a play in *It Can’t Happen Here* no one has gotten around to writing it yet.”<sup>46</sup>

And yet, the contemporary relevance and dramatic potential seen in *It Can’t Happen Here* have led to its repeated revival. *It Can’t Happen Here* seems to emerge from obscurity each time artists observe political movements that trend toward authoritarianism, with readings and productions in professional theatres, nonprofit organizations, and educational institutions.

A number of other adaptations have occurred since then, including one by Rick Hickman with the Z Collective in San Francisco, and productions have popped up

41 “Production Bulletin for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Omaha],” Omaha, NE, 1936, p.2, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, *loc. cit.*

42 “Director’s Notes for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Blackstone Theatre, Chicago],” Chicago, IL, n.d., pp.1-2, Box 149, Federal Theatre Project, Vassar (College) Collection of Programs and Promotion Materials, 1935-39, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives, College Park, MD.

43 “Production Bulletin for *It Can’t Happen Here* [Columbia Theatre, San Francisco],” San Francisco, CA, 1936, p.4, Box 1024, Federal Theatre Project Collection, *loc. cit.*

44 John Chamberlain, “Books of the Times,” *art. cit.*, n.15, p.17; J.D. Adams, “America Under the Iron Heel...,” *art. cit.*, n.11, p.BR1.

45 Pierre de Rohan, “It IS Happening Here...,” *art. cit.*, n.32, p.9.

46 Frank Mittaur, “Unconvincing Propaganda,” October 28, 1936, *L.A. Evening News*, J.Howard Miller personal papers, Collection #Co228, Special Collections Research Center, George Mason University Libraries.

periodically at professional theatres, nonprofits, and universities since the 1930s. Berkeley Repertory Theatre's 2016 adaptation, by Tony Taccone and Bennett Cohen, offers insights into how this piece functions as a performance of history.

## HISTORY AND FUTURITY: A CASE STUDY OF *IT CAN'T HAPPEN HERE*

In February 2016, Berkeley Repertory Theatre lost the rights to one of the first planned productions of the season. Artistic Director Tony Taccone and director Lisa Peterson saw this as an opportunity to respond to the presidential election. Donald Trump's unorthodox campaign was gaining traction and, when Peterson found information on the FTP's historic nationwide opening, *It Can't Happen Here* seemed like kismet.<sup>47</sup> Planned for a September opening, the production would close just two days before the November election, and Berkeley Rep would spearhead play readings nationwide in a strategy that evoked the historic FTP production. Taccone eagerly sought out the FTP script and shared it with his creative team, but he was unimpressed. He described it as "a really bad play," while Berkeley Rep managing director Susan Medak called it "ghastly."<sup>48</sup> Thus an adaptation process began.

Taccone approached screenwriter and long-time collaborator Bennett S. Cohen and the two decided to move forward with a new adaptation based on the novel rather than the FTP version. The "Adaptors' note" describes their intentions:

We have adapted this novel with enormous respect and admiration for its author, Sinclair Lewis. Even when taking liberties with both content and form, we have tried to retain the intent and ambition of the original text.

Mr. Lewis was a singular artist, and his ability to grasp the complexity and underpinnings of American society and to re-imagine the world continues to be a source of inspiration. With this play, we hope to sustain his artistic legacy and to translate his overreaching vision into a compelling piece of theatre.<sup>49</sup>

Note their clear attention to adapting the *novel*, rather than the play Lewis personally wrote for the FTP production. Their respect for Lewis is clear, in spite of

47 Claudia Bauer, "Berkeley Rep casts a vote with 'It Can't Happen Here,'" *SFGATE*, September 27, 2016.

48 Sean Elder, "It Can Happen Here: *It Can't Happen Here*, the fable of a fascist president, is coming just in time for the November election," *Newsweek*, October 7, 2016, p.61; Michael Paulson, "In an Election Year, a Play Asks What If," *The New York Times* (Late Edition [East Coast]), September 26, 2016, p. C1.

