

## Stage for Action: U.S. Social Activist Theatre in the 1940s

*Stage for Action: U.S. Social Activist Theatre in the 1940s*. Chrystyna Dail. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016; Pp. 194.

In *Stage for Action: U.S. Social Activist Theatre in the 1940s*, Chrystyna Dail reveals a significant piece of theatre history and asserts its rightful place in the canon of American drama. Dail begins the book by arguing that the claim often made by theatre historians such as John Gassner that social activist theatre died in the 1930s, only to resurface in the 1960s is a false one. Engaging with Douglas McDermott's political performance continuum, Dail contends that the group Stage for Action (SFA) created a new kind of socially conscious theatre that served as a propaganda machine for the progressive left, as well as a megaphone for civil rights, workers' rights, the fight against fascism, and more. For Dail, SFA did more than raise awareness about these issues; it was "diligently involved in theatrical praxis," demanding and proposing solutions to social justice problems of the day (22).

Dail breaks down her historical study of SFA clearly and concisely containing just enough cultural, political, and economic history to contextualize fully the work of SFA. Dail first offers a chronicle of its creation, arguing that SFA became a "reimagining of progressive performance, both during the War and after, and as an underappreciated model for social activist theatre in the United States" (15). Founded by four young women—Perry Miller, Donna Keath, Berilla Kerr, and Peggy Clark—SFA began as a tool to support the War effort in Europe and to bring attention to the "menace of native fascism" (33). In its brief three years, SFA amplified the voices of some of the most radically anti-racist, anti-fascist, and pro-union thinkers of the era; was one of the earliest racially integrated theatre groups in the US; and became an integral part of Henry A. Wallace's failed 1948 presidential campaign. Dail argues that what started as a small New York-based volunteer theatre group became the breeding ground for a multitude of progressive causes nationwide. To buttress this argument throughout the book, Dail highlights particular plays within the SFA canon that exemplify the progressive politics of the group.

For the second chapter, Dail "explicates the relationship between Stage for Action and labor unions during and following World War II" (45). Dail argues that Arthur Miller's *That They May Win* put SFA in the spotlight. Eleanor Roosevelt discussed the play in her nationally syndicated "My Day" column, and it played to sold-out audiences in New York and around the country. For Dail, Miller's "missing years" (1945-1946) were spent pouring "himself into revolutionary work and leftist theatrical criticism" (47). He ultimately became the playwright in residence of the SFA. *That They May Win* existed in multiple versions and called for better military wages, state-sponsored childcare, and the political activism of everyday Americans. Dail also critically analyzes Les Pine and Anita Short's satirical musical *Joseph McGinnical, Cynical Pinnacle, Opus II*. Dail claims that "August 1946 through November 1948 saw SFA producing work that substantiated its position as the premier social activist theatre group of the late 1940s" (69).

Chapter three examines specific SFA plays that adopted progressive views on racial politics including Charles Polacheck's *Skin Deep*. The play was written to advocate for racial equality and address the anti-black violence and race riots making their way across the nation. In addition, Dail includes a detailed analysis of Ben Bengal's 1946 play *All Aboard*, which dealt with transportation segregation, as well as *Dream Job* by Arnold Perl and *Talk in Darkness* by Malvin Wald. Performed as a part of the Wallace

campaign, which fiercely advocated for full civil rights, universal healthcare and childcare, a robust social safety net, federal minimum wage laws, and equality for women in the workplace, among other policies, these SFA productions forced Truman to take up the cause of civil rights (though not as fervently as Wallace did) in order for him to win the 1948 presidential election.

In her fourth chapter, Dail looks at yet another project of the SFA—its fight against the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Based on close readings, she argues that Miller wrote *The Crucible* after Sidney Alexander's *Salem Story*, noting that “the plays share the same basic plotline and major characters” (112) and that “too many parallels exist between these two artists for the overlap in their plays to be mere coincidence” (116). Finally, she chronicles the red-baiting that several members of SFA suffered. She observes that “during the decade of 1946-1956 informants ‘named’ 40 percent of Stage for Action membership as Communists or subversives” (139) and that several SFA members were called to testify in front of HUAC. Due to the outcomes of these hearings, some lost their careers and even their lives.

In her final chapter, Dail somewhat undercuts her argument that HUAC brought an end to SFA. While the group formally disbanded, several socially activist theatres and productions rose in its place. She offers in-depth readings of the post-SFA plays *Open Secret* by Robert Adler, who addressed the horrors of the atomic bomb, as well as *We Who Are the Weavers* by Joseph Shore and Scott Graham Williamson, who strongly critiqued the colonization of Puerto Rico. Dail closes her analysis and argument by making the point that the professionalism and dedication to social justice found in the SFA directly links the workers' theatres of the 1930s with the companies founded after its disbandment such as the Free Southern Theater and El Teatro Campesino.

*Stage for Action* serves as a fascinating and incredibly well-researched and well-written exploration into an important and oft-forgotten piece of theatre history. Given SFA's commitment to the notion that “entertainment should have a purpose...and that purpose must be exerted to prevent war, stamp out race hatreds, combat poverty” (151) and more, I cannot think of a more appropriate time to revisit and revive their works.

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