

## The Illusion of Work: The Con Artist Plays of the Federal Theatre Project

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In a chapter of her memoir on her tenure as leader of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), Hallie Flanagan details the trials and tribulations of staging plays in New York City. While much of the chapter explores the controversies over certain plays and the successes of others, Flanagan dedicates a portion of that chapter to recalling some of the more outlandish plays produced by her unit in New York (and elsewhere). In between praise for the “insane moments” of a production of *Dance of Death* and for “the inspired lunacy” of *Horse Eats Hat*, Flanagan describes another play which she appears to consider outrageous: the confidence artist play *Help Yourself* by Paul Vulpius which “created comedy from its situation of the unemployed young man brightly hanging up his hat in a bank where he had no job and becoming the leading expert in a land deal that never existed in fact.”<sup>[1]</sup> The fact that the FTP staged a play featuring a man swindling a bank seems curious given that the con has historically been condemned by commentators and that, at least outwardly, the con does not seem to bear the hallmarks of work, especially given, as David Kennedy notes, the prevailing principle for Franklin Roosevelt’s programs “was work.”<sup>[2]</sup>

While a play featuring a man swindling a bank may have contradicted the prevailing ideology of the New Deal, plays that featured confidence artists—defined as any person who defrauds or outwits another person or group by gaining their confidence—were hardly unusual in the FTP.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition to *Help Yourself*, the FTP staged John Murray and Allen Boertz’s *Room Service*, which was the basis for a Marx Brothers film of the same name, wherein a Broadway producer named Gordon Miller engages in a series of ruses to prevent his theatrical company from being thrown out of a hotel by management while he attempts to secure funding for their latest production. Similarly, in John Brownell’s *The Nut Farm*, an aspiring film director named Willie Barton outwits a shady film producer by taking control of the project and outwits the producer by selling the film to a Hollywood studio.<sup>[4]</sup> And, in Lynn Root and Harry Clork’s *The Milky Way*, a promoter fixes a series of boxing matches in which a scrawny milkman wins the middleweight championship.

While Flanagan often promoted popular fare like the con artist plays (she frequently mentions various productions of *Help Yourself* in her memoir and was eager to praise similar plays during her tenure), popular plays like these have not garnered the attention of critics or scholars. For then-contemporary reviewers, the FTP con artist plays were often dismissed, in part, because they considered the plays farces, or cheap commercial fare, and they were often more inclined to write about the more controversial socially-minded theatre the FTP was producing. Meanwhile, scholars have rarely analyzed these plays; *Help Yourself* is dismissed as “a very mild comedy” by Malcolm Goldstein,<sup>[5]</sup> while Barry Witham employs the audience reports of the Seattle Unit’s *Help Yourself* as a way to gauge the socio-economic

makeup of that theater's audience.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed scholars like Witham, Loren Kruger, and Rena Fraden have focused their efforts on the more radical and avant-garde plays performed by the agency—such as the Living Newspaper plays or Orson Welles's productions—that were a small percentage of the overall number of productions. Recent studies such as Elizabeth Osborne's *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* and Leslie Elaine Frost's *Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children's Plays of the Federal Theatre Project* have contributed to FTP scholarship by examining how under-analyzed plays fit into the agency's complicated history, but overall, comic plays are deemphasized in these works.

Yet while discussions of these plays are rare, the con artist plays of the FTP were some of the agency's most complex works and, as I hope to demonstrate in this essay, are worthy of continued study. To accomplish this, I will focus on two of the more popular con artist plays, *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself*. While the plays do promote the importance of employment and hard work, they also invite their audiences to act as participants in the con of the stage, providing agency to Depression-era audiences. At the same time, these plays also reminded audiences of the problematic nature of both the American Dream in the 1930s and the dangers that tolerance of confidence artists by institutions like the banking industry still held for Americans.

### **The Con Artist and the Federal Theatre Project:**

Yet despite the ideological problems presented by the con artist, one can also see the appeal of these plays for the FTP. First, Flanagan's belief that the FTP should embrace the "geography, language origins, history, tradition, custom, occupations of the people" in its theatre aligns with regional, historical, and cultural ubiquity of the confidence artist narrative.<sup>[7]</sup> Tales of confidence men and women in American culture can be traced back to the founding of the Republic and writers, playwrights, and producers frequently centered their works on the exploits of swindlers of all types. The con artist plays were also primarily written by then-contemporary American playwrights (except for *Help Yourself*) and helped fulfill Flanagan's aim of promoting new voices in the theatre.