49 Tony Taccone, Bennett S. Cohen and Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, New York, Dramatists Play Service, 2016, pp.4-5.

the implication that Lewis's adaptation failed to successfully "translate his overarching vision into a compelling piece of theatre." But Taccone and Cohen saw something timeless in Lewis's work. As Taccone explains: "[T]his is *not* about a moment in time. This is about a pattern in American history. Some of the parallels are so eerie that you have to ask yourself, 'What is it about the system, the culture, the pathology that is endemic to this kind of political development?'"<sup>50</sup> Many parallels were already eerily prescient: Lewis describes Windrip as "vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and in his 'ideas' almost idiotic," yet he possessed an inexplicable power to bewitch audiences.<sup>51</sup> Taccone and Cohen further heightened these parallels, noting Trump's ability to garner advertising through the media: "The more offensive his remarks, the more papers get sold."<sup>52</sup> Hilary Rodham Clinton's reference to his supporters as a "basket of deplorables" appeared as well: "[I]t's not because they're all stupid and prejudiced and deplorable. [...] People want a voice. They want agency over their lives."<sup>53</sup>

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While Taccone and Cohen made many notable changes surrounding the complexity of the characters and updated some contemporary references in the transition from novel to play, I focus here on one area with wide-ranging repercussions: the representation of women. Lewis and Moffitt include only three women in the twenty-seven named characters in *It Can't Happen Here*: Mary, wife of the town doctor and mother to Doremus's only grandchild; Lorinda Pike, outspoken resistance operative and Doremus's love interest; and Mrs. Veeder, wife of the murdered grocer. Taccone and Cohen restore Doremus's wife, Emma, and his second daughter, Sissy, which allows all of the women in the play to resonate more deeply and individually. How does Sissy's reinstatement impact the other female characters in the play, particularly her older sister, Mary? How does her presence reshape the play dramaturgically? Here I focus on Sissy's return and consider the ramifications of her presence by comparing two specific moments from the different versions of the play: Mary's death and the play's final moments which,

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50 This interview, as well as numerous dramaturgical articles, are available here: <https://issuu.com/berkeleyrep/docs/program-ic> (Accessed June 7, 2022). Sarah Rose Leonard, "Outstripped by Reality: An Interview with Tony Taccone, Bennett Cohen, and Lisa Peterson," *The Berkeley Rep Magazine*, no. 1, 2016-2017, p.18.

51 S. Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n. 16, p.71.

52 T. Taccone, *et al.*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n. 51, p.36.

53 Quoted from *The New York Times* (M. Paulson, "In an Election Year, a Play Asks What If," *art. cit.*, p. C1). The published version of the play changes this line to "it's not because they're all stupid and prejudiced and blind." (T. Taccone, *et al.*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, p.44.)



in one version, also include Doremus's second daughter, Sissy. While I concentrate on Mary and Sissy, it is also worth noting that Emma's absence makes Doremus's desire for Lorinda more palatable to a Depression-era audience, even if it forces the character of Mary to function in multiple ways dramaturgically.

Mary, wife of the town doctor and mother to Doremus's only grandchild, is also Doremus's only female family member and one of two lead women in Lewis and Moffitt's script. The rise of an authoritarian leader has material and devastating consequences for Mary: in addition to her father's incarceration, Effingham Swan, commanding officer of the Corpos, executes her husband before a firing squad and Shad, a Corpo officer, lusts after the young widow. After Doremus's arrest, Shad attempts to step into Mary's life in a scene parodying domestic bliss. Mary, dressed in black and "huddled in the low sewing-rocker," sews a button on a shirt beside a stack of laundry while Shad destroys her work, threatens her son, and bodily grabs her. When Mary resists, Shad pursues her: "She can't hold out on me any longer! I love her—I love her, and I may die tomorrow! It ain't fair!" He chases her upstairs to assault her, which is where Mary kills him.<sup>54</sup> Shad's death is the catalyst for Mary and her son's desperate flight for the Canadian border, but Swan intercepts them. In the final moments on the play, Mary sends her son ahead while holding Swan at gunpoint:

SWAN. – I knew I should have killed Jessup!

