PATHFINDER

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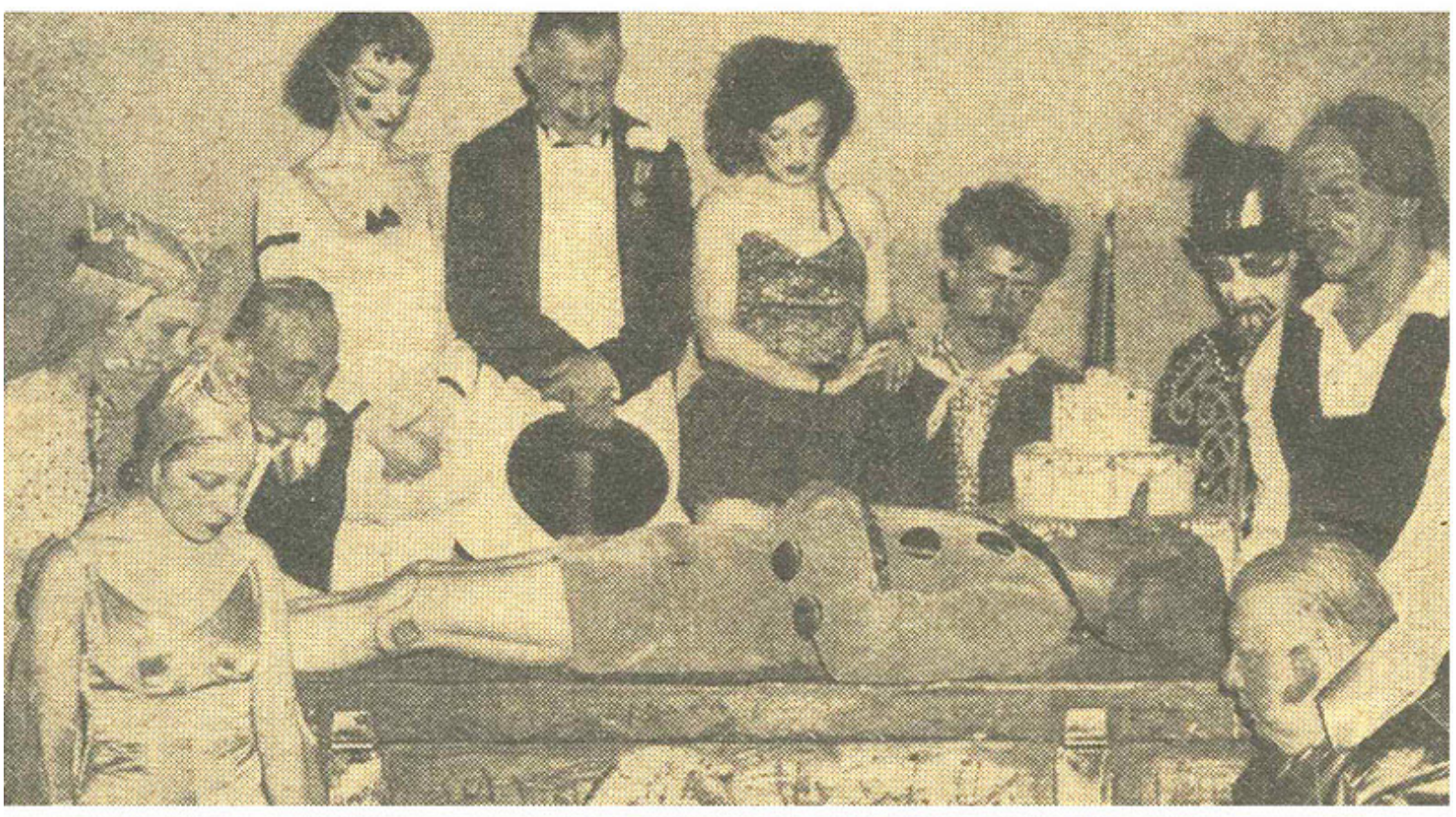
WPA: Death of a Project



"Killed by Act of Congress":
Pinocchio's Dearest Wish Was Denied

For a national government to be in the show business is nothing new. France and Germany long have helped to support national theaters; entertainers in Russia are government employees. To keep unemployed singers, dancers and actors singing, dancing and acting, the New Deal established a Federal Theater Project under the Works Progress Administration in 1935.

Last week, the Federal Theater's curtain came down. Beginning a new fiscal year, Congress passed a relief bill which said no more WPA funds should be spent for entertainment.

