

TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW
with THEODORE WARD

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for the

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TW: So that was the general situation when I came to Federal Theatre through the intercession of Richard Wright, who had been a member of the Writers' Project and who had been assigned, I think, to do publicity for the Negro Unit of Federal Theatre. . . . there was a controversy raging then on the Project with reference to Paul Green's Hymn to the Rising Sun. A young man, Charles De Sheim, who's dead now, had come over as director from the Chicago Repertory Group and he was...sort of a product of the Group Theatre. At least they all believed in the Stanislavski Method. That's what they were struggling to do was to duplicate or live up to or emulate the Group Theatre in New York. Well, behind the scenes a struggle had ensued as to the right of the Negroes to direct their own project. You see, they set it up as a separate unit in the first place here in Chicago because this was a highly discriminatory town. And there were two people on one side involved, Mr. Bob Dummore, but particularly Miss Shirley Graham, who felt that they should be appointed to head the Negro Unit as such, I suppose. I don't know if it extended beyond that as to the council in charge of the plays, whether they would have some jurisdiction in the State as a whole. I don't know if that was involved. But in order to buck the--

. . . . the appointment of De Sheim, who had already been assigned to the unit to direct Hymn to the Rising Sun, they started to fight about that. They stirred the cast up saying that the play was--what shall I say-- inimical to the interests of the blacks and so forth. And even though preparation for the production and rehearsals and so forth were going on, it looked as though the production would be torpedoed./ . . . So Wright came to me and asked me--I was teaching at that time in the WPA (Works Progress Administration) as an instructor of speech. I didn't know

too much about the problem but I had a pretty good background at that time in speech. So it was easy for them to make the transfer for me to try to help in this controversy downtown.

So I was appointed as an actor major on the project. In an effort to stem the tide against De Sheim, I advocated that this was the first real opportunity blacks had ever had in America to serve an apprenticeship in the theatre because it was a very complicated thing, you see, a big art form. And it would be better if people like Mr. Dunmore and Miss Graham who had had no real theatrical experience should remain on the project and accept the tutelage of people like De Sheim, that technically and every other way they could profit by it. And maybe in another year or two, they would be competent to take over. Well, this idea didn't work. I said in the meantime that this would extend to the actors and actresses who had had no practical theatrical experience beyond vaudeville and a few amateur productions in their own community, that they too might find it very profitable. But this whole rac/ial/ society was used in a pronounced way and most of the cast, I suppose, and people on the project were inclined to feel that this was right, let Miss Graham and Mr. Dunmore run the project. "White folks were running theirs. We can run ours our own way." And so it culminated in De Sheim being either dismissed or resigned. I don't know positively which happened there. And Art Smith was brought in and that was that. But one of the major factors that was involved was that with the departure of De Sheim, a white woman entered the picture, Kay Ewing, a very lovely human being. I guess her parents were wealthy as what-not and nobody understood exactly how she got on the project because she stemmed out of one of the wealthy families in Evanston. But she was equipped because she had been a student of Hallie Flanagan. She had gone to an experimental theatre

Hallie Flanagan had at Vassar, or was it in Poughkeepsie? That's Vassar. So Miss Graham resented this very, very, how should I say? Strenuously. But she couldn't bring it out as a personal issue between her and the administration about the appointment of this woman. What had happened was that George Kondolf had approved production of Big White Fog, and that's how Miss Ewing entered the picture from that point, I believe. But she had been appointed to direct it. So Miss Graham in an effort to prevent Miss Ewing's appointment as / director of the play/ started a protest movement under cover. She sent the actors out with petitions and so forth and she contacted major Negro leadership on the south side claiming that the play was defeatist and so on and so forth. So I didn't know about this until one of the actors brought me a petition and said, "We just don't feel she should be doing you like this." Well anyway, whatever the influence of the Negro leadership was, and I didn't really learn of it until after the play was shifted to the south side. Mr. Minturn, who was acting director of the Federal Theatre Project--I don't think he had been fully appointed. It hadn't been settled, you know. And that's the only man I knew that had anything to do with it. He was in cahoots with Graham because Miss / I can say this, / I don't see how she could have manipulated the protest, / in approval of Mr. Minturn / if he hadn't been / the whole scheme. / was afraid that Kondolf was wrong and that the play would be attacked and that would make it bad for him, I guess. He never said this to me, but later he brought me a batch of letters which he had received from Washington, which were letters from the local community, prominent Negroes on the south side protesting the play. / with the critics in practically wholesale approval, / Well, when the play did open, / this went on to say, people from the Urban League, leaders like the head of the Negro--I don't know what you'd call it-- / associated Negro Press, / that is that acted sort of like the AP (Associated Press), he /