MARY. – You couldn't! The Doremus Jessups can never die.

*(Door begins to open briskly. Swan leaps up and at Mary, shouting:)*

SWAN. – Grab her!

*(She shoots him. As he slumps back into chair, Peabody yanks out his automatic and shoots Mary. The two shots are almost simultaneous. Door filling with wondering Corpos... The curtain just beginning, very slowly, to fall, as Mary, rising from chair, staggering but not falling, one hand on her breast and one on the back of the chair in which she has been sitting, cries:)*

MARY. – Good by, Father....Good by, Fowler....Good by, Davey!<sup>55</sup> [fig. 5]

54 All spelling and punctuation preserved from original text (S. Lewis and J.C. Moffitt, "It Can't Happen Here," art. cit., pp.118-123).

55 *Ibid.*, p.150.



5. Mary's death scene in the Detroit Federal Theatre Project production (National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD).

Flanagan witnessed this scene at the Adelphi Theatre in New York City on opening night. She described her experience watching the audience as this scene unfolded: "I have never seen an audience more attentive than this one during the final scene at the immigration border. Whatever the script and our production may have lacked, there was in that moment an understanding wave of feeling that we are all Americans bound together."<sup>56</sup>

Flanagan's assessment notwithstanding, this melodramatic ending provides a powerful emotional climax that would likely lead to a very attentive audience. Mary's sacrifice becomes political only when she references the unkillable Doremus, a remark that suggests the symbol of resistance will endure. The remainder of the scene focuses on Mary attempting to escape murder charges and protect her son. While these are powerful objectives, Lewis and Moffitt added fuel to the conflagration by transforming Mary into a victim of sexual assault to justify her violent response. Murdering her husband, arresting her friends and family, threatening her son, and destroying the fabric

<sup>56</sup> H. Flanagan, *Arena*, *op. cit.*, n.8, p.124.

of American democracy were insufficient. They also elected to end the play with Mary's death and centered her goodbyes to her father, husband, and son, reiterating her roles as daughter, wife, and mother rather than her work in the resistance. If audiences were drawn into this scene as Flanagan describes, one wonders what, precisely, drew them. Was it limited to an emotional climax created by watching a woman sacrifice her life to save her son and kill the man she held responsible for murdering her husband? Did it go beyond that to become a "wave of feeling that we are all Americans bound together"?

The FTP's audience survey reports prove illuminating here. While many of the comments on the production are generally positive, those that speak to the final scene are not. Next to the opening scene (which viewers rightly complain is far too long) and the script as a whole, the closing scene received the most comments, and the majority was negative. New York audiences wrote: "Ending too abrupt." "The end of the play should be clearer." "The end should have been more definite...no solving of problems...a certain something is missing."<sup>57</sup> Indianapolis audiences complained that "the finale should be more pointed in its solution," while Philadelphia audiences requested less "emotional stuff...please be calm."<sup>58</sup> These comments suggest an audience response that was less a "wave of feeling that we are all Americans bound together," and more frustration regarding an ending that felt unclear and dramatically incomplete. Yet many thought they knew what the message was *supposed* to be. As one put it: "Your heart is in the right place but [the] play [is] a caricature."<sup>59</sup> Mary's melodramatic death scene—moving as it may be—simply cannot resolve the political stakes of the play. Too many questions are left unresolved: did eleven-year-old David escape to Canada? What of the unkillable Doremus...did he escape? If so, where is he and what is he doing? What of the resistance? Is the United States doomed to fascism? What does this ending—focusing on the destruction of the American family—suggest about the power of fascism?