Yet another reason why these plays likely appealed to the FTP was that they could be used to temper criticism of the agency. In one sense, producers could illustrate a collective sense of humor on the agency's behalf by staging plays like *Room Service* and *The Nut Farm* with their less-than-flattering portrayals of actors. Additionally, given long standing connections between the confidence scheme and theatre in American culture, the theme embedded in these plays that actors and con artists were not that dissimilar may have resonated with audiences.<sup>[8]</sup>

The con artist plays were also more conservative in nature than many of the radical plays the agency was known for producing. Throughout its run, the FTP was accused of promoting leftist productions by critics in the press and the Republican Party; while the agency did produce a relatively small number of Living Newspaper plays and other shows that did contain radical themes, Flanagan and her producers continually had to deal with accusations from their critics that they were promoting leftist or communist plays. As such, the agency could have staged con artist plays to deflect some of these criticisms because these works could be read by audiences and critics as promoting a safe version of the con. For starters, the plays often feature swindles that are, as Flanagan said, "outlandish": from outfoxing a nation of boxing fans to declaring one just works at a bank, the plots of this plays border on the absurd and appear to lack any realism. Moreover, there are no real victims in the plays: in contrast to real-life swindles such as Ponzi

schemes, the marks of the con artists benefit from the deception (the bankers and employees of the brick factory in *Help Yourself*, the hotel manager and the acting troupe in *Room Service*), or are implicit in the con (boxing fans in *The Milky Way*).

But perhaps most importantly, the plays feature characters whose goal is employment; for them, the confidence game is a means to an end. For example, in both *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself*, the plays conclude with the swindler characters getting full-time work in a dairy and a bank respectively. In addition to promoting the importance of employment, the plays also feature characters who dedicate themselves fully to their labors, reinforcing work ethic norms. The connection between swindling and traditional work is not unusual, as both scholars and confidence artists have understood the con as another form of work. As Joseph Maurer asserts, many confidence artists find they must dedicate themselves fully to their con, such as being versed in “business and financial matters, have a glib knowledge of society gossip, and enough of an acquaintance with art, literature, and music to give an illusion of culture.”<sup>[9]</sup> Similarly, the con artists in these plays have to dedicate an often impressive amount of effort to maintain their illusions, from toiling to complete a film (*The Nut Farm*), to studying the performances of a banker (*Help Yourself*).

While the appeal of con artist plays to the FTP may have been in their outward approval of more conservative ideals, members of agency also likely understood the more subversive nature of the plays. In one sense, it seems that FTP workers sought to restore the character of the con artist to its more heroic status, similar to how Flanagan aimed to restore theatre to its cultural status of the late nineteenth century. Indeed, there existed an interesting parallel between the character of the confidence artist and theatre during the 1930s, as modernity had changed how Americans viewed both. Whereas the rise of cinema and radio as popular entertainments had helped diminish the importance of theatre in the minds of Americans, the lingering effects of the First World War and the Great Depression altered how the American public viewed confidence artists. While the con artists in nineteenth-century culture were emblematic of an optimistic country, the confidence artists that appear in American culture after 1920, like Jay Gatsby, Miss Lonelyhearts, and Elmer Gantry, are “painful victims betrayed by a vision of the new country that retains only the power to delude rather than to fulfill.”<sup>[10]</sup> And for the most part, the con artists in these plays swindle heroically, trying to protect their associates or families, or attempting to outwit institutions that were unpopular during the Depression.

These plays provided the FTP the opportunity to give a measure of agency to its audiences. As Elizabeth Osborne notes, Flanagan believed that her agency should provide “economic, physical, and psychological relief” to both actors and audiences.<sup>[11]</sup> And the confidence plays could have afforded audiences the opportunity to have their spirits “uplifted,” as Flanagan often noted. This effect partially came from the confidence tales themselves, as historically Americans have long admired the confidence artist’s daring and risk—especially through the reading of literature and in the retelling of tall tales or other stories—while celebrating the plodding determination of the self-made man in ceremony.<sup>[12]</sup> However, the confidence artist plays of the FTP seem to have reversed that dynamic, as the plays invited their audiences to participate in the art of deception by enjoying their complicity as “shills” who are enjoying seeing richer, less unaware marks being deceived on-stage. In his essay on the production history of *Room Service*, Sebastian Trainor draws on the work of Raymond Williams and Mark Fearnow to assert that the play’s long term success (it was frequently staged through the 1950s and saw revivals in the 1990s) may have resulted “from an audience’s failure to realize that the tale portrayed the artful manipulation of the American capitalist system by the agents of an emergent ideology.” Yet Depression audiences “likely

derived considerable ‘Freudian pleasure’ from witnessing the abuse of authority figures on stage” and the farcical con artist plays gave audiences the agency to engage in such fantasies.<sup>[13]</sup>

Yet perhaps the most significant reason why the FTP staged so many con artist plays was because they provided the FTP another opportunity to comment upon the socio-economic issues of the Depression. In part, this is because the character has long afforded artists and writers to note, as Gary Lindberg argues, that “the boundaries [of the social structure] are already fluid, [and] that there is ample space between society’s official rules and its actual tolerances.”<sup>[14]</sup> In particular, *Help Yourself* and *The Milky Way* illustrate the long standing intersection between the con and capitalism, investigating economic themes similar to those of the Living Newspaper plays like *One Third a Nation*, *Power*, or *Triple-A Plowed Under*. Scholars have often noted that there is often little to no difference between the labor of the con artist and the work of “the self-made man” that is praised in American rhetoric. For example, Stephen Mihm asserts that conning and finance are “to a certain extent,” interlocked, as “the story of one is the story of the other.”<sup>[15]</sup> He argues that it is a testament to the mythology of the work ethic that it has persisted in society when dishonest swindling has been favored by Americans rather than the “plodding, methodical, gradual pursuit of wealth.”<sup>[16]</sup> Instead, Mihm argues that the true American financial ethos “captures the get-rich-quick scheme, the confidence game, and the mania for speculation” that obsessed not just antebellum America, but that continues to grip American society into this day.<sup>[17]</sup>