thought about it and came to me and said, "We're sorry." "I didn't know what this was all about and Miss Graham came to me. I had no time to read plays and stuff like that and I'm no critic, but it seemed a serious thing. So yes, I wrote about it. There are many of us who feel we should make amends, and if you'll give me--" (what do you call these things that they send out with the picture on pasteboard--^{your photograph./} mats of / "I'll circulate them all over the country," /he said, / "and try to correct the impression about it." Because the play--you see, when it opened the Chicago newspapers, the downtown press was, I suppose, ^{/practically/} overwhelming in their approval. And I don't know of anything that could have happened to stop it. Maybe because one critic did say in the review that this whole campaign against the play was bunk, that there wasn't anything bad about it. Lloyd Lewis said it was a perfect example, the first example really of a thoroughly realistic play that had ever been presented of Negro life. He was laudatory. Even what's her name downtown now who used to be with the Journal American who is supposed to be a strict advocate of art for art's sake. What's her name?

LB: I don't think I know, sir.

TW: She's national. She's as much an art and music critic, I guess, as she is a drama. I'll tell you her name in a minute.

LB: I'm sorry I can't help.

TW: My retentive powers are not so good any more because I've pushed all this out of my mind.

LB: Understand I can't help because I don't know who you mean.

TW: Well, I'll tell you in a minute. She was at that time the critic of the Journal American, which was really Wall Street in Chicago. And she approved it. She said she didn't know what I meant but I had some sort of hazy idea

about a collection of white and black working together to prevent the eviction and it seemed like I was projecting something about the tomorrow, you know. Unity of white and black, and it was that, technically was that. But the whole thing wasn't understood or was ignored. What Big White Fog was all about was the confusion in the Negro community due to the influence of the whites who served as the leaders in this country, whether they were in academic circles or not. The predominant ideas were white ideas impinging on the Negro community from--probably there were quite a few; I don't know but the Negro had--and I didn't dwell too much on this--the Negro knew that he could succeed as a businessman. If he don't look at things the right way, then Garveyism and bankruptcy. And the nationalist way toward Garvey is the other nature, the focus of Negro ideology on the black community has been that of Marcus Garvey, you know. And the leader of the play was, the chief protagonist was Victor, who was a Garveyite, who had been a part of, he and his family had been a part of the great hegira / ^{from the South/} to the North where it was certainly believed that freedom and opportunity was available to the Negro and he could be happy. And they had encountered this thing of Negroes being forced to become Pullman porters and waiters, no matter what college degree they might have and so forth. And as a college man but from a Southern school, not overwhelmingly equipped but certainly conscious enough of the role of white society and opposed to ^{the role of} black society, that the Negro had been mistaken and so he had turned to Garveyism, you know. And he was a firm believer that Negroes should get out of America, get out of here because there's no hope for them.

Now there's no mention of this but you have the whole backlog of everything from Reconstruction down to at least the beginning of the struggle against

lynching and so forth. And so this /was Victor's/ orientation. His brother-in-law said, "Listen. Put together some money and get into--" Have you read Big White Fog?

LB: Yes. I re-read it last night, as a matter of fact, before coming here. No, I'm very fond of that play. I was when I first read it, and we have one copy of it, I believe, and that's all. We don't have--what about Our Land now? We don't have a copy of that. Is that in--

TW: That's been published now.

LB: That's been published. I don't know why that didn't turn up in our collection, whether we didn't get Chicago material.

TW: Well, / Our Lan' came later- Federal Theatre was already dead when I wrote it in 1941. I was referring to Big White Fog./
/ You know, if the play had projected, as far as the public was concerned.

But it wasn't given the chance because the Treasury Department assured me that as far as the box office receipts were concerned, it was doing business /by Federal Theatre/ as well as the best thing that had ever been done /in Chicago. And you had Abe Lincoln in Illinois and Prologue to Glory and things like that. And The Big Sea, which was a big comic thing that ran for a year or nearly a year. It couldn't have been financial, you see, but there was this undercurrent and there was fear, I suppose, much more than I realized, you know, what was happening. I thought the whole thing was confined to the ambition of a Negro woman who was not prepared really to become /instructor or the supervisor or anything else in the Negro unit, but whose ambition was to be head of the project which she couldn't keep. But I didn't try to buck the gal. I resisted the impulse. You see how complex the thing is in my mind to try to give you a clear understanding of what happened, the feeling about it that so many times the administration, such as it was in

