

“He could be described as fine-tuned rather than highly strung. His is the attentive stillness of some birds—one of the predators—a gyrfalcon.”

—Orson Welles on Marc Blitzstein

Born in Philadelphia on March 2nd, 1905, **MARCUS SAMUEL BLITZSTEIN'S** musical talents were apparent from an early age. His first performance was at age seven. He was the son of affluent, non-religious Russian Jews. His family was close-knit and supportive, but Marc found in that support an expectation of success. Although his parents encouraged his music they also pushed him to have a practical career.

Blitzstein did not succumb to his parents' sensible urgings. He took refuge in education, first in the United States then abroad. In Europe, he studied with both Nadia Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg. Boulanger was unhappy when he left her to study with Schoenberg and in truth Blitzstein was much more sympathetic to the musical philosophy of Boulanger than Schoenberg with whom he was frequently at odds. Blitzstein's own musical theories shifted as his political theories changed from more elitist music to populist music. He even authored an English translation of Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*.

Blitzstein accepted an invitation to stay at the MacDowell artist's colony where he met a novelist named **EVA GOLDBECK**. Eva was involved with another visitor to the colony but her connection with Blitzstein was immediate. They maintained contact after leaving the colony ultimately traveling in Europe together. After much discussion, Marc and Eva were married on March 2, 1933. Blitzstein was open with Eva about his homosexuality and though they did have “moonlight,” their code word for sex, quite quickly, their marriage did not include a sexual aspect. Behind what might have appeared to be a marriage of convenience was an intense and genuine emotional bond. Eva was his intellectual equal and he valued her input and unrelenting honesty.

However, their marriage was not free of troubles; Marc feared Eva might leave him for someone with whom she could have a physical relationship. Marc sank into depression whenever he completed a composition. Eva feared failure as a writer and though she published she mainly wrote articles and reviews for periodicals. Eva suffered from anorexia nervosa and dwindled in size. Marc traveled without Eva for months at a time. She was diagnosed with breast cancer. When she had a double mastectomy, Marc wept. Eva was haunted by a dream she had had predicting the date of her death as September 5, 1935. Her emotional state and physical illness only enhanced her preoccupation with the prophetic nightmare. Eva died on May 26th, 1936, only months after her dream predicted. Marc was devastated; He considered giving up composing to finish her novel. It was months before he could work. He carried her ring with him wherever he traveled. When he began working again it was at a frenzied pace. He wrote *The Cradle Will Rock* as tribute to Eva in a mere five weeks. The premise for *Cradle* had been suggested to him in an earlier conversation with playwright Bertolt Brecht. When Blitzstein had mentioned writing an opera about a prostitute Brecht suggested writing about all kinds of prostitution.

Blitzstein died in Martinique on January 22, 1964. He had been drinking with three sailors who used sex to lure him into an alley where they beat him. He later died of the injuries.

< Marc Blitzstein



▲ Eva Goldbeck

*“What I have lived most keenly,
my lack of living.”*

—Eva Goldbeck, *There Was No Time*

Marc Blitzstein

Music and Discord

"It takes a lot of nerve to put your signature down on a piece of paper when it means that the government of the United States is going to pay out a million dollars...You can't care very much what other people are going to say because when you are handling other people's money whatever you do is always wrong. If you try to hold down wages, you'll be accused of union-busting and of grinding down the poor; if you pay a decent wage, you'll be competing with private industry and pampering a lot of no-accounts; if you scrimp on production costs, they'll say your shows are lousy and if you spend enough to get a good show on, they'll say you're wasting the taxpayer's money. Don't forget whatever happens you'll be wrong."

—Harry Hopkins to Hallie Flanagan after she became director of the Federal Theatre Project

From the beginning, the Federal Theatre Project would be a lightning rod for controversy. Hopkins' choice of Flanagan to head the program was the first among many. She had never worked in a commercial theatre, she was an academic, possibly a reactionary and she was a woman. All fronts seemed to conspire against the success of the project. The Broadway theatres feared competition from the government program. Actor's Equity, the actors union, wanted the program to use union actors, the actors themselves doubted the quality of the early productions and many initially refused to have their names put in the programs.



Hallie Flanagan and Harry Hopkins ^

Flanagan was discouraged. The national theatres she had seen in Europe inspired her not to imitate but to create a truly American theatre. She said, "the plan was based on that of the federal government itself:

the general policy and program would be outlined in Washington but the carrying out...would rest with the states. It was not a national theatre in the European sense of a group of artists chosen to represent the government... It was rather a Federation of theatres. That was the origin and meaning of its name."