In Taccone and Cohen's 2016 Berkeley Rep adaptation, strong women return to the stage. Mary's demise is moved to the second scene of the final act, following

57 Dana Rush, "*It Can't Happen Here* Audience Survey Report (New York City, Adelphi Theatre)," New York, November 1936, p.6, Box 254, Federal Theatre Project: National Play Bureau Audience Survey Reports, 1936-38, Records of the Work Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives, College Park, MD (added a space between "is" and "missing" in last quote).

58 *Id.*, "*It Can't Happen Here* Audience Survey Report (Indianapolis, IN, B.F. Keith's Theatre)," New York, December 16, 1936, p.4; *id.*, "*It Can't Happen Here* Audience Survey Report (Philadelphia, PA, Locust Street Theatre)," New York, February 15, 1937, p.5.

59 *Id.*, "*It Can't Happen Here* Audience Survey Report (New York City, Adelphi Theatre)," art. cit., n.59.

Doremus's incarceration in the concentration camp. Rather than encountering him as she flees, Mary chooses to approach Swan in his office and sets a careful trap for him by performing the role of the female victim. She then stabs him in the neck with a hairpin and, as he dies, reveals that *she* is the one who has been working against him: "Jessup. That's the name. Mary. Jessup. Greenhill."<sup>60</sup> Here, Mary references both her maiden name, Jessup, and her married name, Greenhill, reminding the audience of her family's tradition of principled resistance and her own personal reasons for fighting. Though Mary's death follows her last stand, this scene evokes Mary's death in the novel. There, empowered by her role as leader of her hometown's rebel cell and frustrated by the slow pace of change, she enlists in aviation and bombing lessons, and kills Swan by crashing her plane into his in midair. In both this adaptation and the novel, Mary becomes a formidable force. She makes arrangements for her son's care, and ultimately chooses a course that leads to her death rather than having it thrust upon her. It is the decision of a committed revolutionary—a warrior—rather than a woman who has been violated and assaulted and is running for her life.

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In an especially important choice, Taccone and Cohen restore Sissy, Doremus's second daughter, to the play. In doing so, they decouple the responsibilities that had been relegated to Mary in the FTP version, thus creating Mary and Sissy as unique characters who pursue separate agendas. Early on, Sissy becomes the driving force of the resistance and she pulls reluctant family members—including Doremus—along in her wake. Her daring manifests in a plan to undermine Shad:

SISSY. – He's sweet on me and I've been sort of letting him, you know

DOREMUS. – Sweet?... What?

SISSY. – Don't bust your gullet, Dad. I know how to protect myself.<sup>61</sup>

Sissy wields her sexual appeal as a weapon and recovers evidence reveals Shad's criminal activities and banishes him to a concentration camp. In this act, she recognizes the dangers and chooses to execute her plan anyway, confident in her abilities, committed to her cause, and willing to suffer the ensuing consequences. As Lorinda says: "That girl is fearless."<sup>62</sup> Sissy goes on to lead the rebel cell after Mary's death and her father's arrest. Even when Lorinda engineers Doremus's escape, Sissy helps him flee to Canada while she remains—now the only member of her family in the country. As he leaves, Doremus passes the responsibility to her: "I'm putting my faith in you, my

60 Tony Taccone, *et al.*, *It Can't Happen Here*, *op. cit.*, n.51, pp.88-89.

61 *Ibid.*, p.76.

62 *Ibid.*, p.77.

brilliant, brave daughter. I'm counting on you, Sissy. To fight."<sup>63</sup> And fight she does. The play ends with a split focus between Doremus's ongoing clandestine work and Sissy and Julian, her boyfriend, printing resistance leaflets in Fort Beulah: "We have so much to do."<sup>64</sup> A series of narrators tells us that "the struggle went on / past the span of [Doremus's] life / and the lives of his children, / and his children's children. / And history marched on, / and the struggle continued... / Straight on through to the present." Sissy and Julian are that present and they choose to continue engineering resistance. The play ends with Julian and Sissy:

JULIAN. – Are you ready?

