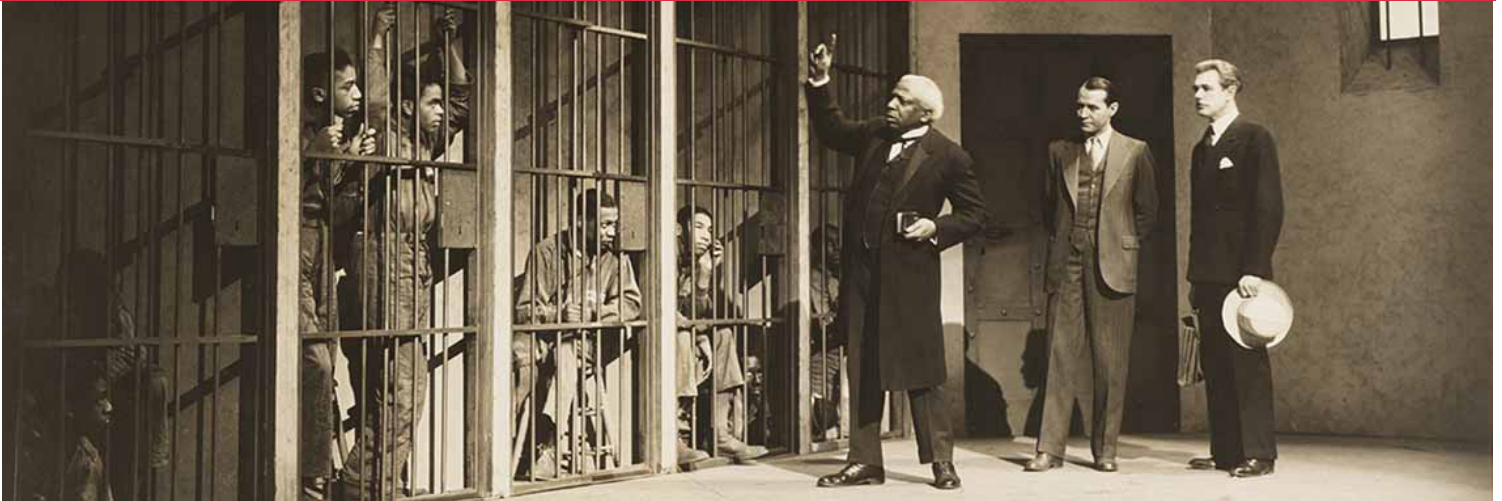




ECONOMIC RIGHTS

ART FOR THE MASSES:

An Activist Theater 1930-1945



OVERVIEW

Students will learn how theater was used as a tool for activism to address the housing crisis in New York during the Great Depression.

STUDENT GOALS

- Students will read excerpts and act out elements from a play to experience dramatic re-enactments of specific events.
- Students will compare events in the play with historical texts to understand how the play was researched and written.
- Students will learn about the New Deal and the Federal Theater Project to learn how theater was used to raise awareness about social issues.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

Grade 2:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.2.1

Ask and answer such questions as who, what, where, when, why, and how to demonstrate understanding of key details in a text.

Grade 6:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone

Grades 11-12:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

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KEY TERMS/VOCABULARY

■ Presidential address

■ Drama

■ New Deal

■ Strike

■ Theater

ACTIVISTS

■ Arthur Arent

■ Harry Hopkin

■ Hallie Flanagan

 ECONOMIC RIGHTS**ART FOR THE MASSES:** An Activist Theater 1930-1945**INTRODUCING RESOURCE 1****Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Second Inaugural Address." *Speech*, Washington, D.C., January 20, 1937.**

Art and politics in New York have long gone hand in hand, but at no time was this more true than the 1930s. The Great Depression spurred the growth of radical movements whose members viewed art as a weapon for exposing the failures of the American political and economic systems. Many young intellectuals and artists who sympathized with or openly embraced communism, socialism, or anarchism also pioneered new experimental forms of theater to confront issues such as labor exploitation, racial injustice, and the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe. One such example was the Federal Theatre Project's Living Newspaper Unit. Arthur Arent's *One Third of a Nation* was produced by the unit, which used innovative techniques to grapple with contemporary social issues. "I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished," President Roosevelt said in his second inaugural address, and his phrase helped to inspire Arent's play. Opening at the Adelphi Theatre in January 1938, the play traced the history of Manhattan real estate, showing the misery of tenement conditions, and called on the federal government to intervene and build low-cost public housing.

The Living Newspaper Unit's left-leaning politics aroused the concern of conservative congressmen. In 1938, the new House Un-American Activities Committee investigated the allegedly "subversive" nature of Living Newspaper productions. Although *One Third of a Nation* ran for 237 performances on Broadway, in July 1939 Congress closed down the Federal Theatre Project and the New York Living Newspaper Unit.