Not only did the project provide relief to unemployed artists, it provided affordable entertainment for the general public in cities and rural areas across the country. In the four years it existed, from 1935–1939, the Federal Theatre performed for audiences of an estimated fifteen million people. At its height it employed 15,500 theater workers.

It had a wide variety of units designed to suit the needs and interests of the regions of the country in which the performance was located. There was a vaudeville unit, the marionette unit, a circus unit, as well as the classical theatre, children's theatres, the Negro theatre and experimental theatre. Flanagan also instituted a feature called "The Living Newspaper" designed to present current events in theatrical format. "The Living Newspaper" as well as specific shows such as *The Cradle Will Rock* and even a children's show called *The Revolt of the Beavers* would come under fire by the federal government as being potentially subversive. Flanagan herself would appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal administration started numerous social programs to alleviate unemployment during the Great Depression. The Works Progress Administration (later the Works Projects Administration) was one such program. Harry Hopkins was Roosevelt's pick to head the WPA, which like most relief programs, initially focused on manual labor. Hopkins wanted to employ the many out of work artists, actors, writers and musicians as well. He called upon former Grinnell classmate **HALLIE FLANAGAN** to head the newly formed **FEDERAL THEATRE PROJECT**.

Flanagan was head of Experimental Theatre at Vassar and the first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship, which she had used to study theater throughout Europe.

^ Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Hallie Flanagan >

The Federal Theatre Project

Arts Embattled

"I never blamed my folks for Kenosha—Kenosha blamed my parents for me."

—Orson Welles



▲ Virginia Nicholson and Orson Welles

GEORGE ORSON WELLES was born in Kenosha, Wisconsin on May 15, 1915. His father, Richard, was a sometime successful businessman and an alcoholic. Beatrice Welles, his dynamic mother had a fair reputation as a concert pianist and a beauty. Young Orson slipped into his mother's adult world and Orson lived up to her expectations, amazing adults with his precocity. When his mother and father separated his mother's lover, Dr. Maurice Bernstein, whom tellingly Orson called "Dadda," became something of a father to Orson further encouraging Orson's self-image as a young genius. After Beatrice Welles' death in 1924, Richard Welles and Maurice Bernstein shared an uneasy sort of dual custody of Welles. Orson was enrolled in the Todd School where he flourished in its progressive academic setting. In headmaster, Roger Hill and his wife, Orson found yet another set of parental figures inclined to give him great latitude and encourage his genius. In a short time Orson took control of the school theater and its productions.

Welles' own accounts of his early life are varied and conflicting. Welles was an actor who believed keeping details of his life secret enhanced his varied performances. The child-genius image coupled with his native storytelling ability became the hallmark of how he portrayed himself. He enjoyed remaining a cipher and delighted in giving conflicting accounts of himself to his interviewers. Welles' accounts of his travels with his father were impossibly fantastic. He once recounted a trip to Germany where he saw a funny little man with a Charlie Chaplin moustache. In his tales of his adolescence he repeatedly describes himself as the passive object of sexual interest for both men and women but especially older men.

Orson Welles met **VIRGINIA NICHOLSON** when she was an apprentice actress at Woodstock, a summer theatre affiliated with the Todd school. They married in 1934, first secretly then publicly six weeks later. The bride's wealthy parents were not enthusiastic over Welles' career choice. Virginia's father, Leo Nicholson, urged Orson to become a stockbroker, an offer Welles quickly refused.

The couple moved to New York City where finances were tight, and their early concerns over money put a strain on the young marriage. Virginia attempted to be an artistic partner in the marriage. John Houseman recalls meeting Virginia at a business meeting with Orson. She was, "a delicious child with blond, reddish hair and ivory skin." She performed some minor radio roles and volunteered on some of Orson's plays. Several sources credit her with suggesting setting *Macbeth* in Haiti.

Welles' reputation continued to grow. His first professional directing project, the so-called "Voodoo *Macbeth*," was a stunning success for the Negro Unit of the Federal Theatre Project. He was twenty years old. Welles and Houseman transferred to Project 891, the classical unit of the FTP, where, as the title character and director of *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*, he received further acclaim. Welles' radio work brought financial security but the marriage was failing. Even the birth of daughter, Christopher, could not draw Welles to the family life. His fanatical work ethic and his compulsive womanizing led to the couple's separation and ultimate divorce in 1940.