the WPA. I don't know how the council operated there, whether there was that sort of thing, but anyhow, one local Negro woman and Hallie Flanagan put the play on. Because the Board of Censors came in and said, "No" after the preview of opening night. And this Negro woman who was quietly very powerful, a Negro woman on the South Side, her reputation wasn't known by the community at large but it was known as far as the Republican Party was concerned. She had access to the McCormicks and all those people and she was a very able woman. She could go down to any judge and get somebody out of jail. She called...one of the local commissioners /of the City/ and said, "This is nothing but a bunch of Negroes who are jealous of /my/ boy--...The Mayor had ducked; he'd gone out of town because he knew it was hot stuff, you know. He'd gone. He didn't want to be bothered." And so, /Joe Geary, the Commissioner,/ called...the Board of Censors and told them to /permit the/ play /to open./ Now the play was dead at 12:00 that day but by 2:00 /p.m., I/ got a notice/to see a Mr. Costello, Chairman/of the Board of Censors ...in Chicago. /He/ questioned me about the play. /He/ said, "Well, we understand there's a lot of...obscenity /in the play." "That's not so," I said; "there's isn't a word of obscenity in the whole play."/ I didn't realize what was happening. I just knew Mrs. Hale had intervened. And so /Mr. Costello scanned the dialogue and finally said, "Here's a sample of profanity - 'God damn!' Cut it. We don't stand for such profanity on our stage."/ That's all /he/ could find in the play to cut, one "God damn." So it might have been a political job. These /political/ people didn't know which way they were going and they were not going to alienate /the/ blacks on the South Side and prominent Negro businessmen, and so forth. So it was a political thing as far as the local politics was concerned. It didn't have a damned thing to do with their conscience.

So the play opened, and as I told you, the reception of the critics here /were/ very fair. . . /Nevertheless/ after ten weeks, /Mr./ Minturn maneuvered under the

policy that had been enunciated, that the regional group should seek to carry plays into the hinterland. He didn't use that word, but to strengthen the whole organization, that the public had to know what Federal Theatre was doing and that many of these communities had never seen a play and that this way they would broaden the impact of Federal Theatre on the American public. So under this, though nothing like that was stated to me, I can see it because I understand now what the development was as far as the controversies in Federal Theatre as to what to do to combat the reaction because it had started in Washington to seek to destroy it. So Minturn retired the play to the south side to a Negro high school, saying that Big White Fog was a

Negro play and that the Negroes need to know it. Now Negroes were already packing the Great and / Northern Theatre, / they weren't there alone. I mean, somebody might say that a large proportion of the white audience was due to some political consideration, but I doubt that because while there might have been a part of it, it's true; it was also true that the Chicago critics had approved the play.

LB: Which meant a great deal.

TW: So Minturn moved... / the play from the Loop to / the South Side, and that was the same as killing it, you see, / because what do the Negroes know about going to the high school to see a ^{been} play? It might have been true if / there / had / a great controversy and what-not / although the play was naturalistic, it did not stir up "race hatred," as the but / Chicago Tribune put it, / because it / had not been / written that way. So it played four... / then was / No doubt Mr. Minturn had calculated / performances to black houses and / closed. / it was a good way to get rid of / the / play, / though it / was doing / good / business in the Loop. And that's that. / That's that side of the story, so far as I know anyway. And it's sort of the crux of what was happening here in terms of developing the tack that ^{black social} could destroy / theatre, see? You know about the fact that Hallie Flanagan

/scurrilous/ charges that Federal Theatre was wasn't permitted to answer the / Communistic, and how unscrupulous people /appeared before/ the Dies Committee /accepted their views, and wouldn't let anybody combat them and so /forth./ So they built this whole apparatus. In the meantime, there was something hidden. There was something hidden because Roosevelt and Hopkins, who had stood for and been really the creators of this great experiment in the American theatre, seemed to have tied /Miss Flanagan's hands because she couldn't even speak. So what is this? You see, they were afraid—I don't know /because/ /whether the election /was/ coming up or what-not, but /Federal Theatre/ had already been approved way back in 1936, you know.

LB: We had heard that when she was writing Arena, Harry Hopkins just came to Poughkeepsie and he came in and said—he knew that she was writing the book. And he said to her, "Hallie, I guess you're really going to rake me over the coals in that book for what I did to you." And of course she didn't but--

TW: Where'd you get that?

LB: Someone--

TW: That's not in Arena, is it?

LB: No.

TW: She never gave up on him, I don't think, but I think she was very disappointed, but she hadn't understood how politics /are the tool of the rulers of society, and how they are shaped for the convenience of the class./

LB: Worked. I think Mr. Emmet Lavery--you know the name? Lavery?

TW: Yes.

LB: I think he was the one who told us this because he worked with her on Arena. He got some money. I think it was Ford Foundation money to collaborate and help her get that book--

TW: He was an important man, too, in that period. I remember that.