Examine President Roosevelt's second inaugural address that inspired *One Third of a Nation*:

"I see a great nation, upon a great continent, blessed with a great wealth of natural resources. Its hundred and thirty million people are at peace among themselves; they are making their country a good neighbor among the nations. I see a United States which can demonstrate that, under democratic methods of government, national wealth can be translated into a spreading volume of human comforts hitherto unknown, and the lowest standard of living can be raised far above the level of mere subsistence.

But here is the challenge to our democracy: In this nation I see tens of millions of its citizens—a substantial part of its whole population—who at this very moment are denied the greater part of what the very lowest standards of today call the necessities of life.

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I see millions of families trying to live on incomes so meager that the pall of family disaster hangs over them day by day.

I see millions whose daily lives in city and on farm continue under conditions labeled indecent by a so-called polite society half a century ago.

I see millions denied education, recreation, and the opportunity to better their lot and the lot of their children.

I see millions lacking the means to buy the products of farm and factory and by their poverty denying work and productiveness to many other millions.

I see one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.

But it is not in despair that I paint you that picture. I paint it for you in hope—because the nation, seeing and understanding the injustice in it, proposes to paint it out. We are determined to make every American citizen the subject of his country's interest and concern; and we will never regard any faithful law-abiding group within our borders as superfluous. The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

- Franklin D. Roosevelt. "Second Inaugural Address." Speech, Washington, D.C., January 20, 1937

DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- In the first paragraph, the president lays out the successes he sees in the nation. What are they?
- Roosevelt goes on to discuss the "challenge." What are the main concerns? Why does he feel they are a challenge to democracy?
- In the last paragraph, Roosevelt mentions hope. What does he mean when he "proposes to paint" out the injustices?
- How does the address inspire hope? Review the speech and underline the key words or phrases that you found particularly moving.

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INTRODUCING RESOURCE 2

C.J. Charles, "Letter to the Editor- New York Jobs for New Yorkers", *The New York Times*, August 23, 1930.

This letter written by an employer argues that New Yorkers who are unable to find work and are competing for employment with people arriving from other states. He asks if there is anything that can be done to prioritize employing New York residents.

New York Jobs for New Yorkers.

To the Editor of The New York Times:

This is a letter of protest which strangely enough is written by an employment manager and has to do with the overwhelming influx of out-of-town people looking for work here. I am well aware there can be no restriction placed upon travel. but I am also only too well aware that this dreadful unemployment situation is being daily made more so by the hordes of Southerners, Middle Westerners, Down Easterners and others who come here and absorb the few jobs that are available.

Frankly, I am tired of turning away capable born New Yorkers and then hearing of an out-of-towner obtaining work, generally, as they phrase it, "by a lucky break." Can't we begin now to work and plan to secure much-needed work in New York for bona fide residents?

C. J. CHARLES.

New York, Aug. 19, 1930.

The New York Times

Published: August 23, 1930

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C.J. Charles, "Letter to the Editor- New York Jobs for New Yorkers", *The New York Times*, August 23, 1930.



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DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- Who is writing the letter and what is his main concern?
- What is his solution?
- Do you agree or disagree? Underline the sentences that support your point.

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INTRODUCING RESOURCE 3

"4,000 March in Fight against Harlem Rent Rise," *The New York Times*, October 11, 1936.

A large parade brought attention to rent increase and housing conditions in New York City.

**4,000 MARCH IN FIGHT
ON HARLEM RENT RISE**

**Rain Fails to Halt Parade of
3½ Miles—Increases of 3
to 30% Are Charged.**

More than 4,000 Negro men, women and children paraded three and one-half miles through Harlem yesterday afternoon as a protest against rent increases and housing conditions there. Later the marchers assembled in Rockland Palace, 155th Street and Eighth Avenue, where speakers urged them to reject any increased rent demands of the landlords.

The parade was sponsored by the Consolidated Tenants League of New York City and included more than 1,000 followers of Father Divine, whose banners advertised peace and Father Divine, but did not indicate any concern with the rent problem. Some of the placards borne by other marchers read: "Don't be a slave to your greedy landlord" and "Abolish firetraps and insanitary housing conditions."

"4,000 March in Fight against Harlem Rent Rise,"
The New York Times, October 11, 1936.

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DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What is the main reason for the march?
- Compare this article with Resource 4 on page 9. How do the signs and concerns of the protestors square with the findings of the commission?
- How was the march an effective means of protest? How does it differ from the author's protest in Resource 2 on page 5?

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INTRODUCING RESOURCE 4

"2,000,000 in Slums Face Housing Crisis," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1936.

In an attempt to gain federal aid, the Tenement House Commission painted a dire picture of the unsanitary and unsafe old law tenements and the immediate need to replace them with new or converted tenements.

**2,000,000 IN SLUMS
FACE HOUSING CRISIS**

**Witnesses at Post Hearing Say
Most of Old-Law Tenements
Must Be Torn Down.**

HOME SHORTAGE LOOMS

**State or Federal Aid Seen as
Only Possibility of Getting
Adequate New Dwellings.**

A dismal picture of the living conditions of the more than 2,000,000 persons in the city who dwell in "old-law" slum tenements was painted yesterday before the city Housing Authority, as the *La Guardia* administration opened a drive to obtain State or Federal aid for widespread slum demolition.