Center of government drama was New York City, where 3,500 were employed. As entertainers played last-night performances all over the country, Federal actors in New York made a poignant gesture. They were presenting *Pinocchio*, one of many FTP productions aimed at child audiences. In the final act, Pinocchio, a wooden puppet, is granted his dearest wish when he is transformed into a real boy. But in *Pinocchio's* last performance, the boy was turned back into wood. In a mock funeral ceremony, actors chanted: "Thus passed Pinocchio . . . died June 30, 1939, killed by Act of Congress."

At its peak in 1936, FTP employed 12,500 persons. At its expiration, it had puppet shows, vaudeville units, circuses and stock companies traveling through every state. Local projects were established in 20 states. FTP presented radio programs; from New York, it sent play scripts and instructions to children in 20,000 schools.

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FTP

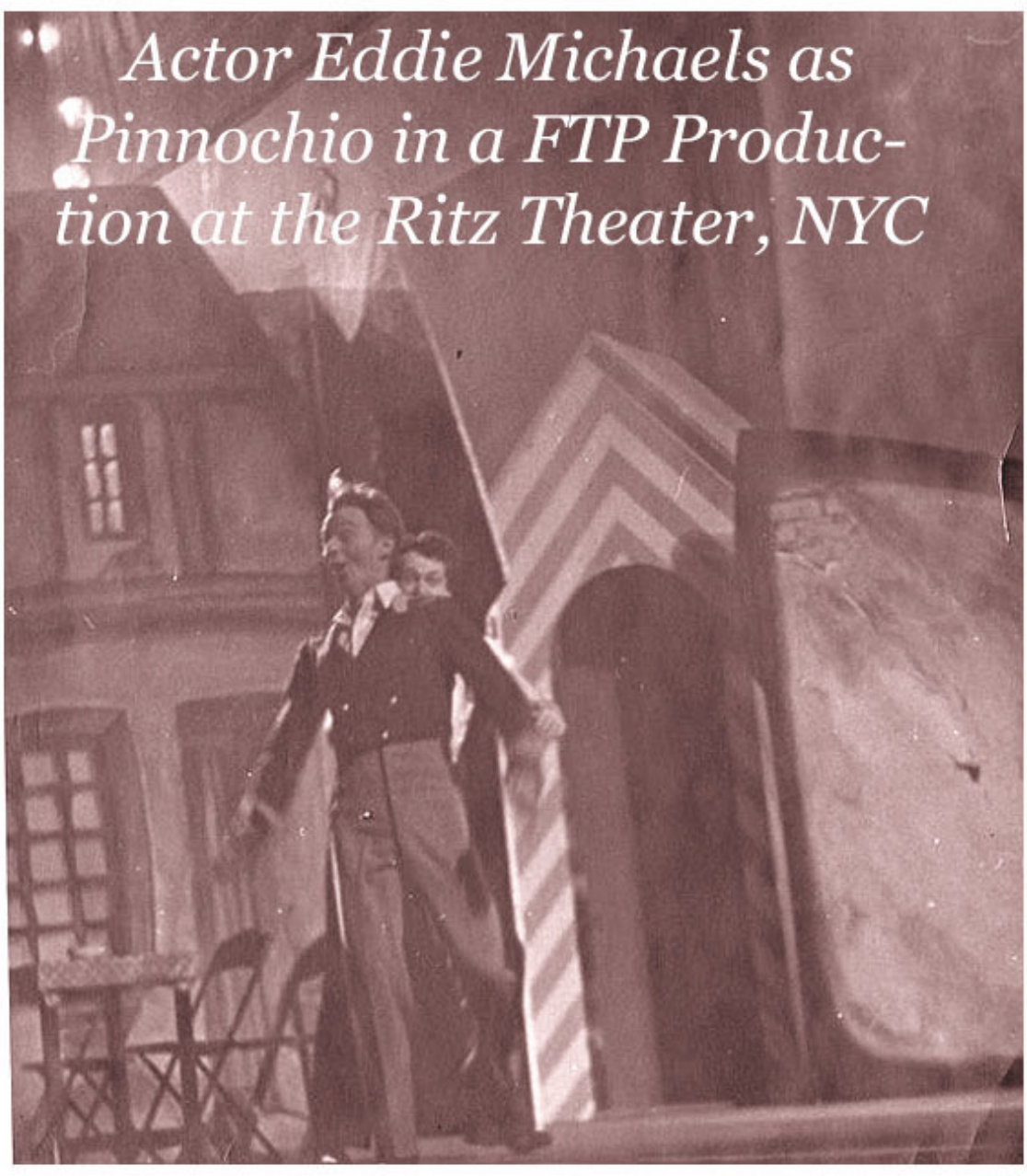
From the first, FTP had its troubles. Labor unions insisted that stage hands should receive union pay. Self-governing, FTP often had to delay productions because of internal disagreements. Socially conscious FTP playwrights presented plays which irked conservatives. The Dies Committee investigated FTP because a few of its employees admittedly were Communists. And FTP was expensive; its annual cost per worker was $1,250, as compared with the WPA average of $732.