Orson Welles as Faustus >



The Lives of Orson Welles

It's All True

"It (*The Cradle Will Rock*) was described by its author, Marc Blitzstein as a Labor Opera—in a style that falls somewhere between realism, romance, satire, vaudeville, comic-strip, Gilbert and Sullivan, Brecht and agitprop." —John Houseman, *The Night the Audience Walked*

In the weeks before *The Cradle Will Rock* was to open, the leaders in Washington D.C. became nervous. The WPA was scheduled to ask congress for the renewal of its funding. It was feared that in the current climate of violent steel strikes a play about a steel strike would be the excuse needed by opponents of the WPA to cut its funding. Hallie Flanagan supported the project but the WPA superseded her authority. Houseman recalled, "Her loyalty to her people was unwavering. When the ruckus broke out over Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock*, she neither reproached us nor tried to dissuade Orson Welles and myself from our defiance of the administration upon whose support the continuation of the WPA Federal Theatre depended."

On June 12, 1937, the WPA issued an order that no new play, musical performance or art exhibit was to open until further notice. By June 14, WPA security guards occupied the Maxine Elliott Theatre to make sure no government property was removed. The theatre doors were padlocked. The WPA called organizations that had bought tickets to tell them *The Cradle Will Rock* had been canceled. Welles and Houseman were defiant and called their audience back to tell them it would be performed as scheduled on the 17th. In three days an extraordinary number of events occurred. A theatre broker searched for a space. The musicians and actors unions informed Houseman and Welles that their members would require new contracts at union rates that Welles and Houseman could not afford to pay. Undisturbed, they announced to the press who had gathered at the theater that there would be a performance (without musicians or actors) of Marc Blitzstein playing and performing *The Cradle Will Rock*. Jean Rosenthal, who had been sent to find a piano called in at 6:00 PM with a piano in a truck. She was told to keep the driver circling because they hadn't yet secured a theatre. At 7:30 PM actors Hiram Sherman, Will Geer and Howard Da Silva performed songs from the show for the crowd gathered outside.

At 7:40 PM the theatre broker arrived with the key to the Venice Theatre. Members of the press paid the one hundred dollar rental fee. Rosenthal called in (the truck driver was getting angry) and was told to take the piano to the Venice Theatre. She persuaded members of the neighboring firehouse to load the piano into the theatre. The actors had been told they could go to the theatre as spectators but it was not required. Much of the audience walked the twenty-one blocks

between the Maxine Elliot and the Venice; the crowd grew larger as they walked. At the theatre, Hallie Flanagan joined the audience. An Italian flag was torn down to the resounding cheers from the audience. Welles and Houseman thanked the audience and repeatedly told them the change of venue was not a political act. At 9:00 PM Marc Blitzstein set the scene and began to play and sing. Olive Stanton joined in from the audience.

The other actors followed suit and performed in all areas of the house—but not on the stage—to abide by a loophole in Equity rules. They played to packed houses for eleven more performances and then stopped to comply with WPA regulations that did not allow the actors to be absent for more than twelve days. Welles and Houseman were fired.



▲ Rehearsing *The Cradle Will Rock*



▲ Rehearsing *The Cradle Will Rock*

The Cradle Will Rock

Down Will Come Baby



May 14, 1937
The Steel Workers Organization Committee at Chicago's Republic Steel Corporation authorized a strike call if negotiations for a new labor agreement failed.

May 20, 1937
Republic Steel had

\$3,296.50 worth of tear gas delivered to its Chicago plants.

May 22, 1937
Officers in the Police department learned of the impending strike and visited with Republic Steel Officials. The police did not meet with Union organizers.



May 26, 1937
11:00 AM—A strike was called and workers at the One Hundred and Eighteenth Street and Burley Avenue plant.

4:00–6:00 PM—Union workers walked out of the plant and assembled at the gate.

6:30 PM—John Riffe, the SWOC representative in charge of the Republic Steel lodge, arrived. Approximately 150 police officers were already assembled at the gate.

Police Captain Mooney asked Riffe to get the men to leave because he feared a sit-down strike. When the workers did not leave Mooney told Riffe, "we are running these streets and will run them...we are going to run the plant whether you like it or not, you and the strikers too."

The group of strikers and sympathizers had grown to several hundred. Some tried to organize a picket line. Others shouted at the police, calling them "scabs" and "finks." The police forcibly

removed the strikers, arresting 23 people for unlawful assembly and disorderly conduct.

Police Captain Prendergast established three shifts of 90 patrolmen to watch the plant night and day.

May 27, 1937
Chicago Mayor Edward S. Kelly read a statement to the press saying that peaceful picketing would be permitted, but Police prevented the strikers from expanding the picket line.



Mooney to set the parameters for the pickets. Yurotovac asked for the decision in writing but police referred him to the City's attorneys.

5:00 PM—Workers held a meeting and attempted a mass picket. The group marched down Green Bay Road, but was dispersed by police before reaching the plant. Police fired three shots. Six strikers were arrested.