With their representation of socio-economic issues, the con, and the intersections between them, plays like *Help Yourself* and *The Milky Way* afforded the FTP another opportunity to challenge audiences; while not as overt in addressing the audience as the Living Newspaper plays, *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself* still offered their audiences complex themes that also implicated all levels of society and forced audience members to reevaluate the myths they believed in and their complicity in the dangerous cons.<sup>[18]</sup>

### *The Milky Way*

While its popularity has fluctuated since its inception in the late nineteenth-century, professional wrestling in the United States (and elsewhere) remains one of the most popular confidence games. As Susan Maurer explains in her analysis of wrestling, professional wrestlers relish their participation as members of an elaborate confidence game, selling audiences their roles, personas, and the narratives in an environment that generally preaches the concept of “kaybabe” (the illusion that the performances and actions in and around the ring are real).<sup>[19]</sup> As Roland Barthes writes in his seminal essay on professional wrestling, the spectator of a wrestling match must attach meaning to the outcome of a match not based on the science of who won or lost, but on the match’s moment within a grander narrative. Barthes writes, “The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, this is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.”<sup>[20]</sup>

The observations of Mazar and Barthes on professional wrestling help explain the significance of the FTP productions of *The Milky Way*. Like other plays of its type, the play centers on an outrageous swindle (in this case in the world of boxing), but the believability of the con is not an issue here. Like the professional wrestling audience, the fictional and real audiences in and of the play are shills of the confidence artists of *The Milky Way* and enjoy taking part in the con. This provided Great Depression audiences a form of agency in times when many Americans questioned their own power. And while the play appears to reinforce traditional norms of work and success, *The Milky Way* subtly challenges the continued validity

of myths like the American Dream.

*The Milky Way* centers on a seemingly ludicrous con in the boxing world. At the beginning of the play, a middleweight boxer, Speed McFarland, is accidentally knocked out by his drunken trainer during an argument. However, newspapers report that a meek and mild-mannered milkman named Burleigh Sullivan who happened to be near McFarland and his trainer knocked out McFarland. To protect his boxer's reputation, McFarland's manager, Gabby Sloan, decides to send Sullivan on a whirlwind tour of the United States where the milkman will appear in a series of staged fights (even Sullivan is unaware the fights are fake) in which he "knocks out" his opponents in the first round. With each succeeding fight, Sullivan's fame grows, and Sloan decides to have McFarland and Sullivan fight in a staged bout in which Sloan and his cronies can bet heavily in favor of McFarland. However, Sullivan accidentally knocks-out McFarland with an elbow to the head during the match. Having bet their life savings on the fight, the manager and his cohorts believe they will end up destitute, until Sullivan announces that he bet on himself and will buy a milk dairy with his winnings and happily give his friends jobs.

Originally staged on Broadway in 1936, Root and Clark's play was performed nine times by the FTP in 1938: Holyoke and Salem, Massachusetts; New York City; Los Angeles; Portland, Oregon; San Diego; Denver; and two productions in Manchester, New Hampshire. While the FTP staged the play rather frequently, press coverage of these productions is limited.<sup>[21]</sup> In many respects, the FTP productions of *The Milky Way* appear to have suffered from the competition of a major Hollywood adaptation, as *The Milky Way* was adapted for the screen by Paramount in 1936. Directed by Leo McCarey, the film starred the famous silent comedian Harold Lloyd, and many reviewers of the FTP production appear to have preferred Lloyd's version. According to a review from the *Los Angeles Evening News*, the film was far superior to any stage production. The reviewer writes, "At best, the Lynn Root and Harry Clark comedy, which made a choice film vehicle for Harold Lloyd, would seem pretty flat in any stage production."<sup>[22]</sup> In places like Manchester and Salem, productions garnered little attention from the press while reviewers of other productions found the play to be not worthy of serious attention. A member of the audience for the Portland production found the play to be trivial. The unnamed reviewer believed that "regular audiences, accustomed to serious theatre, were apathetic to this show" and some "individuals were critical of our doing a 'trivial' show, contrasted the bill unfavorably with *Prologue to Glory*, *One Third a Nation*, etc."<sup>[23]</sup> Meanwhile, an unnamed reviewer for the *San Diego Union* noted in his or her 1938 review that the play's authors had written a text that, while humorous and representative of the boxing world was simply entertainment. The reviewer notes, "We are ready to believe the funniest possible stories about the fighting ring promoters, champions and their trainers, but Lynn Root and Harry Clark have written a three act play that . . . is merely something to be enjoyed."<sup>[24]</sup>

One of the interesting elements of this "trivial" show was how problematic the con scheme is in *The Milky Way*. Boxing has long fostered the con as fixed matches have long dogged the sport. However, Sloan's con is complicated by the fact that the key member of his scheme, Burleigh Sullivan is a terrible skill for the majority of the play, especially in terms of his performances. In his autobiography, the boxer Jake LaMotta, the inspiration for the film *Raging Bull*, explains that the most important aspect of throwing a fight was selling it in the ring. Recounting his infamous thrown fight with Billy Fox in 1947, LaMotta explains a successful fixed fight must, like other cons, be predicated on a near-flawless performance:

