

Rehearsing revolutions: the labor drama experiment and radical activism in the early twentieth century

Mary McAvoy

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The interwar period in the United States was a turbulent time for the American labour movement. In only two decades, it experienced major setbacks and gains. The advances made by the movement owing to Franklin Roosevelt's pro-labour New Deal policies in the mid-to-late 1930s occurred between two world wars and two reactionary moments that sought to expunge radical leftism from American society (the First and Second Red Scares). Over this time, labour colleges emerged across the country that taught unionism and leftist political economy to youths that aspired to become labour activists. While other historians have variously explored the labour movement, these colleges, and workers' theatre, Mary McAvoy's *Rehearsing Revolutions* unites these strands by uncovering the dramatics programmes at these institutions between 1922 and 1939. Drawing from lesson plans, scripts, essays, photographs, and reviews, McAvoy charts the development of these programmes and situates them in their broader social, political, and economic contexts.

Rehearsing Revolutions begins with an introductory chapter that outlines the book's key themes: "labor [*sic*]", "radicalism and progressivism", "education", and "performance". The chapter explains that the mainstream labour movement, represented by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), sought to secure social legitimacy by severing ties to radicalism following the First Red Scare. Additionally, it stresses that labour drama was an experiment that developed through trial and error. With this established, McAvoy turns to Doris Smith in Chapter 2 and explores her pioneering efforts at Portland Labor College (PLC) between 1922 and 1925. The AFL-funded PLC hired Smith to develop a dramatics programme that served as a recreational outlet and a marketing medium. Smith transcended these objectives and advanced labour drama as an important component of workers' education in itself. Chapter 3 documents Hazel MacKaye's stewardship of dramatics at Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, from 1925 to 1926. MacKaye had previously specialised in suffrage pageants. She began her tenure with the ambitious intention to produce high-class theatre, though she quickly adapted her approach to facilitate her students' tastes for pop-culture. Hollace Ransdell's work at the Southern Summer School for Women Workers between 1928 and 1936 is examined in Chapter 4. Ransdell, a labour journalist, taught drama to Southern white women and was explicit about her pedagogical goal: to teach labour issues. Much of her work focused upon practical solutions to labour problems, though it did become more daring over time. The pressures of the Great Depression, however, compromised the programme. Zilphia Horton and Highlander Folk School in Tennessee between 1934 and 1940 are the subjects of Chapter 5. McAvoy shows that Horton's tenure marked a maturation of purpose and procedure. Horton, a musician, believed that labour drama needed to be "accessible" to performers and audiences, and had to advance solutions to social problems, especially those relevant to the South (e.g. agricultural issues and racial segregation). Lastly, Chapter 6



focuses on Lee Hays and Commonwealth Labor College in Arkansas in 1932–39. Unlike the other colleges, Commonwealth was sympathetic to radical politics. Resultantly, the college attracted animosity from the surrounding community, drew the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and was eventually closed by the state government. Hays directed the school's drama programme and represents the experiment's apex. Not only was the programme prolific in its production of scripts and performances, it also stressed the importance of both production *and* performance. For Hays, labour drama had to be educative to performers as well as audiences. McAvoy then shows in her conclusion that although the experiment was over by early 1940s, it nevertheless served as an incubator to the arts-based activism that followed the Second World War and successfully taught “abstract concepts” to student performers and their audiences.

Curiously, it becomes clear by the end of *Rehearsing Revolutions* that there is a disconnect between its content, on the one hand, and its conclusion, title, and blurb on the other. The latter implies that these drama programmes were hotbeds of radical and revolutionary activity. However, McAvoy establishes in the first chapter that “many workers and artists considered in this study were not radical” and that they “rarely aimed to topple societally sanctioned political, economic, artistic, or education systems, and, instead, set out to work within extant political systems (p. 18)”. With the possible exception of Commonwealth Labor College, this characterisation fits all of the institutions and programmes explored in the book, notwithstanding their occasional flirtations with radicalism. It is surprising, then, that McAvoy concludes that drama students “practiced tangible action for change” and “rehearsed revolutions” (p. 207). Perhaps “revolution” is here meant figuratively and is intended to contrast the programmes with other youth theatre initiatives that were designed to foster socialisation (pp. 206–207), but given the book's meticulousness in establishing definitions elsewhere, this makes such use of the term unusual. Otherwise, this statement (and the title and blurb with it) is at odds with the rest of the book. Ultimately, anyone expecting to read about openly revolutionary student theatre may be left disappointed.

Packaging aside, *Rehearsing Revolutions* is a solid work of history. McAvoy does a wonderful job of detailing these programmes and her contextualisation is consistently excellent. She shows how the social, political, and economic circumstances of the interwar period shaped and constrained labour drama. The labour movement generally had to navigate trying circumstances, even during the New Deal when it made significant headway. McAvoy explains how extrinsic pressures *prevented* labour drama from being radical or revolutionary—it is *this* that makes the book interesting. Further, it successfully charts the medium's evolution over this period. Although the book consists of case studies, it retains a narrative trajectory by showing the practical and theoretical developments that took shape from the early 1920s to the late 1930s. The book demonstrates how labour drama grew in practical and theoretical sophistication and it is intriguing to observe how educators responded to unforeseen challenges and opportunities. Learning how they approached racial politics also is fascinating, ranging from not at all (PLC) to clumsily yet directly (Highlander). Overall, *Rehearsing Revolutions* is sure to be of interest to historians of American labour, theatre, and education.

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