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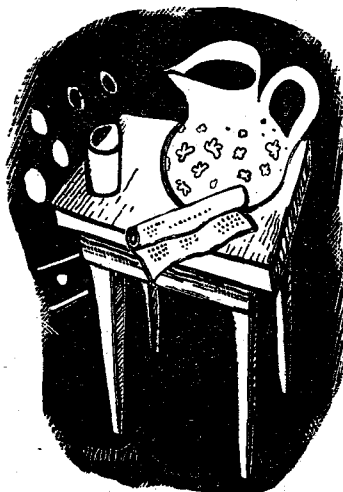
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THEATER

THE 1938 biennial convention of the New Theatre League was so much like others in this broad people's movement that it would be trite to use the statistics of the credentials committee to establish the fact that color and life abounded there. The plain fact is that in New York City, from June 10 to 12, delegates to the convention met, exhibited their wares, discussed their trade, and planned for the future.

Friday night the convention opened at the Nora Bayes Theatre on Forty-fourth St., near Broadway. Lem Ward, director of "... one-third of a nation ..." was chairman and Albert Maltz the main speaker. Two short plays followed, both presented by Negro units of the League. First was Alice Ware's *Mighty Wind A Blowin'*, done by the Theatre Progressive of New Haven, Conn. The play, which won the George Pierce Baker Award at Yale, dealt with Negro and white unity among sharecroppers. A Negro family, with a background of tenant servility, is a bit worried about the militant trade-unionism of one of its members, and their concern seems justified until he shows them the power of organization in a way they cannot fail to understand. An evicted white cropper is forced to take food for himself and first aid for his son from the Negro family. And the result of the cooperation is a united front against the landlord, which saves the union-minded son from the chain gang and his parents from eviction. All this takes place in a half-hour and is rather a strain on one's credulity, but the dialogue is so authentic and the whole production so spiritedly executed that the hasty conversion seems less embarrassing.

In the intermission Lem Ward again took over and first introduced Millen Brand, who spoke to the delegates, not irrelevantly, on Washington's attitude toward the arms embargo against the Spanish government. Richard Wright, Anna Louise Strong, Marc Blitzstein, and others were introduced.



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Then the lights dimmed and a young Negro, carrying a suitcase with the words Harlem Suitcase Theatre illuminated, strode onto the stage and announced that his outfit was so called because it was portable enough to move from one engagement to another with only a suitcase to carry its equipment. The play that was to follow, he said, was about himself and was called *Don't You Want to Be Free?*, written by Langston Hughes. What followed was an exciting, impressionistic panorama of Negro life from the beginning of the American slave-trade to date—June 10, 1938. Every symbol the Negroes have known in those three hundred years was brought into play—the African tom-tom, the slave block, the overseer's lash, and the lynch rope—all of these and more, with episodes built around them, comments on their significance in the culture of an exploited race. But best of all, in my opinion, was a sequence of blues songs, sung and acted by Earl Jones, Edith Jones, and Moody Scrivens. I think the word should be spread that Langston Hughes, in addition to being a fine poet, can write blues with all the tenderness and plaint that *genre* can possibly take care of. His *Lonely Blues*, *Morning After Blues*, *Family Blues*, and *Weary Blues* were strong wine even in a time when Benny Goodman and swing have largely replaced W. C. Handy and his sorrowful melodies. But *Don't You Want to Be Free?* went on to a brisker tune, the marching song of the Negro people, knowing where their strength lies and who their friends are.

Saturday and Sunday the group convened at the New Labor Theatre. The central point of discussion was the relationship between the League and the trade unions. Reports from member groups told of their performances before the workers in the cotton fields, before pickets in Akron, before workers everywhere. A delegate from the Detroit New Theatre League's "sitdown circuit" told of performances a year ago last winter, when auto workers watched *Waiting for Lefty* from disembodied Fisher bodies. Delegates from Chicago, undismayed by the Federal Theatre's experience with *Trojan Incident*, told how they were rewriting Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* with a labor angle. Newark, which played *Waiting for Lefty* three times in one night recently, is at present working on a show called *Jersey City Scandals* and is sponsoring a prize contest for an anti-Hague play.

The delegates voted to sponsor a National Theatre Congress, similar to the writers' and artists' congresses, to be held sometime next year, probably in New York. They talked of drives for new plays, more directors, better theaters—an extension, in other words, of the work the New Theatre League has been carrying on for the past few years. This is the organization that first gave us *Waiting for Lefty*, *Bury the Dead*, *The Cradle Will Rock*, *Transit*, and a good many others. A continuation of that tradition would be satisfactory, but in its 1938 convention it promised a good deal more.

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Country Bride is the story of the courtship of a tractor driver and a blonde beauty of the women's shock brigade who gathers the harvest behind his sputtering steed. After the completely Socialist custom of picking film stars from mill and field, the leads are Boris Bezgin and Maria Ladynina. You have never seen them before, and you may have to strain your eyes in crowd shots to see them again. They are as anonymous and genuine as the happy people of the "sunny South" of the Soviet Union.

We have seen many Russian films of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the wars of intervention, and the immediate post-revolutionary time. Here is the picture which was awarded the Order of Lenin as the best film of life in the Soviet Union today. It is a film of celebration, of victory, of peace. Man has been released for his basic struggle against nature. He has something to sing about! The gay peasants of the Ukraine sing of work, of love, with the broad Cossack comedy that we know from Gogol and their folk songs.

The picture is as big and round and full of sun and shouting as life may be where man has freed himself of his chains. These Breugelesque women, striding barefoot through the stubble, with their white teeth shining, have the truth that only the anthropological films of Robert Flaherty have conveyed before. The earth from which they glean the bread of the Soviet Union in the world's greatest granary is always present in the picture; how close to nature, in harmony with the seasons, the people live. The camera gets excited about the theme. It gets above acres of wheat, shows us trucks and tractors hurrying over the bright hills, composes hundreds of harvesters against the landscape. Then it closes in on a group of women with apple cheeks, sheaves of binder wheat across their backs, shouting derision at the unfortunate tractor driver who has fallen behind their killing pace.

The plot is a practical and comic story of the new morality of Socialism. A conniving bookkeeper of the collective, who wants to marry the heroine because of her great industry, tells each of the lovers that the other is a shirker. This threatens the course of true love. The plotter is laughably exposed in a broad comedy sequence, involving an ancient

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