I'll also tell you something else about throwing a fight. The guy you're throwing to has to be at least

moderately good. . . . I thought the air from my punches was affecting him, but we made it to the fourth round. By then if there was anybody in the Garden who didn't know what was happening he must have been dead drunk. There were yells and boos all over the place. Dan Parker, the *Mirror* guy, said the next day that my performance was so bad he was surprised the actors Equity didn't picket the joint.<sup>[25]</sup>

While Sloan is an experienced con man who is skilled at flattering boxers, promoters, and fans, Sullivan is depicted as too naïve and honest to be fully in on the con. Not only does Sullivan consistently bemoan the dishonesty of the scheme, but also he is woefully underprepared for his role. When a reporter asks Sullivan about his possible connection to the famous boxer John L. Sullivan, Sullivan responds that he has never heard of the man, which makes Sloan claim that the milkman is just joking. He exclaims, "That's a good one! Quote that—'The contender, with a sardonic smile and a twinkle in his eye.' . . . He'll clown like that with you all day."<sup>[26]</sup>

Additionally, the playwrights portray Sullivan as someone who does not even resemble a professional boxer in either appearance or performance. In his character description in the play and in FTP performance stills, Sullivan is a wiry, un-toned, and bespectacled figure who does not look like a professional athlete. In particular, the Los Angeles production of the play frequently dressed the actor in Sullivan's role in loose sleeveless t-shirts that emphasized the character's lack of muscle mass. Moreover, Sullivan's in-ring performances are even weaker. During his first fight, Sullivan begins the bout with his bathrobe on. Later, in his fight with McFarland, Sullivan needs to be "boosted into the ring" like a child because he has trouble with the ropes and becomes entangled in them and his boxing style consists of incredibly awkward jabs and ducking of punches.<sup>[27]</sup>

Yet while both fans and the press covering his bout condemned LaMotta's fight, the obviously staged fights in *The Milky Way* do not garner such criticism from fans or media within the play, a fact made all that more complicated given Sullivan's lack of strength and ability. In particular, the media covering Sullivan's fights seem to be fully deceived by the bouts. One newspaper article declares that the milkman was born for the role: "Sullivan's a natural. A born fighter. Cheered as he left the stadium."<sup>[28]</sup> Nor is it just the press that is taken by the act: boxing patrons are completely taken with Sullivan's performance. Audiences seem especially enamored with Sullivan's ability to hop and duck around the ring and his knockout punch, which is a "right you can see comin' from the dollar seats."<sup>[29]</sup> Even during Sullivan's title bout with McFarland (which ends in roughly sixteen seconds after McFarland knocks himself out by falling into Sullivan's elbow) the radio announcers describe a crowd that does not boo or jeer the sudden outcome. Such a reaction seems muted in contrast to typical reactions to real boxing dives from journalists and fans. As noted earlier in this section, many of the fans, reporters, referees, and officials in attendance at some of boxing's most infamous thrown fights were aware that they were seeing a fix, including Jake La Motta's fight, during which calls of "fix" and "scam" rained down from the angry crowd at Madison Square Garden.

However, there is a broader implication of Sullivan's performances and of the audience's acceptance of them. In particular, *The Milky Way* shows a con perpetrated on institutions. The con artists of the play symbolically subvert the power structures of the era. Not only does the complicit audience of Sullivan's fights read his bouts as a triumph over adversity, but also as counter-con of the boxing establishment. After having been treated to a litany of fixed matches, the audiences (and perhaps even the press) within the play are celebrating their own complicity in a con that literally subverts the boxing industry and the media and metaphorically outwits other social institutions. While the believability of the play might be

suspect, the theme of a fictional audience performing and participating in a confidence scheme against an institution likely would have resonated with Depression audiences. For workers and audience members used to the swindles of capitalism, the staged narrative of workers flaunting their own cons to industries and institutions that had been swindling them for ages must have been a pleasurable experience.

Yet if the reactions of the boxing fans in *The Milky Way* are read in terms of the performances of professional wrestling, the fans' embrace of Sullivan speaks to their need to find meaning in his bouts. The fans' embrace of the obvious swindling in front of them signals that they read these performances not as an athletic competition, but as a staged narrative like professional wrestling that holds mythological implications. And the myth that *The Milky Way* is wrestling with is the American Dream. Like other con artist plays as well as many plays produced by the Children's Theatre Unit of the FTP that Leslie Elaine Frost argues balanced ideals of model citizenry with an increasing apprehension over declining American fortunes, *The Milky Way* illustrates both the idealized and problematic American Dream through its portrayal of Sullivan.<sup>[30]</sup> In one sense, his story is a near-perfect representation of the American Dream, as Sullivan achieves fame and fortune and uses his winnings to purchase a dairy and provide jobs to his former con artists. Yet the model actions of Sullivan, as well as his procurement of the American Dream, is undercut by the play. Despite his pluck and hard work as a milkman, the play provides us no sense that Sullivan would have been able to maintain his station in life by working for the dairy; indeed, given the nature of many other FTP plays that addressed economic issues, it is likely that audiences would have understood Sullivan's hold on his employment as tenuous at best. Moreover, Sullivan is only able to achieve the American Dream through a confidence scheme that not only requires the assistance of trainers, boxers, media members, and complicit national audience, but also his willingness to gamble on a staged fight rather than working hard and saving his winnings. While the play outwardly showcases a model American who achieves the American Dream, *The Milky Way* also illustrates the public's fear over "viability of the American . . . economic system" and the American Dream itself.<sup>[31]</sup>

