Chapter Three

Strike Songs: Working- and Middle-Class Revolutionaries

Looking Left: Broadway and the Workers’ Theaters

When the stock market crashed in October 1929, the professional theaters did not respond. With the fading out of the Little Theater movement of the early 1920s, Broadway had resigned itself to general musings about the metaphysical longing of man. It had no significant comment to offer on the current crisis. What is more, the typical Broadway audience, the carriage trade, had long been conditioned not to expect anything relevant from the stage. Mordecai Gorelik mockingly commented, “The playgoer is asked to check his reasoning powers at the door. [. . .] What he sees on the stage does not, apparently, matter very much; it is important that it be a story whipped up in excitement and bathed in dreamlike nostalgia.”¹ As early as 1928, with prosperity still at its height, the professional theater was largely considered dead. During the Depression, Broadway simply watched its audiences shrink away as fewer and fewer members of the middle class could afford Broadway prices and as more and more wandered off to the movie theaters.² Moreover, it had nothing to say to the ones who stayed. As usual, it kept offering distraction and entertainment, deliberately refraining from reflecting on the national crisis. As observers of the time remarked, Broadway had become “completely superfluous” to those who were interested in what was happening all around them.³

At the same time, there existed a broad public that took a keen interest in contemporary events, demanding plays that discussed the economic and social crisis. It was a public of working- and lower-middle-class people eager to share their experience and opinions in a public forum like the theater. While Broadway stagnated, this demanding public developed a lively drama on the amateur stages of its immigrant communities, at strike, rallies, and in union halls. This vibrant workers’ theater movement was to be crucial to the development of professional

I. Saal, New Deal Theater
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leftist theaters of the New Deal as well. In what follows, I shall give a brief overview of its history and aesthetics in order to trace its influence on the emergence of a vernacular praxis of political theater.

The new public first announced its presence on Broadway in December 1931, at the opening of Claire and Paul Sifton’s play 1931.4 “Seldom has a bad play stunned an audience quite so completely,” a bewildered Brooks Atkinson declared.5 The play was a rather crude exercise in expressionism but startled its audiences and critics by sheer virtue of topicality. For the first time one of the most pressing social concerns was addressed on the commercial stage: mass unemployment. In the parable of Everyman Adam undergoing the turmoil of the recent economic recession, the Siftons had created a modern morality play that vividly depicted how long-term unemployment affected the American people emotionally, psychologically, and socially. For the Broadway carriage trade, such topical verve was so surprising that upon leaving the theater, Percy Hammond of the New York Herald Tribune felt compelled to reassure himself that surely life was not as bleak and cruel in the streets as portrayed on stage. Looking at the men and women in line for the movies, he was relieved to see that “none of them was cold or hungry. They were warmly clothed and had the price of admission.”6 Hammond’s incredulity and deliberate ignorance of the thirteen million unemployed on the other side of Broadway was not atypical for the patrons of the Great White Way.7 In the end, their general disinterest shut down the Siftons’ play after only nine performances. But during those nine evenings, Hammond along with the fur-coated and jewel-encrusted public in the orchestra seats were forced to acknowledge the presence of a lively “new” audience—the spectators in the galleries who enthusiastically applauded each performance.8

“The theatre being born in America today is a theatre of workers,” Hallie Flanagan observed that very same year. “Admittedly a weapon in the class struggle, this theatre is being forged in the factories and mines.”9 The workers’ theater drew its inspiration and vitality from a variety of sources. One source was the numerous immigrant theater groups, who cultivated within their ethnic communities both the classic humanist tradition of the European People’s Theatre (e.g., the Ukrainian Dramatic Circle, the Yiddish Art Theatre, the Hungarian Dramatic Circle) as well as the iconoclastic experiments of German agitprop and Russian constructivism (e.g., the German Proletbühne, the Jewish Artef, the Hungarian Uj Elöre).10

At the same time, intellectuals and theater professionals became increasingly interested in and involved with the amateur workers’