Nevertheless, FTP's achievement was considerable. During its 3½ years, FTP played in schools, hospitals, village squares and theaters to a total audience of 30,000,000 Americans. Fully two-thirds of them had never seen a play in their lives; some did not laugh at FTP quips because they thought it would be impolite.

Admission to three-fifths of FTP performances was, in fact, free; for the other two-fifths, the charge ranged from 10 cents to $1.10. When it expired, FTP had spent $43,000,000 and had taken in about $2,200,000.

Since 1935, FTP has presented more than 1,000 different plays. In the country, FTP stuck to established playwrights. In the city, it presented plays by its own writers: *Triple-A Plowed Under*, '*. . . one-third of a nation. . .*' and others.

First FTP hit was *Murder in the Cathedral*, a somber drama in verse. Last great success of FTP was a swing version of *The Mikado*, with an all-Negro cast. After six months in Chicago, it moved to New York, where it was so successful that a private producer took over the company after six weeks, doubled admission prices —and failed.



Actor Eddie Michaels as Pinnochio in a FTP Production at the Ritz Theater, NYC

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MILLIONS OF PLAYGOERS

TWO MILLION enjoyed WPA open-air shows last year

4 WPA FEDERAL THEATER PHOTOS

OFFICIALLY, theatergoing in the United States—exclusive of the movies—is in a very bad way. For the entire country, the average weekly attendance at commercial theaters is a mere 10,000 to 20,000, as opposed to the movies' estimated 90,000,000. No wonder it is commonly alleged that "the theater is dead."

As a matter of fact, there is quite a lot wrong with this picture. True, the box office figures don't lie (talk to anybody in show business), but actually, millions of Americans are going to the theater to see plays that are professionally produced—real plays, real actors, real scenery, real properties. These audiences don't show in the above statistics because the plays are *not produced for profit*.

The Federal Theater, that department of WPA which employs theater workers, has on its rolls some 9,500 stage people of all categories, operates 92 companies in 27 states—and packs 'em in.

In the big cities, Federal Theater gives plays in the regular theaters, usually charging 55 cents for the best seats. In New York City, last year, half a million people saw these performances. For the entire country the figure may be doubled.