LB: Yes. We talked to him in California, interviewed him. And I think it was

out of that interview. He said he was there and Hopkins walked in and was really expecting that--

TW: Well, he knew. Harry was a smart man all right, but he didn't know enough at the end. I don't know. My impression was that he had ambitions and the President would be going out, a new one would come in and all that kind of thing. So he must have thought that it was /politically/ /advisable/ for him to allow the thing to pull in /his horns. Miss Flanagan/ /of the Federal Theatre Project/ was the direct representative /but he allowed other people to come in to advise him-and so and so. It broke her power in a way of speaking though it didn't get rid of her. It must have been, "This confusion is nice, but we've got to /break/ this thing that Hallie /Flanagan is sold on /for the time being." I think that probably was the consideration.

LB: He was undermining her really in the background?

TW: Well, I mean, he undermined her authority, but it didn't get rid of her because he knew as it stood /her ideas were his ideas. Right?

LB: Yes.

TW: You see, he fought for this thing in the general sense and if I understand it at all from what little I've read and what scholars have told us, appropriations and what not, and spreading the whole Federal Theatre idea, he had been totally sold on it. As a matter of fact, he had been instrumental in bringing her into the Administration. So there you have that.

LB: But it was too successful, just like your play was. Once you draw attention to yourself, maybe your days are numbered at least as far as these committees are concerned or the powers in Congress.

TW: Well, the interesting thing to me is that I was never called to Washington. I saw a list of where witnesses drawn to Washington /by/ the Dies Committee had made some ... remarks /about me. But /the Committee /didn't/ cite me--you know, /

accumulation of witnesses where at least 19 people had said something about my being either a Communist or been affiliated and how the Daily Worker had supported my plays and all that kind of thing. But they never called me, see?

LB: That's how it works, isn't it?

TW: They knew that that was^{enough,} sufficient for them, but they didn't want to attract attention. This is my feeling about the orientation of that committee, the Southerners on it and what-not, they didn't want to attract attention to me by trying to label me as a Communist. But they went to Hollywood and they did damage all over the American stage. Why not? I believe that no impartial critic or writer or historian can say that Big White Fog advocated Communism. This was a struggle for democracy in America. This is what it was all about, and I've never ceased to believe that, that much is true about the orientation of where the Negro's going. He's certainly not going back to Africa according to what I've been

reading, see? And he believes that his heritage is here and that's that. Now if this is so, why should I be attacked by the Dies Committee? It would only attract the Negroes to me as a spokesman. That's my reasoning as a result of all this. So it is not a question of just Big White Fog. It's a question of what happened, say, in New York after the approval of the Chicago critics. Can you say that they were so provincial out there that they didn't know anything about what the play was about? But in 1939 you had the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and--how should I say it--the retreat of ... the American intellectuals. Because in my time, coming along then, I didn't know and couldn't see and couldn't discern in^{the} attitude of that position of the American intellectuals to whatever was being published to the necessity for a realization of American

society. Now /these intellectuals previously/ weren't saying that /the country/ should go communist. But they were saying: that there were a whole lot of things that needed to be done, you know, to monopolies and whatever. Well, this must have been true, because if you think about national media, you know that it's intellectuals everywhere /were/ doing the job. /Yet/ suddenly there's this attack /on the play/, not wholly direct, but enough for slanting and indirect/ion/ and whatnot, to kill the New York production. I couldn't understand it. Mr. Brooks Atkinson saying that /the play was/ "painful and unanswerable." If this is so, how was it that /he could turn his column to condemn it by adding that, /"if Mr. Ward wants to get on a soapbox about Communism, that's his business." Now who's had any soapbox? There was... no soapbox /in the play. The truth is that / the whole intellectual atmosphere had changed because America had been hurt by the feeling that the Russians had ... released the Nazis to the destruction of democracy in Europe. I think that was the substance of it. I don't have any proof of that, but I'm certain that /otherwise/ there could not have been the combination /of the critics who/ ganged up on the play /when it was presented/ in New York. . . Nothing was said about accusing me of being a Communist, but there was innuendo in the air and there was insinuation that the play was Communist and that was that. /The idea of cultural and self-determination posed by the Negro Playwrights Company was opposed by the liberals as an affront in that there had never been a Negro theatre built in Harlem. It had been the whites from downtown that had done things at the Lafayette and what-not, but had never been a people's theatre. It had always been Broadway rehash, and when Federal Theatre had come in, something lively had begun to happen up there. Federal Theatre was now dead./

