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Furious Improvisation: How the WPA and a Cast of Thousands Made High Art out of Desperate Times

Susan Quinn

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Under the direction of a five-foot redheaded firecracker, Hallie Flanagan, the Federal Theater Project managed to turn a WPA relief program into a platform for some of the most inventive and cutting-edge theater of its time. This daring experiment by the U.S. government in support of the arts electrified audiences with exciting, controversial productions. Plays like *Voodoo Macbeth* and *The Cradle Will Rock* stirred up politicians by defying segregation and putting the spotlight on social injustice, and the FT P starred some of the greatest figures in twentieth-century American arts-including Orson Welles, John Houseman, and Sinclair Lewis. Susan Quinn brings to life the politics of this desperate era when FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the chain-smoking idealist Harry Hopkins furiously improvised programs to get millions of hungry, unemployed people back to work. Quinn's compelling story of politics and idealism reaches a dramatic climax with the rise of Martin Dies and the House Un-American Activities Committee, which turned the FTP into the first victim of a Red scare that would roil the nation for the next twenty years.

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