May 29, 1937
Limited picketing was permitted in front of the steel plant.

Captain Mooney heard from anonymous sources that the strikers planned to march into the plant on Sunday, May 30. He increased the number of officers on patrol for Sunday afternoon to 264.

May 30, 1937
3:00 PM—Two prominent union leaders delivered speeches from the back



of a truck. 1,000 to 2,500 people were estimated in attendance including women and children.



reached the plant they faced a line of police.

Accounts become conflicting at this point. Police claimed the intent of the strikers was to break through the police line and enter the plant. Strikers claimed they were protesting police interference and their right to establish a picket line.

Police said the picketers were armed with rocks and sticks. A shot was fired, or in some accounts several shots. The crowd began to move away. Tear gas was deployed.



Police claimed they were armed only regulation weapons but photographs show they carried white axe handles believed to have been provided by Republic Steel.

Two young men carrying American flags led the group toward the plant.

Police widened their line so that when the marchers reached the plant they faced a line of police.

Tear gas was used on the strikers but police department inventory showed none of their stock of tear gas had been used. It appeared to be the tear gas received by Republic Steel ten days earlier.



Coroner's reports showed that most of the gunshot entrance wounds were on the backs of the dead.



June 30, 1937
The Senate Committee on Education and Labor began three days of hearings investigating violations of free speech and labor rights in the Memorial Day Incident.

July 22, 1937
The Senate Committee published its report finding that the picketers did not intend to use

force to enter the plant. It also concluded that the police department was at fault for its actions and that loss of life could have been avoided.



The Memorial Day Incident of 1937

Strike

JOHN HOUSEMAN was born Jacques Haussmann in 1902 in Bucharest, Romania. His foreign name made him feel ostracized during adolescent years in England. After college, he went to work in his father's grain business in the U.S. and went bankrupt in the depression. Houseman turned first to translating, then directing and producing plays. In 1935, he became head of the Federal Theatre Project's Negro Unit after then director, Rose McClendon, became ill and died. She suggested Houseman as her replacement. He asked Orson Welles to direct a production of *Macbeth*. The so-called "Voodoo *Macbeth*" was set in Haiti and featured an entirely black cast. Houseman and Welles had a tumultuous friendship and collaboration both during Project 891 and later with the Mercury Theatre, initially created to take over the production of *The Cradle Will Rock*. Their relationship was irreparably broken after an infamous fight over the authorship of *Citizen Kane*. Houseman went on to produce numerous films while continuing to make significant contributions to the stage, particularly as artistic director of the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, CT and Director of Drama at Julliard. He won an academy award for best supporting actor for the 1973 film, *The Paper Chase*.

v John Houseman and Marc Blitzstein



"If Olive had not risen on cue in that box I doubt the rest of us would have had the nerve to stand up and carry on." —Hiram Sherman, actor, *The Cradle Will Rock*

Little is known about **OLIVE STANTON**, the relief actress hired through the Federal Theatre Project to play the part of the Moll in *The Cradle Will Rock*. In John Houseman's account of their pivotal performance at the Venice Theatre he makes it clear that she was an actress with everything to lose. She was, he said, "a frail, red-haired girl in a bright green dress...glassy-eyed with fear...she and her mother were entirely dependent on the small weekly check she was receiving from the WPA."

"I can name a few who seem to sort of disrupt things once in a while. Whether or not they are Communists I don't know. One chap we have currently, I think is Howard Da Silva. He always seems to have something to say at the wrong time." —Robert Taylor

Born on May 4, 1909 in Cleveland, Ohio, **HOWARD DA SILVA** spent two years of his life working in a steel mill before becoming an actor. He starred in numerous plays including Clifford Odets' play *Waiting for Lefty*. He left New York for Hollywood where he appeared in films such as, *Strange Alibi* and *The Blue Dahlia*. He was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee on the strength of testimony from "friendly witness," Robert Taylor. Da Silva refused to answer any of HUAC's questions and was blacklisted; he did not appear in any films until 1962, after the ban was lifted.

Born in New York City in 1912, **JEAN ROSENTHAL** was one of the first women to gain a reputation in the field of lighting design. In 1930, she became a technical assistant at the Neighborhood Playhouse where she was briefly a student and where she began a lifetime of collaboration with Martha Graham and her dancers. She studied, scenic, costume and lighting design at Yale between 1930–1933. By 1935 she was technical assistant for Unit 891 where she met Welles and Houseman. She joined them when they founded the Mercury Theatre but stayed in New York when the pair went to Hollywood to make films. Rosenthal designed over 300 Broadway shows, started a theatrical supply company, and authored a book on lighting design.



^ Orson Welles and John Houseman

The Players