SISSY. – Yes, I'm ready.

*(Sissy and Julian start to run the press. The sound swells. The lights go out.)*<sup>65</sup>

Sissy's inclusion in Taccone and Cohen's script restores powerful women to the center of the play. No longer fulfilling multiple domestic roles, Mary becomes a complex character that seeks out Swan's destruction even at the cost of her life; she is an agent of change rather than a victim. Sissy similarly speaks her mind, and uses her intelligence and sexual appeal to advocate for her cause and recruit others. Both women are valuable allies tied inextricably to the core of the resistance. When Doremus leaves town to advocate change nationwide, he does so knowing that Mary has neutralized a formidable local opponent and Sissy's strength will feed the resistance. Finally, Sissy is still standing at the end of the play, along with a strong ally in Julian. Sissy and Julian look to the future, where they will work together to continue the movement after Doremus disappears into history. In this adaptation, the battle against fascism is ongoing. Doremus may have been the face of the resistance initially, but Sissy and Julian—empowered and politically engaged young people—take on that role at the end of the play. As they say, they are ready.

## DYSTOPIAN FUTURES

So how did *It Can't Happen Here* function differently in 1936 and 2016? The FTP script flattens characters and shows a tendency toward melodrama by conflating the emotional climax of a traumatized woman fleeing for her life and protecting her son with a muddled anti-fascist—or at least pro-American—political message. But in 1936,

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63 *Ibid.*, p.96.

64 *Ibid.*, p.100.

65 *Ibid.*, p.101.

the play was able to capitalize on the cultural memory of the novel as well as widespread awareness of the rise of fascism abroad. Americans were well aware that fascism was not something relegated to the land of impossibility even if public opinion was not necessarily convinced it was a danger in the United States. The novel made an intellectual case for the plausibility of its spread to the United States while the play functioned on a more emotional level. Even flawed, the social and economic reality of the Great Depression, the cultural saturation of the novel, and the FTP's reach into communities across the nation made *It Can't Happen Here* into a performance of futurity that captured the nation's attention. Roosevelt's resounding victory in the 1936 election offered a way to safely reject this performance of a potential future—for the moment.

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In 2016, Berkeley Rep employed a performance of history *and* a performance of futurity. Just as the FTP did, they employed a performance of a dystopian future to offer Americans a look at a future that they hoped would be rejected. And by mobilizing readings nationwide and ghosting the work of the FTP, Berkeley Rep also created a performance of history, looking back to the 1930s and producing a piece that marked a rejection of fascism. The undeniable historical parallels—widespread economic disparity, racism, radical political divisions, the rising popularity of a potential demagogue—marked 2016 as a historical repetition of sorts. The Berkeley Rep team worked hard to enhance these similarities, drawing on that historical rejection of fascism as a way to process the contemporaneous moment. Sissy and Julian—agents of change—looked to the future with optimism, but when Trump was elected president, it seemed the nation ushered in the leadership that would give rise to all that *It Can't Happen Here* warned against.

In 2020, the United States narrowly voted down a second Trump regime. In the midst of a global pandemic, Berkeley Rep reimaged *It Can't Happen Here* for a free national broadcast via *YouTube*. In this moment, ghosting one production that ended in a rejection of fascism and another that culminated in the election of a demagogue, *It Can't Happen Here* becomes even a performance of history with an uncertain future. For this audience—a nation torn apart by racial strife, white supremacy, economic collapse, widespread violence, and an unwillingness to trust science—it could indeed happen. The ongoing challenges to the democratic process and the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021 show the fragility of the political system.

As we look back in time at this performance of a history that never was, perhaps we might take heart *knowing* that the nation was able to avoid slipping into fascism in the 1930s. Or perhaps we might take its contemporary reappearance as a warning that the dystopian future it predicts could be closer than ever.