### *Help Yourself*

Intellectuals in the United States have long privileged the plodding, diligent worker. For example, in his autobiography, Ben Franklin celebrates the accumulation of his wealth and the ability of a man to retire from business. But as Gary Lindberg suggests, Franklin wanted work to be treated as pleasurable because while gaining wealth has its benefits, for Franklin, the greater joy is the *game* of business. Lindberg explains:

The model self feels exhilarated less by final rewards than by the immediate sense of competition and play . . . living for and in the amusement of the present performance. . . . The skillful player can move easily from one game to another, say from business to politics, as he senses more invigorating play or more interesting or satisfying competition.<sup>[32]</sup>

While Lindberg makes clear that Franklin does not openly advocate diddling or conning, he hypothesizes that Franklin would have understood the thrill of swindling. In particular, Lindberg argues that Franklin believes one should only adopt new roles in business or in life once "the game" has lost its appeal, just as many con artists felt the need to change their roles when their work was done.

The play *Help Yourself* shows a kind of Franklin-esque hero who manages to play at work and business by adopting and playing the role of a banker. Yet this play is not simply about workers adopting a more

playful approach to their labor. In the context of the 1930s, the play is both a satirical examination of the banking industry and the tendency of Americans in any number of fields to act as confidence artists. More significantly, the play demonstrates the prevalence of the confidence scheme in American society and warns its audience about their complicity in ignoring the more dangerous confidence schemes such as the games played by the bankers in the play and in real life.

*Help Yourself* centers on an unemployed man named Chris Stringer who wanders into a bank where his college friend Frank is a clerk. Much to Fred's chagrin, Stringer sits at a desk and begins to work without holding a position in the company. When Fred accurately asserts that Stringer has no business training, Stringer writes up a false business memo regarding a defunct brick factory project, which leads to a meeting between his bank and a competing bank. While no one can remember the specifics of the proposal, Stringer convinces the trustees of the banks to move ahead with the project. As the project progresses, Stringer endears himself to the other employees of the bank by telling jokes, going to lunches, and dating the boss's daughter, even though they cannot remember working with him. As the new brick factory nears completion—with additional support from the federal government—Stringer panics when he realizes that he has no employment record and will be fired, but a last-minute forgery by Fred and his girlfriend permits Stringer to stay on at the bank. At the play's conclusion, Stringer earns a promotion to the vice presidency of the bank.<sup>[33]</sup>

Given that it was produced by the FTP twenty-one times, *Help Yourself* left an extensive record of audience reception.<sup>[34]</sup> In its report to the FTP, the Omaha production stated the audience reaction was "very favorable,"<sup>[35]</sup> while the Des Moines report notes that many audience members left the theater repeating Stringer's refrain of "up she goes!"<sup>[36]</sup> Meanwhile, a writer for the *Boston Herald* declares *Help Yourself* to be a "featherweight variation of the fairy tale about the Emperor's new clothes" and "that only the most reactionary of audiences would see the political element in a harmless farce."<sup>[37]</sup> Similarly, audience members of the Los Angeles production found the play to have provided some relief from the economic climate of the Depression, but demonstrated the limitations of theatre. As one reviewer noted, "This is an amusing way of presenting a social problem. But I don't see the trials of the new generation being solved in this way except in the theatre."<sup>[38]</sup> Commenting on the production of the play of by FTP Seattle, a writer for the University of Washington newspaper finds the play to be highly enjoyable, but imbued with a very serious message. She writes, "The spirit of 1929 is on the way back. The catch line of the play is 'up she goes.' . . . The play was not produced in the same era was *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing*. A new spirit is on the march."<sup>[39]</sup>

The varied responses to *Help Yourself* can be explained by the play's complicated portrayal of work and banking. Like other con artist plays produced by the FTP, the play represents more conservative ideals about employment and working. For example, not only does the play reinforce the importance of employment by having its main character procure a job, the play undermines the normal labor contract with Stringer happily working for free. When his friend asks him why he's working without compensation, Stringer retorts that if he is not on the payroll, then he cannot get fired. If they try to cut his job, he will "keep right on working."<sup>[40]</sup> From the perspective of employers, Stringer is the perfect employee, given that he is willing to work for free. Additionally, Stringer espouses a hyper-individualistic attitude toward work throughout the play. Stringer declares that he "changed from the unemployed to the employed not because I asked for work, but because I took it."<sup>[41]</sup> Taking work, he reasons, was preferable to sitting idly by and waiting for work to come to him. At such moments, Stringer embodies the mythology of the self-made man. Stringer echoes these traditional views of work when he implores



the bankers to proceed with the Kublinski account. He says, “We must go on working, as life goes on working. Not figure and ponder, but work. You must pick up the first packing-case you see with a shout of *up she goes!*”<sup>[42]</sup>