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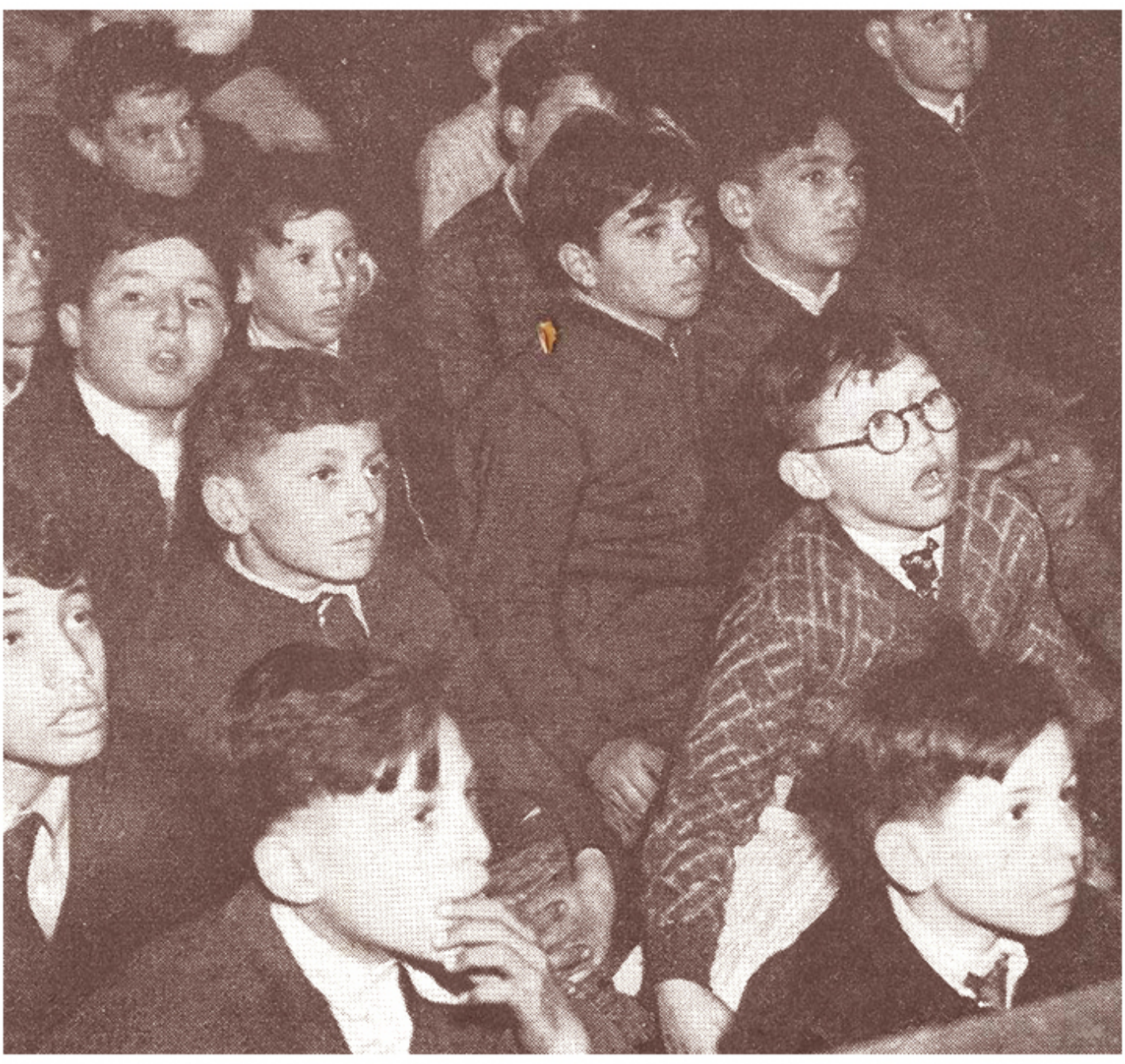
Government Theater



OLIVER TWIST in an "easy English" version in a Federal Marionette Theater holds its audience spellbound. More than a million New York children go to the play

In small towns the farmer comes to Federal Theater performances in his Ford, and applauds mightily at the comedy or vaudeville in the grange hall. In Valley, Nebraska, a village of a thousand inhabitants, 800 people tried to get into a hall that would hold 200. The Manchester, New Hampshire, company wows them, but has to launder its dialogue and warn the ladies of the troupe not to smoke in view of the townfolk.

And the children—! They may be counted by the hundreds of thousands. In New York City, Federal Theater gave, from July, 1936, to June, 1937, nearly 2500 free indoor performances—plays, vaudeville, and marionette shows—chiefly in settlements, clubrooms, and school auditoriums, and the audiences (overwhelmingly children) totaled 1,097,458. Summer outdoor performances in the parks (twenty-five a week, weather permitting) drew a total audience of nearly two million—the whole family attending. Besides

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Government Theater

FASHIONABLE Harlem turns out for the opening of a Federal Theater play where a good seat costs 55 cents. Evening dress optional

all this, Federal Theater put on a circus which brought nearly 300,000 fans, mostly children, to its 150 performances, at prices ranging from 10 cents to 40 cents.

There is a new kind of audience, too, that is going to the theater, or rather, the theater goes to them. This is an audience which will never figure in the commercial theater's plans, for it is composed of those who need the breaks. About twenty-five thousand inmates of hospitals, asylums, industrial schools, and the like now have the chance of being entertained with great benefit to morale and discipline.

Where geography permits, Federal Theater has also sent shows to CCC camps where few of the boys had ever seen a play. Twenty-five thousand is the average weekly attendance at these.

To round out the picture comes the astonishing report from George Terwilliger, the Federal Theater expert in charge of advising amateur theater groups, that there are in the country no fewer than 70,000 such groups, regularly giving one or more performances each year.

The theater is dead, is it? Not by a long shot. The avidity with which Americans by the millions have grasped the opportunity to see and enjoy good plays well acted disproves that once and for all. Can it be that show business has something to learn?—*Hiram Motherwell*

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