

The Federal Dance Project (FDP, 1936-1939)

by Ann Dils



The Federal Dance Project (FDP) was the first national program dedicated to the financial support of dance and dancers.¹ Part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Second New Deal, the FDP (also called the Federal Dance Theatre) provided ongoing salaries for dancers, choreographers, musicians, and technicians, and support for dance productions, establishing dance as a distinct profession contributing to the public good. Although short-lived and representing only part of New Deal support for dancers, the FDP is important to understanding aesthetic and social issues that faced dancers in the 1930s, as well as the history of public funding for dance in the United States. The FDP was created at the behest of modern dancers and largely served that community, enhancing a dance scene that remained vibrant during the Depression.²

The FDP situated dance within a network of agencies that put about one-third of the nation's 10,000,000 unemployed to work.³ Initial programs such as the Public Works Administration focused on the building trades and on large projects such as dams and bridges. The Civil Works Administration and Federal Emergency Relief Administration were broad in scope and included smaller building projects (surprisingly, these included golf courses, stadiums, and zoos); farm relief; and popular arts programs such as circuses and light opera. The Works Project Administration (WPA), part of the Second New Deal, became an independent agency on May 6, 1935, and continued earlier programs as well as creating new jobs in education, libraries, health, and the arts and culture. Initiatives included disaster relief, jobs specifically for women (rural librarians, for example, who delivered books on foot or horseback), and new arts projects.⁴

Dance was first part of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), one of five projects grouped under Federal Project One of the WPA: the Federal Art Project (FAP), Federal Music Project (FMP), Federal Theatre Project (FTP), Federal

Writers' Project (FWP), and Historical Records Survey (HRS). The Theatre Project was extremely broad and included departments for children's drama, circuses, vaudeville, puppetry, radio drama, motion pictures, and Living Newspapers.⁵ African-American performers were separated into "negro" units. Author, theater director, and Vassar faculty member Hallie Flannagan led the theater and dance programs nationally.

The FDP was established after [Helen Tamiris](#), as National Chairperson of the newly formed American Dance Association, lobbied Flannagan for a separate program.⁶ Artists associated as board members of organizations active in securing the FDP, or as initial FDP choreographers, include: [Doris Humphrey](#), [Charles Weidman](#), Tamiris, Felicia Sorel, Mura Dehn, Senia Gluck Sandor, and Roger Pryor Dodge. Units were established in New York (led by Don Oscar Becque, later by [Lincoln Kirstein](#), and finally by Tamiris); Chicago ([Ruth Page](#) and Bentley Stone); Los Angeles (Myra Kitch and Bertha Wordell); Philadelphia (Malvina Fried and Carlton Moss); Tampa, Florida (Senia Salomonoff, Asa Thornton, and Josef Castle); and Portland, Oregon (Bess Whitcomb) (Cooper 1997, 29 and Skalski 1998, 580-581). Dancers were hired under four categories: ballet, modern dance, vaudeville, and teaching.

The goals of the Dance Project, like those of the Theatre Project, contained inherent conflicts. The Project made dance part of "a tremendous re-thinking, re-building and re-dreaming of America.... [representing] a new frontier ... against disease, dirt, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and despair, and at the same time against selfishness, special privilege and social apathy" (Brown quoted in Cooper, 26-27). While dancers were encouraged to make dances about important national problems and events, they could not express their opinions. As Cooper notes, quoting from a Federal Theatre Project Publicity Department report, the "purpose and duty of the Theatre [is] not

only to entertain, but to inform the people," however, "the Federal Theatre does not take sides in any controversy be it social, political, or otherwise" (2004, 232). Censorship, along with unfair audition practices and unequal treatment of African-American and European-American dancers, continued to be points of conflict.

The FDP encouraged evening-length works that explored social issues and free or inexpensive access to performances. Sample dance works produced under FTP or FDP suggest the subject matter favored by the Projects. Tamiris's *How Long, Brethren?* (1937) depicted the privation of unemployed African Americans in the South. Danced to songs collected by Lawrence Gellert in "Negro Songs of Protest," the work was in seven parts: "Pickin' off de Cotton," "Upon de Mountain," "Railroad," "Scottsboro," "Sistern an' Brethren," "Let's Go to de Buryin'," and "How Long, Brethren?" An all-white cast danced the work, with the songs sung by an African-American chorus accompanied by full orchestra. "How Long, Brethren?" was among the most successful works of the period; Cooper reports that 24,235 people saw it (1997, 31). In Chicago, Ruth Page and Bentley Stone created *Frankie and Johnny* (1938) and *Guns and Castanets* (1939). *Frankie and Johnny* depicts the story of the popular song, with Frankie and Nellie Bly staged as prostitutes and two-timing Johnny as their pimp. *Guns and Castanets* was a reworking of Bizet's *Carmen* set during the Spanish Civil War (see Cooper 2004). Also working in Chicago was [Katherine Dunham](#), who directed the negro unit of the Chicago Federal Theatre Project. Only twenty years old in 1930, Dunham contributed dances to Chicago FTP productions of *Run, Little Chillun*, *Swing Mikado*, and *Emperor Jones*, as well as presenting her Martinique-inspired *L'Ag'Ya*. Dunham, as an anthropologist, was also hired by the Federal Writers Project to direct a study "investigating religious cults," among them followers of Aimee Semple McPherson and Elijah Muhammad (Aschenbrenner 2002, 111-115).