Anyway, this had killed the Negro Playwrights Company. They killed it, you see, at the outset. Because I had gained the support of Paul Robeson and Richard Wright, I suppose it was that. But I also had the support of Eleanor Roosevelt, you see, and others, of this distinction in the American Theatre, and in the American center, that this must be so. You see, there was hostility by the former black celebrities of ... black theatre prior to the Depression, you see, who were mad and angry because one of the big newspaper articles that came out in Harlem--I think it was Dan Burley who had said, "Here's these boys, these strangers who have come here. You people have been talking about building a Negro theatre all these years. How could they do it over night?" You see, the insinuation there, I suppose, though he didn't intend it, was that we had some kind of support. And at least Ethel Waters said, "The white folks put you up to that and I'll take you down. I'll push you down." You know, that is we couldn't get the cooperation after the attack to sustain what had been done. So that's that. Well, I've overstepped my bounds because what I wanted to say was that concludes what I had to say about Big White Fog. Let's put it that way, that that was done in Harlem after a strenuous effort to raise money and so forth, but that with the appearance of Paul Robeson for the first time in Harlem, we had succeeded in raising the money and had gotten a lot of support from people who felt that it was a good thing. I can't go through the list now. I don't remember all the prominent people, but many a prominent white person gave us money, you see. But the assumption was the Communists built it. That was easy to assume after the Robeson attack and Richard Wright's, you know, affiliation and all that sort of thing. And perhaps the Communists did see it because they/ ^{had} some kind of a program going at Workers' Alliance that

/formed and/ and that art should be / directed by the Communists/without a Communist's idea of what art consisted of, that you couldn't have a national theatre. (In other words, you had this grand/de/lusion that because of people that had been in Hooverville and participated in the marches and had stood up against the guns out here in /Chicago/and the South, /as well as CIO in/the steel mills; /therefore/the American /working class was moving toward revolution.) And supposedly, if it hadn't been for Roosevelt policies, you would have had it, you see. Because no man is going to stand and see his children cry without milk, no matter how stolid he is and where he stands. He's going to try to make something move for that kind of accommodation. And no job, no nothing, and there were millions and millions. Nobody ever counted them. You hear figures like 14 million, 15 million, 16 million, but nobody--it's like right now. Nobody knows the actual count of people out of work and they don't care to know it.

LB: They can play games with figures.

TW: Well, this wasn't true because while the Communists had attempted and maybe wanted to wreck, they did in one respect because they used the the fact that-- I say the Communists-- I'm not sure it was the Communists as such but some /when the N.P.C. was in financial distress/ of their leadership moved in on the board and there it goes into it, "Big White Fog should be retired and that the /company/ should put on a musical." I questioned whether it was legitimate for any outside people to come into the board. Not as an anti-Communist gesture but just because the play, you know, and the whole experiment had excited the whole--I don't know how far it reached, but it certainly had excited Harlem. If the Communists could do something like this, then it was a feather in /the Party's/ cap. Well, you had--you couldn't do this at the time, but I can see it in hindsight with the attack on Robeson, that people were probably justified in thinking

that he had only done it as a political gesture. Richard Wright had by this time also--well, he proved the same demoralizing effect as far as the black cultural leadership was concerned. With all the hostility that he had shown about Communism, I didn't see why he had ever been one in the first place except that he had this kind of arrogance and gargantuan egotism. He was a dictator really, intellectual dictatorship of the whole black community. But he had struck me in the back and I had thought that we were friends. He had made an eloquent statement as to why the theatre should begin and all that, but for some reason he twisted. Maybe it was part of his campaign there, but anyway he twisted and ^I had pretty authentic reports about ^{him} being in a meeting of Jewish intellectuals and people who had financial competence to help when we were in this distress with the theatre, when we were about to be destroyed. And he had accused me of absconding funds from the theatre. Now, there wasn't a stagehand that didn't get more in his first week out of that play as far as my income was concerned than I. I lived on \$10 or \$12 a week. This was the way it was because my interest was in the theatre. We didn't have a chance on Broadway and so, not if we were going to do right towards our own, my interest was in a people's theatre. It had been that when I joined the Federal Theatre. so as to my idea long It had been / prior to that. So anyhow, that was a very devastating blow to me to know that he could do this to me. He did it. Anyhow, it really was powerful enough to obstruct any challenge being, you know, created to help us during that period. But I do know this, that New Theatre League sent two representatives to our Board, and I think they were reacting to criticism which had appeared downtown following the lead of Dan Burley, that these white intellectuals who had been proclaiming the need for a people's theatre were exposed by what had happened and how it

had been done, you know. And these two people sat in on the Board and I can name them: Ben Erwin and Lem Ward, who were not members of the Board. But I was powerless because I had gone to a major leader, I mean /Joseph/ legal talent, and that was /Broadsky/. I didn't know--he was just one /a/ of the top labor leaders and being my age and /working class Southern person, I had gone to him and asked, "What right have these people to come in like this?" I'm talking about the others, not Lem Ward. He said, "Well, the Board of Directors or the Board of Trustees have the right to enlarge the Board if they so choose. This is legal." So I had to face this meeting with this group. There were other complications involved. There were people in there who felt that "Now we... have the theatre, we can take it over." You know, this was the size of it. And so they voted to kick me upstairs but in terms of the meeting, these two people who were there --I suppose because these others had wanted them there, that I had gotten all the publicity and what-not" and that I should confine myself to writing. That's what I was. "You can serve as president of the company /Erwin/ /that/ rather than its manager." And / proposed /we should do a musical. I said, "Where are you going to get the book?" /He said, "Write one!" I said, / "Meet the People" /is trying to get another vehicle to go back to Broadway - they are writing everyone for songs and sketches. Why should you assume that I can write a musical to save this theatre?" / I was conscious of the fact, and, I suppose, so were they, that you couldn't sustain that place without /retiring Big White Fog, / so on and so forth. I said, "I have had communications, not once but twice /in the last year /from Pins and Needles company, /or some people that are trying to reorganize on the Pacific Coast. They're ... presently writing to every prominent writer in the country to supply them with skits /and lyrics./ They want to build another Pins and Needles or yet something of that sort. If in two years these people haven't /been able

