

THE WORKS PROGRAM

-- Works Progress Administration --

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Marionettes in the Federal Theatre.

Audiences aggregating half a million--most of them children--have seen the performances of the five Buffalo Marionette units of the Federal Theatre project of the Works Progress Administration in the past year. That is a measure of the popularity of this important branch of Federal Theatre activity under the direction of Mrs. Hallie Flanagan.

Marionette projects of Federal Theatre are in operation in New York City, Buffalo, Washington, Newark, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Dallas, Omaha, Jacksonville, Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. These comprise 22 separate producing units, employing 353 persons. They give more than 100 performances each week to an average audience of between 300 and 400.

Taking a single week of the New York City Marionette work for the week ending April 20, the eight units of the project gave 34 performances, witnessed by 9,085 persons, a great majority of them children. Of the 34 performances, four were in Children's Hospitals and Asylums, five in Settlements, and the others mostly in school auditoriums and playgrounds. During the summer months, more performances will be given in parks.

The "actors" in these peregrinating theatres range all the way from the simplest hand puppets (one little troupe in Oakland specializes in shadow plays which are appropriate for small hospital wards) to elaborate dolls, more than half life size, operated by more than 16 strings each.

Of especial importance are the many marionette performances in children's hospitals. Here, entertainment is of prime importance in providing an atmosphere of relaxation and hope which are in many cases absolutely essential to cure. In the

Children's Departments of Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital, New York City, Federal Theatre marionettes have been working experimentally with the physicians in charge for 18 months. Dr. Lauretta Bender, Senior Psychiatrist of Bellevue, states: "The problem of working out a routine for these children would have been a difficult one with the limited facilities and staff which the city can afford. However, with the aid of activities offered us by workers from the Works Progress Administration, it has been possible to organize a number of interesting projects, one of the most valuable of which has been the puppet shows. These have the advantage that they may be consciously used for psycho-therapeutic purposes by directing the interest of the child toward the solution of his own emotional problems."

The use of puppets for direct educational purposes is endorsed by the Public Schools of Buffalo, with which Federal Theatre units have been cooperating for two years. Here, again, it is possible that a distinct contribution may be made to the science of pedagogy--one which as yet is only in germ. Tests have proved that facts presented visually to the child are far more easily and clearly retained than the same facts told in words.

Among the plays are "Mickey Mouse's Birthday," "Little Black Sambo," "Hansel and Gretel," "Snowwhite and the Dwarfs," "Puss in Boots," and "Punch and Judy." Puppets can be exciting too. The New York dolls put on that classic thriller "Treasure Island" and also a Sherlock Holmes play, a truly hair-raising performance of a sinister undertaking in an old English manor. The classics of literature and the drama are also represented. Los Angeles stages "Don Quixote"; San Francisco the medieval farce, "Pierre Patelin"; New York, "Oliver Twist." Philadelphia is producing the most famous of all puppet plays, "The Legend of Dr. Faustus."

But still more surprising things are happening. The Los Angeles Unit is putting on its stage the Story of the Creation, showing Adam and Eve, the serpent, and the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, with specially composed music and extraordinary lighting effects which the rapidly developing science of stage lighting has made possible. The emphasis, says its director, is on "the poetry of music, form, and light in expressing the theme of the creation of the universe."

Another production of this unit is "Afrique" which will interpret the development of Negro music. The first scene presents the music of primitive Africa interpreted by Paul Robeson through use of the recordings which he personally made on

folk-song, the Negro work song, jazz, and blues--all appropriately danced by the extraordinarily proficient dolls. A third production of this unit, soon to see the footlights, is an adaptation of Euripides' "Cyclops" in Shelley's translation, the only surviving example of the ancient satyr play, or burlesque tragedy.

Some of the units stress local history. In New Jersey one troupe is dramatizing the story of the local heroine, Molly Pitcher. In Buffalo, Nathan Hale is the hero of a play. The Buffalo Negro unit, one of two in Federal Theatre, presents the life of Stephen Foster, with the accompaniment of his songs and other plays.

An outstanding example of the marionette's adaptability is the series of plays which one Buffalo Unit is soon to give in the parks, dramatizing the dangers of reckless driving. This is done under the sponsorship of the Buffalo Automobile Club and with the cooperation of the Buffalo Police Department. In fact, the Chief of Police has accepted an invitation to make a speech at the opening performance. The show, "Death Takes the Wheel," is a dramatization of an article, "And Sudden Death," and presents with a technique peculiarly of the marionette theater, not so much the perils that come from wild and reckless driving as those derived from mere carelessness of which all drivers are occasionally guilty. This play will go on its local "circuit," then a sequel will be ready for performances, pointing out more of the careless and dangerous things which drivers sometimes do. Meanwhile a group of instructors is being organized to go to other cities of the state (always with the cooperation of the local automobile clubs) to set up units giving the same plays.

It will be seen that although the children come first in this government program, the art of puppetry is also a serious dramatic art for adults. One of the San Francisco companies is entitled "Not for Children Only." In Philadelphia, the Federal marionettes play to packed audiences.

An important part of the Federal Theatre puppet work is the teaching of amateurs to make and operate their own puppets, and even write their own plays. The fact that many of these dolls are crude and the operation amateurish is of little consequence. Puppet making and playing is beginning to be a standard part of modern education, but without competent instruction it cannot have its full educational value. Federal Theatre is providing instructors and educating others who will in turn become teachers to help fill the growing need.