Yet despite its promotion of more business-friendly ideals, *Help Yourself* is far more critical of the banking system. And for audiences who likely would have suffered as the result of real-life banking policies, seeing such a representation would have given them both enjoyment and a semblance of agency. One such moment is when the bankers are swayed by Stringer’s rhetoric about work, in which the play satirizes the promotion of traditional work norms by nineteenth and twentieth-century capitalists. In the meeting between banks to discuss his business proposal, the bankers struggle to comprehend (or remember) the details of Stringer’s plan. Since he is able to detail some vague references about the fictional proposal, Stringer wins over the bankers by urging them to approve the plan through a speech that arouses the interests of the assembled businessmen. He says:

Yes, gentlemen, that’s how we must begin today—“Up she goes.” This happy cry of the simple workman should be our slogan. Workers and employers, bakers and carpenters—“Up she goes!” Statesmen and politicians—Europe and America—“Up she goes!” In the mountains where the coal lies buried, in the ground where the treasures are hidden—up she goes—Out there, machines lying cold—“Up she goes.” Rusty shovels lie in the engine rooms—“Up she goes!” Damn it gentlemen, bang on the table—Forget about your positions—put aside your official expressions.<sup>[43]</sup>

Stringer first heard the phrase “up she goes” while watching movers attempting to hoist a piano through a window. Stringer felt a physical reaction to watching the movers, and he says that “with much spirit my muscles began to itch to work” and he decided to just pick up a suitcase and help them carry items upstairs in the townhouse.<sup>[44]</sup> While the sight and sound of the laborers inspires Stringer to work, his evoking of the phrase “up she goes” compels the bankers to do the same. As the scene ends, the bankers dance out of the conference room shouting “up she goes” in unison. There is an irony to the fact that the actions of manual laborers compel the bankers (as well as Stringer) to act, and the play satirizes how proponents of traditional work ethics promoted the idea that work could provide workers with upward mobility when, ultimately, many workers would never achieve such aims. As such, the bankers are convinced to work by Stringer’s usage of language that parodies traditional work ethic rhetoric.

In addition, *Help Yourself* satirizes the nature of business performance, portraying the bankers of the play who are easily duped through vague language and action. Throughout the play, Stringer is able to convince his colleagues of his legitimacy as a banker through a series of superficial gestures. While the line between the business realm and the con realm were often vague, the publication of Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in 1935 signaled a new emphasis on the performance of business. Karen Hatthunen argues that Carnegie’s manual, is a de facto guidebook to swindling one’s professional colleagues. According to Halttunen, “Carnegie’s purpose was to train men in a very special type of corporate salesmanship, ‘the salesmanship of the system selling itself to itself.’”<sup>[45]</sup> While Carnegie’s manual demonstrated how businessmen should perform to other businessmen, it also taught its readers how to convince themselves that they were performing their roles properly. In other words, Carnegie was also selling to his readers the spectacle of selling themselves to themselves, as if a reader were both the mark and the confidence man at the same time. This insincere performance is essential to Stringer’s con of the bank. By studying the “bank inside and out,” he has learned how to craft business proposals so ensconced in vague rhetoric that the bankers reading the proposal are inclined to accept it as

is. In addition, Stringer manipulates his coworkers by evoking workplace rhetoric that persuades the other worker to react per the norms of the business world.<sup>[46]</sup> When someone asks Stringer if he is a new employee, Stringer replies that he has been at the bank for years, but had been working in another department. Stringer also provides vague details about himself, such as “I was the guy in the corner” or “I always ate ham and cheese sandwiches.”<sup>[47]</sup> Invariably, the other bank employees, after a brief pause, acknowledge that they remember Stringer. At points, Stringer is even able to tell “inside jokes” that his colleagues laugh at not because they understand, but because they are supposed to laugh at such jokes per the performance norms of the business world.

While *Help Yourself* critiques banking culture, it also suggests that these performative elements in work extend beyond the banking industry. In stating part of his rationale for engaging in his con, Stringer claims that adopting a false persona is a game that everyone plays at. When his friend asks him why he is undertaking this scam, Stringer explains, “Just the illusion of working does something for you. Everyone plays at something—children play at being policemen—politicians at being statesmen. . . . Why shouldn’t I play at working?”<sup>[48]</sup> In one sense, Stringer’s statement echoes the Franklin’s belief that one must adopt new roles once their particular game has lost its appeal; Stringer also suggests through his words and actions that the solution to one’s working ills is to play your role and others will presume you are working.<sup>[49]</sup>

Yet Stringer’s declaration that “everyone plays at something” seems to have be a signal for audiences to consider not only the importance of one’s sociological role, but also how prevalent false personas (and cons) such as politicians attempting to be statesmen are in society.