With the Reorganization Act of 1939, the Works Progress Administration became the Work Projects Administration. Often labeled communist and attacked as "boondoggles" (a word coined to describe WPA programs), the theater and dance programs were eliminated. With World War II, WPA efforts turned toward defense projects. Modern dancers moved away from social commentary and embraced abstraction. When dance was again funded at the national level, it promoted American excellence and cultural sophistication. This was especially true during the Eisenhower administration when dance companies, including [American Ballet Theatre](#), [New York City Ballet](#), [José Limón Dance Company](#), [Martha Graham Dance Company](#), and [Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre](#), were sent overseas by the State Department as part of Cold War cultural diplomacy.⁷ The Eisenhower administration also initiated, through the 1958 National Cultural Center Act, what would become The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), created in 1965 by Congress and President Lyndon Johnson, is the most direct successor of the FDP and other WPA arts projects. Part of Johnson's Great Society, which also sponsored the National Endowment for the Humanities, Public Broadcasting, and increased monies for education and health care, the NEA was established to "nurture American creativity, ... elevate the nation's culture, and ... sustain and preserve the country's many artistic traditions" (Bauerlein, 1). Like the WPA programs, the NEA, with their state and regional partners, fund artists across the United States and work to make the arts accessible to all. The NEA has inherited many of the challenges of the WPA, including conservative outrage at the politics of sponsored artists. Providing ongoing wages for artists, part of WPA programs, is not part of NEA. Only a small percentage of today's dancers have wage or work-environment protections. Dancers in large companies and in commercial

venues are represented by unions, many of them created during the 1930s and inspired by New Deal policies.⁸

Scholars exploring the FDP include Betsy Cooper, Julia Foulkes, Ellen Graff, and Susan Manning, who discuss FDP artists and productions, the FDP as part of the history of dance organizations, and the FDP's relationship to other dance and New Deal activities in the 1930s. Most research has centered on the New York and Chicago units and on exploring leftist, "negro," and modern dance of the period. Information on the FDP is included in The Library of Congress's extensive WPA holdings. State Department funding for artists has been written about by Naima Prevots in her 1999 *Dance for Export: Cultural Diplomacy and the Cold War*. Jan Van Dyke's 1992 *Modern Dance in a Postmodern World: An Analysis of Federal Arts Funding and its Impact on the Field of Modern Dance* deals primarily with the NEA.

The short-lived FDP seems a golden moment in American dance history in which dance was recognized as a profession, valued as contributing to public discourse, and made accessible across the country and to people from many walks of life. The FDP also left us with questions we continue to investigate: What do the arts contribute to our public lives: to education, economic well-being, and our sense of ourselves as a people? What does the moving body tell us about who we are, and how we operate as a society? Histories of the WPA arts projects, State Department-sponsored touring projects, and the NEA show that dance has been supported by Democratic and Republican administrations, and employed variously to celebrate "the people" and promote American exceptionalism. As federal funding for the arts is applauded, it must also be understood within the politics of the time and examined for the relationships it builds among aesthetics, politics, and social value.

NOTES

¹ Donna Binkiewicz provides an overview of federal funding for the arts in her 2004 *Federalizing the Muse* (12-14). Binkiewicz notes that Congress commissioned official portraits, statues, and federal buildings in the nineteenth century and that there was some movement in Congress toward, if not actual funding for, support for the arts in the late nineteenth century. Early twentieth century presidents Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft established advisory bodies that influenced public architecture and sculpture in Washington, DC, including the creation of the Lincoln Memorial.

² As Ellen Graff makes clear in her *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942*, the dance community was increasingly divided in the 1930s, with some dancers emphasizing a-political professionalism and abstraction, and some insisting on using dance as a social tool. Dance activities in the 1930s included professional dance companies, such as those of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey; the Bennington School of the Dance, a summer program and predecessor of the [American Dance Festival](#); efforts to bring dance to new populations and to serve non-elitist aims such as the [New Dance Group](#); and gatherings like the 1936 First National Dance Congress and Festival, held at the 92nd Street Y in New York.

³ Margaret Bing makes the distinction that WPA programs helped the unemployed nationally, while state and local programs provided for people whose age or condition left them unable to work. Bing lists the weekly wage for WPA workers as around \$50.00; relying on oral histories, Cooper (1997, 27 and 45-46) relays that dancers made \$23.86 per week (and later, \$19.00 per week).

⁴ My understanding of New Deal programs in general and the Federal Theatre Program relies

primarily on Taylor, Bing, and on the Library of Congress website.

⁵ Living Newspapers were experimental productions dramatizing contemporary events and issues. *Triple-A Plowed Under*, a dramatization of the struggles of Dust Bowl farmers and criticizing the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 (AAA) is an example.

⁶ The American Dance Association was made up of older organizations: Dancer's Association, New Dance League, and Dance Guild. Cooper (1997), Graff, and Manning all discuss of this history with slight variations in organization names.

⁷ Dance touring has continued to be supported by the federal government, most recently through the State Department/ Brooklyn Academy of Music collaboration, DanceMotion USA.

⁸ Dancers belong to the American Guild of Musical Artists, Inc, of the AFL-CIO, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the Screen Actors Guild (all created during the 1930s), or the Actors' Equity Association (created in the 1910s). See United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook. <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos094.htm>.

For full references to works cited in this essay, see [Selected Resources for Further Research](#).

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