As an example of how fast an old-law tenement will burn, he cited a fire in the Bronx in the last week. There, he said, a janitor who previously had extinguished a fire in a baby carriage, without the aid of the Fire Department, attempted to beat out with a broom a fire in an old overstuffed chair.

"He dislodged some of the burning stuff and it fell into the hall," Mr. McElligott said. "Then he ran out to turn in an alarm, and before he got back the flames were shooting across the entire street and up to the roof as well. A girl was killed in that fire. Her brother and mother were on the way up the stairs to the roof, and they saw her leave the apartment to go out into the hall to the stairs. She never reached them."

Asked if that could happen in a new-law apartment, Mr. McElligott replied:

"Of course not."
Neither could it happen in an old-law apartment converted to conform to the present requirements of the Tenement House Department, he said.

Health Commissioner John L. Rice was called to show the effect of slums in breeding disease. Sunshine, good ventilation, lack of crowding, are three important elements in health, and the lack of them has a very definite relation to the sickness and death rate in the city, he declared.

"The slum areas overlap very closely our sore-spot health areas," he said.

Harry M. Prince, First Deputy Tenement House Commissioner, read into the records figures showing that since 1911 there have been 1,238 deaths as a result of fires in old-law tenements, compared with 271 in new-law buildings.

McElligott Lists Fire Hazards

Following him on the stand, Fire Commissioner John J. McElligott, testifying with the air of putting into words what to him was an old story, declared that the reasons were elementary—wooden stairs, wooden wainscoting, inflammables everywhere.

"2,000,000 in Slums Face Housing Crisis," *The New York Times*, December 18, 1936.

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DOCUMENT BASED QUESTIONS

- What is the main concern of the article? What are the solutions proposed?
- Why is the “only possibility” of a solution state or federal aid and not private funding?
- How did the commission get their point of view across? What tactics did they employ?



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ACTIVITY

During this activity, students will focus on the Federal Theater Project. In 1938 the Federal Theater Project presented the original Living Newspaper play *One Third of a Nation*. Staged during the Great Depression, the production took its title from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's second inaugural address and its subject from New York City's housing crisis. Students will analyze sources to discover how the thoroughly researched plays both educated and entertained while focusing on political, social, and economic concerns of the 1930s.

For excerpts of the script, visit:

<https://robbsdramaticlanguages.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/one-third-of-a-nation-script.doc>

Arrange students in a circle, each holding pre-chosen pages or sentences from the scripts. Have the students conduct a circle read to ensure that each student voices a character. At the conclusion of the read, pose the following questions to the students:

- How did the dialogue play on emotion to incite response?
- What information did the students learn about New York City's housing crisis by reading the play?
- What information was relayed in the play about addressing the concerns and challenges?

Once the students have responded to these questions, explain that in small groups, the class will create mini Living Newspaper productions. Following the Living Newspaper example of using primary sources and factual information to educate the public, students will use the newspaper articles excerpted in this lesson to create their own dramatic performances.

Steps:

1. Assign each student one article to read. Students should underline or highlight a provocative or informative sentence.
2. In small groups, each student should present his or her article addressing the main theme of the source and the sentences they singled out.
3. Once every student has shared their resource, the group will decide on a single theme and stitch together their highlighted sentences to create a one-minute script.

Students can use the worksheet below to move through the steps.

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WORKSHEET: CREATING LIVING NEWSPAPERS IN THE CLASSROOM

Act I: Analyzing the Documents

1. DBQs for Individual Deep Read

Who are the characters in your document?

What is the problem or conflict depicted?

When and where did the conflict arise?

Why is this an important issue?

2. Share Out

In a group, share the problem or conflict in your articles. After every group member has shared, choose a central conflict for your script:



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Act II. Bringing the Documents to Life

1. List your play's characters.

2. Where is the play taking place?

Setting: _____

3. Describe the main conflict of your play in greater detail:

4. Describe the resolution or how the play will end

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ADDITIONAL READING

“Coast to Coast: The Federal Theater Project, 1935-1939” is an exhibition from the Library of Congress all about the history and legacy of the Federal Theater Project.

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/federal-theatre-project/final-curtain-legacy.html>

Review of the movie version of *One Third of a Nation* from 1939.

<http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D05EFD8113FE23ABC4952DFB4668382629EDE>

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

“Please Don’t Move to Austin: Mayor Announces Affordable Housing for Artists” by Brianna McGurran, is an article detailing the current public housing initiative that helps artists of all kinds find affordable housing in New York City, a contemporary spin off on the Federal Theater Project.

<http://observer.com/2015/02/please-dont-move-to-austin-mayor-announces-affordable-housing-for-artists/>

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