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## NOTICE

Elizabeth A. Osborne is Associate Professor in Theatre Studies at Florida State University. Her work has appeared in *Theatre Survey*, *Theatre Topics*, and *Theatre History Studies*. She is author of *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project*, coauthored *Revel for Explore Theatre* (2nd edition) with Michael O’Hara and Judith Sebesta, and coedited *Working in the Wings: New Perspectives on Theatre History and Labor* with Christine Woodworth. Her next project is on performances of history and their influence over cultural memory. She is an editorial board member for the *Journal of American Theatre and Drama* and Immediate-Past President of the Mid-America Theatre Conference.

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ELIZABETH A. OSBORNE  
The Promise of *It Can’t Happen Here*

## ABSTRACT

On October 27, 1936, the Federal Theatre Project staged one of its great triumphs: Sinclair Lewis and John C. Moffitt’s *It Can’t Happen Here*. The play rehearsed how the United States could become a totalitarian state bit by bit. I argue that the piece operates as a potential future that played out for audiences in the imagined space of the theatre as a preventative lesson, with the intent of activating individual and community responses to fascism.

In October 2016, Berkeley Repertory Theatre resurrected the play in a new adaptation by Tony Taccone and Bennett Cohen. Another presidential candidate railed against the mainstream media and intellectual elite. With this return to *It Can’t Happen Here*, Berkeley Rep brought a performance from a specific moment in history into the present. Employing cultural history and literary analysis, this article compares the novel, FTP production, and the Berkeley Rep production.

## KEYWORDS

Federal Theatre Project, Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Tony Taccone, Bennett Cohen, Fascism, Historical performance

## RÉSUMÉ

Le 27 octobre 1936, le Federal Theatre Project met en scène l'un de ses plus grands triomphes : *It Can't Happen Here* de Sinclair Lewis et John C. Moffitt. La pièce met en scène le basculement progressif des États-Unis vers le totalitarisme. Je démontre dans cet article en quoi l'œuvre dépeint un éventuel futur présenté au public dans l'espace imaginaire du théâtre sous la forme de ce que l'on pourrait appeler une « leçon préventive », dans l'intention de susciter chez les spectateurs des réactions tant individuelles que collectives face à la montée du fascisme.

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En octobre 2016, le Berkeley Repertory Theatre a ressuscité la pièce dans une nouvelle adaptation de Tony Taccone et Bennett Cohen. Un autre candidat à la présidentielle avait alors dénoncé les médias traditionnels et l'élite intellectuelle. Avec ce retour à *It Can't Happen Here*, le Berkeley Rep a proposé une performance qui transposait un moment spécifique de l'histoire dans le présent. S'appuyant sur l'histoire culturelle et l'analyse littéraire, cet article compare le roman, la production FTP et la production Berkeley Rep.

## MOTS-CLÉS

*Federal Theatre Project*, Sinclair Lewis, *It Can't Happen Here*, *Berkeley Repertory Theater*, Tony Taccone, Bennett Cohen, fascisme, performance historique

## CRÉDITS PHOTO

### VISUELS DE COUVERTURE (TOUS DANS LE DOMAINE PUBLIC)

1. Hallie Flanagan, director of the WPA Federal Theatre Project. Created *ca* 1939. Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress.
2. Windrip addresses the crowd in a rally in the San Francisco Federal Theatre Project production of *It Can't Happen Here*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
3. Photograph of the New York production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a Living Newspaper play by the Federal Theatre Project, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
4. « Continue WPA ! », Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. « Federal Theatre Project » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.
5. Crowd outside Lafayette Theatre on opening night, Classical Theatre, « *Voodoo* » *Macbeth*, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
6. Scene from the Federal Theatre Project production of O'Neill's *One-Act Plays of the Sea* at the Lafayette Theatre (Oct. 1937-Jan. 1938), Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, New York Public Library, « Mr. Neil's Barn » The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

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