to produce a musical, how the hell ^{/do/} you think we're going to do one here and the rent's due next month?"

Well, they were vociferous in this respect. They had made up their mind to change the whole damned setup and put somebody in /my place./ They /had/ brought in /John/ Carlton Moss and Velasco, two of the most prominent Negroes in Harlem that I knew that had been involved in Negro culture up there. And then here's Len Ward and Ben Erwin. So they carried the weight. I was voted to be president and it was announced that that was the way it was. So I went home sick and went to bed. Really I was sick for two weeks because it was a terrible blow to see this thing happen. Now that's that and that's the end of my explanation of what happened to Big White Fog. It was a change of attitude, change of atmosphere in the country and so forth. And it hasn't been done ^{/since,/} / and most people think it's a Communist play. (Interruption)

The general disposition of patronage could have been better about it, but we do need a reorganization. The democratic process isn't operating as it's supposed to operate. Simple or not, that's all it is, just cold turkey.

And I figure this as far as I'm concerned, that even if it were true that America should go Communist, if Communism didn't work for the American people, they would revolt against it and it would be a replica of the early Revolution against the British Empire or the British king. We'd change the government to suit ourselves again, that's all there is to it. I don't see how anybody can stop that. Now other people, of course, feel less critical about it, you know. But there it is. That's the way I see it and that's the way I'll see it, I suppose, until I die. If Lincoln could say people have the right to life or to change the government, I think he would prefer the democratic. He was so

for it that he allowed the Civil War to /be prolonged/ because he didn't understand the necessity of /liberating the slaves as an adjunct to America's progress, preferring to believe his only duty was to preserve the Union; and didn't understand...the equal right of the President /to advocate or hope/for/change. It had to be a democratic process and so we have that kind of a block right now, you know. But how are you going to change it if you keep electing people to go down and represent you with no goddamned-- excuse the expression-- concern for people or the democratic rights of the people. These are moral, philosophic questions, I suppose, but it seems to me that's where we are, you know.

LB: Yes, I agree.

TW: Anyway, Federal Theatre, I came to New York with the Mikado unit and behind the scenes there was agitation going private enterprise because everybody could feel that Federal Theatre was really fully doomed, you know. And Minturn and his bunch, he had some wealthy people who were willing to make a deal with the Government to take over. And they did; they made a deal. Well, I refused to go back on the assumption that these people /would/ continue to pay the salaries and that they could reopen the play at the World's Fair here in Chicago. I said /to the cast,/ "You're naive, people. You'll get paid nothing. There's nothing to coerce them; if they don't make money, that's just too bad." I said, "We could write to Mrs. Roosevelt and all these props and scenery and what-not would be turned over to us. We /ve had/ millions of dollars of publicity in the United States. /We can/ go down to Philadelphia or Boston and start /playing,/ and from then go on." Well, of, I suppose, Mr. Minturn and there was also the general /internal/ disrespect for the Negro thinking and leadership. They were all stymied by the idea of "Who's going to look after /us," you know, take care of them?

"Who knows how to get around ...for billings" and all that kind of junk?
Some of them^{who} had been in legitimate theatre were basically the spokesmen
that we should go ^{under the/} / tutelage and the ownership of whatever these forces
were behind Minturn. Well, I left the company. I said, "I'm not going/
back ^{/to Chicago."/} / I said, "Federal Theatre's over" because I had enough information
about what was happening down there with the Woodru^{ff} Committee, you know,
the attacks and so forth that Federal Theatre was out, that's all. I
think by that time an amendment had been ^{by the Congress/} passed, which really eliminated
Federal Theatre. It might not have come up at the moment, but I know this
much is true. So the whole idea that Federal Theatre was in competition with
legitimate business and all that stuff. Michael Todd had a big show across
the street in which he had really taken all the dope and conned every angle
that had been / ^{/his Hot Mikado/} used in the Swing Mikado to make a success. He just put them in
and put new costumes on his people and brought in Broadway stars like ...
Bill
Robinson and others. So we still had no trouble with the competition
because people were still flooding the theatre. It wasn't a mob activity
on the public's/ part, but Swing Mikado/ was playing to big audiences every night.
So with the change I chose to come back to Chicago as an individual. I
thought that the time was right to try to do something on our own. We
hadn't developed enough people, actors and technicians, you know, at the Lafayette.
And then
the California and Seattle groups might come together and really make a
stab at doing their own theatre, you see? So that's my knowledge of what
happened. Whether it's of any value to you in the terms we're talking about
as regards/
the Federal Theatre Project, I can't estimate that because I attended only
one discussion. We didn't have a single meeting when it came up to the cast.
We had a meeting that was the general thing. People--I don't recall it.