And yet this play, like *The Milky Way*, offers readers a more complex and perhaps accusatory message in its conclusion. While the play seems to suggest that understanding a role gives you believability, *Help Yourself* also appears to assert that this form of conning is endemic in all institutions—not just banking or other businesses. Echoing the ideological stances of some of the Living Newspaper plays, *Help Yourself* suggests to audiences that they need to be aware of the dangers of the con Stringer pulled. While Stringer may have demonstrated daring in swindling the banks and procured jobs for other unemployed people, he nevertheless operated a far more dangerous confidence scheme than seen in *The Milky Way*: while Sullivan and his cohorts engage in a scheme in the entertainment world (although they do risk their own savings and the money of gamblers), Stringer’s swindle involves two separate banks and their respective investors as well as the government, and failure of this scheme would have likely endangered the money and jobs of other people. The danger of Stringer’s con is reinforced to the audience by how the play utilizes them. Whereas the real and fictional audiences of *The Milky Way* are (for the most part) in on the con, the bankers in *Help Yourself* are mainly unaware of how Stringer operates, while FTP audience members would have understood how little he knows about the banking industry and how his con succeeds through a considerable amount of chance. As such, when Stringer is promoted to vice president of the bank at the conclusion of the play, audiences are, on the one hand, encouraged to enjoy his success, but on another, unnerved by the bank’s inability to engage in due diligence with a powerful employee and the sense that Stringer will likely try another risky proposal in the future. Just as *The Milky Way* questioned the stability of the American Dream, *Help Yourself* presented to its working class and poor audiences a rather terrifying idea: that bankers—despite New Deal reforms—would engage in the same careless and risky practices that occurred in “the spirit of 1929.”

## Conclusion

Hallie Flanagan believed that one of the aims of the FTP was to produce theatre that should be “socially and politically, aware of the new frontier in America, a frontier not narrowly political or sectional, but universal, a frontier along which tremendous battles are being fought against ignorance, disease, unemployment, poverty and injustice.”<sup>[50]</sup> Her ideal has often influenced critics and scholars to examine overtly radical plays like the Living Newspaper plays, the national production of *It Can't Happen Here*, or the works of Orson Welles while downplaying farces, comedies, or other broad entertainments. And given that plays like *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself* were in part farcical, outlandish tales that outwardly reinforced some traditional values, downplayed the appeal of the confidence scheme, or promoted the importance of employment, it is easy to see why researchers of the FTP have focused their efforts on other plays.

However, plays like *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself* were far more representative of the goals of the FTP than many critics have observed in the past. While the plays certainly featured more heroic con artists than other elements of American culture in the first half of the twentieth century, the performances of these plays permitted audiences to “get in on the con” as the characters on stage outwitted their foes. While granting their unemployed and lower-class audiences some necessary (if temporary) agency during the Depression, the plays also illustrated how endemic the confidence scheme was in American society, as actors, boxers, bankers, and most workers engaged in swindling of some form. But more importantly, these plays also addressed their audiences’ increasing anxiety over the decline of socio-economic status in the United States, as well as the dangers posed by unregulated institutions and workers. In this sense, the con artist plays of the FTP not only afforded audiences another opportunity to consider “the new frontier in America,” but did so under the guise of entertainment. Audiences may have been singing “up she goes!” as they left productions of con artist plays, but they were very likely also contemplating the meaning and their roles in the cons.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Hallie Flanagan, *Arena: The Story of the Federal Theatre* (1940; New York: Limelight, 1985, 77.

<sup>[2]</sup> David A. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 176.

<sup>[3]</sup> I use the terms “swindler,” “con artist,” “confidence artist,” as well as “confidence scheme,” “con,” and “con game” interchangeably throughout this essay. Rather than “con man,” I mainly rely on the gender-neutral term confidence artist in these pages.

<sup>[4]</sup> I provide an overview of the production history of *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself* in their respective sections, but as an example of its popularity, despite competing with a major Hollywood film adaptation,

*Room Service* was produced seven times in three years: Wilmington, North Carolina (1938), San Francisco (1938), San Diego (1938), New Orleans (1939), Denver (1936 & 1939), and Miami, Florida (1939). See George Mason University, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 135. The Nut Farm was less popular. On the FTP stage, the play was only performed twice in Manchester, New Hampshire, and Springfield, Illinois (neither of which appears to have attracted much, if any, press coverage). George Mason, *The Federal Theatre Project*, 113.

<sup>[5]</sup> Malcolm Goldstein, *The Political Stage: American Drama and Theatre of the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 268.

<sup>[6]</sup> Barry Witham, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Case Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>[7]</sup> Flanagan, *Arena*, 22-23.

<sup>[8]</sup> For a discussion of the overlap between theatre and the con artists of medicine shows, see James Harvey Young, *The Toadstool Millionaires: A Social History of Patent Medicines in America before Federal Regulation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

<sup>[9]</sup> David Maurer, *The Big Con: The Story of the Confidence Man* (New York: Merril, 1940), 158.

<sup>[10]</sup> William E. Lenz, *Fast Talk & Flush Times: The Confidence Man as a Literary Convention* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985), 199.

<sup>[11]</sup> Elizabeth Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

<sup>[12]</sup> Jackson Lears, *Something for Nothing: Luck in America* (New York: Penguin, 2003), 100.

<sup>[13]</sup> Sebastian Trainor, "It Sounds Too Much Like Comrade": The Preservation of American Ideals in *Room Service*," *Journal of American Drama and Theatre* 20, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 29-49, 31.

<sup>[14]</sup> Gary Lindberg, *The Confidence Artist in American Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 9.

<sup>[15]</sup> Stephen, Mihm, *A Nation of Counterfeiters: Capitalists, Con Men, and the Making of the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13.

<sup>[16]</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>[17]</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>[18]</sup> I use Elizabeth Osborne's reading of the Living Newspaper play *Spirochete* as a model to thinking about the effect of *The Milky Way* and *Help Yourself* on their respective audiences. Osborne, *Staging the People*, 47.

<sup>[19]</sup> Sharon Mazar, *Professional Wrestling: Sport and Spectacle* (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998).

<sup>[20]</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. trans. Annette Lewis (1952; repr., New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 15.

<sup>[21]</sup> George Mason University, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 103.

<sup>[22]</sup> “Review of *The Milky Way*.” *Los Angeles Evening News*, August 5, 1938. Box 1040, Los Angeles *The Milky Way* Folder, Federal Theatre Project Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC). Hereby referred to as FTP LC.

<sup>[23]</sup> “Audience Survey.” Ibid., Portland *The Milky Way* Folder.

<sup>[24]</sup> Review of *The Milky Way*. *San Diego Union*, August 26, 1938. Ibid., San Diego *The Milky Way* Folder.

<sup>[25]</sup> Jake LaMotta, *Raging Bull* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1970), 162.

<sup>[26]</sup> Lynn Root and Harry Clork, *The Milky Way* (New York: Samuel French, 1936), 84.

<sup>[27]</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>[28]</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>[29]</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>[30]</sup> Leslie Ann Frost, *Dreaming America: Popular Front Ideals and Aesthetics in Children’s Plays of the Federal Theatre Project* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013). See also Amy Brady, “Staging the Depression: The Federal Theatre Project’s Dramas of Poverty, 1935-1939” (PhD dissertation, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2013). Brady details how “poverty dramas” of the FTP also represented lingering anxieties over the stability of the American Dream.

<sup>[31]</sup> Frost, *Dreaming America*, 5.

<sup>[32]</sup> Lindberg, *The Confidence Artist in American Literature*, 88.

<sup>[33]</sup> *Help Yourself* was originally written after the First World War by the Austrian playwright Paul Vulpius. Vulpius was a somewhat popular playwright in Germany and Austria during the inter-war period, and was responsible for a popular play entitled *Hau-rack (Heave Ho!)*. According to Anselm Heinrich, a theatre group sympathetic to the Nazi Party wrote the Prussian Theatre Council in 1933 and inquired as to whether Vulpius was Jewish. Initially, the Theatre Council informed the group that Vulpius’ lawyer had informed them that Vulpius was Aryan. However, in 1934, the Prussian Theatre Council declared Vulpius to be a “non-Aryan,” quoted in Anselm Henrich, *Entertainment, Propaganda, Education: Regional Theatre in Germany and Britain Between 1918 and 1945* (Herefordshire: University of Herefordshire Press, 2007), 121-22. Vulpius appears to have relocated to England at some point during

the 1930s where his play *Youth at the Helm* was adapted into a 1936 British film entitled *Jack of All Trades* which centers on a con man who fakes his way through a series of jobs in order to help his sick mother. Vulpius is credited as a writer on a 1950 BBC version of *Youth at the Helm* which, according to the BFI, is nearly identical to the plot of *Help Yourself*.

<sup>[34]</sup>*Help Yourself* was performed twenty-one times by the FTP: New York City, Syracuse, and White Plains, New York (1936); San Bernardino, California (1936); Peoria, Illinois (1936); Los Angeles (1937); Springfield, Massachusetts (1937); Denver (1937); Omaha, Nebraska (1937); Cincinnati (1937); San Francisco (1937), Wilmington, Delaware (1937); Des Moines, Iowa (1937); New York City (1937); Salem, Massachusetts (1937); Boston (1937), Bridgeport, Connecticut (1937); Philadelphia (1937); Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania (1937); Seattle (1937), and Atlanta (1938), quoted George Mason University, *The Federal Theatre Project: A Catalog-Calendar of Productions* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 71-72.

<sup>[35]</sup>“Audience Reaction Report.” (Box 1016, Omaha *Help Yourself* Folder, FTP LC).

<sup>[36]</sup> “Audience Reaction Report.” Ibid., Des Moines *Help Yourself* Folder.

<sup>[37]</sup> Review of *Help Yourself*.” *Boston Herald*. 27 Jan. 1937. Ibid., Boston *Help Yourself* Folder.

<sup>[38]</sup> “Audience Reaction Report.” (Box 1015, Los Angeles *Help Yourself* Folder, FTP LC).

<sup>[39]</sup> Mary Sayler, “*Help Yourself*.” *University of Washington Daily*, November 6, 1937 (Box 1016, *Help Yourself* Seattle Folder, FTP LC).

<sup>[40]</sup> Paul Vulpius, *Help Yourself*. trans. John J. Coman (New York: Samuel French, 1936), 22.

<sup>[41]</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>[42]</sup> Ibid., 63, emphasis in original.

<sup>[43]</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>[44]</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>[45]</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture In America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1982), 185.

<sup>[46]</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>[47]</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>[48]</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>[49]</sup> In several respects, *Help Yourself* foreshadows *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and, as several colleagues have told me, many episodes of *Seinfeld*.

[50] Flanagan, *Arena*, 372.

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