Maybe it was a way to survive but anyway, the principal people from the project were there. They didn't say anything but they were there. Of course, the main conclusion was fear. That meeting was fear that we had lost our jobs and the necessity for continued activity on the part of the people on the project or the workers on the project to safeguard themselves against any erosion of salaries or any more pink slips and that sort of thing which had been going on. That's all I know about that because I just simply wasn't in the know, you know. I was a person who I suppose they all felt /was/ important to the project, just as the administration did, had brought me in to sit. I wish I had known. I wasn't alert enough in that period. I came out of school very naive. You see, there had been agitation around the university so far but there hadn't been this total thing about trying to recruit people and what-not. What had been intellectual /among/ discussions in the Auden Club and other prominent students showed me /that I was/ some sort of a celebrity. I was an honor scholar /as/ most of these people were--I was some kind of an attraction, you know. So I met some serious kids. They were either students of poetry or people who were attempting to write poetry. And I met some kids who had a Marxist inclination. At that time it was a very general thing because even professors would reflect, you know, the interests of the intelligentsia in this country. You can get that so on that campus there was...no hostility towards Marxism as such. Whether you talk about philosophy or what-not, it was there so I had some /Marxism./ information about / And this had given me a clearer idea about the way maybe America should go. But I'd never become a part of the Communist Party and I don't know if they had any--they probably did have a unit on that campus. But that was something I didn't know. I was attracted by the

kids who had some kind of brains.

LB: So the Federal Theatre, in terms of one of the standard questions to ask is what kind of influence Federal Theatre had on your life and what you've told me is that it broke your heart in many ways.

TW: Often it did, but I have to say this, you see. When I went to school, I was interested in writing poetry and probably short stories, but I had no basic orientation except my feeling that a black boy who had come up in this country as an American wasn't going to attract anything but the Negro minority. That was the period when we were still fighting the practice of lynching in the South. By the time I got out of school it was "Smash Lynch Law!" and then you had the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. You had all this as a part of a ferment--when I left school, I left because of a specific reason. I didn't think the university had any answers to the problem that I thought it was capable of solving or that its students were aware of in the sense that they knew what they were doing. I thought all the Negro leadership in the main had been exposed to this, people like DuBois and poets whom I knew or knew of, that they all had some sort of educational orientation which kept them in an equivocal position, but that it was their university and I wanted to know whether it was worthwhile, what it was all about. Well, it's a strange way of learning. I hadn't found anything. My professors and people that I had contacted were, I suppose, educated clearly in the English tradition who were Americans in that sense. So I had a conference with a man whom I suppose on the campus was known as the most erudite of these English professors, American, all white, an aesthete of the first water. And he said to me, . . . Mr. Ward," . . . You write very well, but you're butting your head up against a stone wall. The best people already

know what /you're saying/ and the rest don't want to hear /it./" (laugh) So I thought he was about to give me some sound advice, but later during that conference I mentioned Howard University and he said, "Howard University? Where's that? I never heard of it." So this struck me as profound example of where white people stood in this country. They're even educated and the best of them don't even know of such a--the years the man had been in a university and even the ones I'd really begun to believe in, you know, because there'd been a lot of traditions there. So I said /to myself,/ they don't even know the Negro people . . . "They don't even know we exist." I'd been looking and looking. So I said, "To hell with it." So I left the university. Well, Zona Gale came down here to Chicago and she convinced me to go back. I went back but my heart wasn't in it because I knew there I wasn't going to find what I wanted to know. And I didn't believe any more that it was possible to get it up there any more, you see. So that spring at the end of the semester I left the university and I didn't go back. That was the end of the 1933 /academic year./... For two years /or more/ I was around Chicago and some of my friends advised me to get on the WPA because I could teach and so forth, and I did. From that I guess I told you.

LB: Yes.

TW: I went in there; I must have gone in the latter part of 1936 because I was accepted and I was appointed to teach speech and drama down at Lincoln Center /here in Chicago./ And that's where I was when I met Richard Wright and we /formed the Southside/ Writers' Club. . . .

And this thing about the controversy in Federal Theatre came /up./
specific,
Now this is the only thing that I can tell you, the only authentic thing.
I can say definitely that I knew that Mrs. Flanagan and the policy of the

Federal Theatre said that plays like mine should be done. Susan Glaspell told me that Minturn raised hell with the writers on the projects. "How is it a nigger comes up and writes a play and you haven't done that? The first authentic play done here." And that Arnold Sundgaard got some work. This was Susan Glaspell; I know that this was done, that the thing was done. So he got to work and wrote Spirochete. I don't know, of any other thing was locally done for Chicago actors. You see, I was used as a springboard to stimulate that. Now that's why I don't believe Minturn ever was sincere with reference to Big White Fog because that had been done not only--it had been scheduled by Kondolf, who was transferred to New York, the New York Project, but also that Minturn was in a cabal somehow with Miss Graham. And thirdly, that he tried to wipe his hands of the whole position ^{partly} /by showing me this correspondence of the Negro leaders. / "It was your own people who killed your play," he told me. / It wasn't him. But I wasn't dismissed and I was kept when I couldn't even sing, you know. But I was kept in the Swing Mikado and went to New York with it. He was keeping me on because he didn't know but what I might do something, write something that (laugh) he could produce.

LB: So that was security really for him to keep you going?

TW: Yes, I suppose so. You know, he couldn't very well ^{/do otherwise/} without creating some kind of furor /if he kicked/ me off the project.

LB: And then he went back and gave, I suppose was instrumental in giving Shirley Graham the children's play.

TW: Well, you see, that's what she proposed, this Little Black Sambo. She was a naive, stupid woman at that time. She might have woke up later, but she (laugh)--

LB: Trusted?

TW: I went and I talked to her. I said, "Miss Graham, the Negroes on the south side will rise up in arms if you're prepared to do anything about this theatre. Don't you think?"

"Ah ha, ha. You think so?" (Laugh)

My God, how can people be so distrustful with that alienation of class or spirit definitely, still do it. I don't think it's pronounced now or outward but you do have that. You see, this thing that grew out of slavery is still here, the separation between the mulattoes and the blacks. It's undercurrent, but it's here. And she might have been just moving on that basis. She married a dark little boy.

(End of side 2, continued on side 3)

LB: . . . influence it had in terms of you personally, certainly not ideal. But in terms of the country, what is your sense of Federal Theatre? Or is that hard to separate? That's a hard question to answer, I think.

TW: No, as a precedent, I think the Federal Theatre was the greatest thing that ever happened in terms of its relationship/to/the creative artists and the people of America. It was destroyed and I think it'll come again, but it'll take a long time unless—it'll take some kind of radical reorganization of the government for it to really serve its purpose, the purpose which is pretty clearly defined here in Hallie Flanagan's administration and it should be for and by the people that made it, same as it was. It should be--what is the famous quote that she used to use, that there was a government factor in Federal Theatre as to what it ought to be. That is a theatre of grownups--how do you put that? It's part of exactly what I do. I know the essence of it is this, that it should be adult and it should be uncensored, and it should be concerned with America's changing society. I think that was the substance of it. Well, we saw what happened

on that basis and until people are aware of art as an instrument, that it is one of your powerful props which they can have, that the same forces that destroyed Federal Theatre are in operation now and that they've corrupted the majority of the artists. And you still see this thing. I had some news about the Rockefeller Fund, Rockefeller people, Whitney Museum in New York either doing now or announced a display of American art. I forgot the time limits but it certainly has eliminated American artists from it, the latter-day artists. And I had already gotten the impression that as in Europe after World War I, they had the development of modernism / as the chief expression of art that Mr. Rockefeller founded the museum that made the artists of our time, as far as American art is concerned. There is where we got all this abstraction, you see. I have read how James Joyce and others in Europe that there was a--how should I put it--total feeling of disappointment that this made. It had grown out of the World War I, that the whole illusion of the intellectuals as a class and the leaders of ^a society and their ideas had been stupid and wrong, that the great mark of Western civilization was German culture. The Kaiser was washing men away, having millions on the Western Front, that something had been radically wrong and if it had been wrong, some of it later

a group of so-called trained and articulate people, that they had sold a lie. And they came up with the idea promulgated

None of us can understand one another.

And we are doomed to isolation and despair. And all the circumlocution around psychology . . . I don't know what it's called, but my impression is that not only the psychologists but the scientists will assume that there's no such thing as ultimate truth and that the end of everything is a contradiction,

no matter what you examine. And yet they take the persistent direction of trying to understand, of saying this and that is so. The psychologists think you and I are composed of two personalities, and one side of us is negative, and the other /positive, and so we are confused. But all this is the junk that's going on in the abstractions. Now I understand that some artists are protesting that.

(The balance of side 3, about 20 minutes, is conversation on a variety of topics between the interviewee and interviewer. It has not been transcribed.)