

Kidding on the level: the reactionary project of *I'd Rather Be Right*

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Abstract

An analysis of the text and reception of the neglected 1937 Rodgers and Hart musical I'd Rather Be Right, positioning it as a reactionary response to President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. The composer and lyricist, along with librettists Kaufman and Hart, exploited a pronounced strain of anti-Roosevelt sentiment among the wealthier strata of the Broadway audience. Targets in the show included such conservative bêtes noires as high taxes, Social Security, pro-labor legislation, and the Federal Theatre Project. Even the casting of the patriotic and popular George M. Cohan in the role of FDR undermined the president thanks to the actor's history of anti-labor stances and allegiances with Roosevelt's enemies. Contrary, then, to the presupposition that all Broadway musicals bear a liberal bias, this essay aims to reveal I'd Rather Be Right as a fundamentally right-wing cultural product.

Keywords

US Musical Theatre
 1930s
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 Great Depression
 Franklin Roosevelt

Most accounts of the 1937 musical *I'd Rather Be Right*, both contemporary and subsequent, have echoed Brooks Atkinson's initial judgement that its lampooning of Franklin Roosevelt is 'affectionate' and 'tender' and that it is a tepid and ultimately ineffectual attempt at political satire (Atkinson 1937).¹ Such assessments tend to stress the sympathetic aspects of the play's fictional Roosevelt as a character, especially as portrayed by its charismatic and beloved star, George M. Cohan. Also, the unquestioned liberal credentials of its authors – librettists George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart, songwriters Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart – have mitigated any seemingly anti-Democratic stances. To read *I'd Rather Be Right* today, though, without the influence of such performative ameliorations or biographical assumptions, is to discover a text full of pointed and relentless criticism of the president and his administration. One reason this has been overlooked is that commentators have focused more on the portrayal of Roosevelt the man – who comes off in the script as a well-meaning grandfatherly figure surrounded by dubious advisors – rather than on the representation of his policies. Instead of a simple *ad hominem* attack the authors offer quite the opposite: the story of a good man misled by bad ideas.

This direct engagement with the ideological foundations of the New Deal itself makes *I'd Rather Be Right* an unusually politically sophisticated popular entertainment, and yet its consistent rejection of 1930s progressivism positions it as something even more unusual: a right-wing musical. Read in the context of political and economic debates of the time, the play's text consistently echoes conservative arguments. An investigation of

1. Musical theatre historians explicitly echoing this view in more recent assessments include Bach (2001), Julian (1998), McCabe (1973), Mordden (2005), and Roost (2001, 2004).

the show's reception, as reported in the contemporary press, also confirms anti-Roosevelt reactions, at least by those already predisposed against him. Whether Democrat or Republican the target audience on Broadway was always a wealthy one, at a time when wealth itself was targeted by New Deal tax policies. Reception, then, I argue, was shaped more by class than by party affiliation. The authors themselves wrote and produced the play from a standpoint of considerable wealth and success in their own careers, aligning them with this constituency financially and, therefore, problematizing their relation to the Roosevelt reforms, despite whatever professed political positions of theirs to the contrary. The encroachment they felt from 1930s progressivism on their own business – in the form of the Federal Theater Project and the Labor Theater movement – also reveals itself in *I'd Rather Be Right*, which both mocks and borrows from this non-commercial realm. And, finally, conservative reaction was performed in the show via the politically weighted presence of George M. Cohan, which, far from depoliticizing the play, contributed its own right-wing ideological content to the production, which was at one point even explicitly interpolated into the play's text.

Through close examination of the text of *I'd Rather Be Right*, an exploration of its political and economic contexts, and a reconstruction of its performance on Broadway, this essay rediscovers the piece as a rare and uniquely explicit conservative reaction in the American theatre against the New Deal and its emergent welfare state.

Synopsis

I'd Rather Be Right opened at the Alvin Theatre on 2 November 1937 and closed on 9 July 1938, before embarking on a year-long national tour. Its Broadway run was 290 performances. The title *I'd Rather Be Right* refers to the famous words of nineteenth-century perennial losing candidate Henry Clay, who said he would 'rather be right than president' (Rodgers 1995: 184). Fittingly, the play's Roosevelt finds himself repeatedly in the wrong. Billed as 'a musical revue', the script is episodic and the songs eclectic in style (Kaufman and Hart 1937: title page). There is a clear plot, though, which hinges on the plight of two young lovers, Peggy and Phil, whose hopes for marriage are frustrated by the economic realities of the Great Depression. One night, on the Fourth of July, in a moment of magical coincidence, President Roosevelt suddenly appears, listens to their concerns, and vows to balance the federal budget just to help them. He takes them on a series of adventures through the corridors of power – the Cabinet, the Supreme Court – as he attempts various comical solutions to the nation's fiscal crisis, including asking all American women to forego make-up. As one after another of these plans fails, Roosevelt also encounters a series of citizens disgruntled with his New Deal policies. By the end, the beleaguered president, still determined to help his new young friends, vows that only an additional term in office will give him enough time to overcome the obstacles to balancing the budget and restoring happiness to his countrymen.

The story's meandering directions allow for a musical score ranging from patriotic fanfare ('We're Going to Balance the Budget') to Viennese waltz ('Spring in Vienna'). The topicality of many songs (such as the Gilbert-and-Sullivan homage 'Off the Record' and the swinging 'Gold

Digger' number 'Take and Take and Take') have since fated them to obscurity in the Rodgers and Hart catalogue. But one ballad, 'Have You Met Miss Jones' (sung by Phil about Peggy), atypically romantic for this barbed satire, soon became a standard. One reason the score is not well remembered is that its songs are so well integrated into the particulars of the story and political themes. Such cohesiveness became a Rodgers hallmark with *Oklahoma!* six years later, but *I'd Rather Be Right* shows that even before his collaboration with Oscar Hammerstein II he strove for a close coordination between music and libretto (Roost 2004).

The authors

Although all four of the authors had a body of politically progressive work behind them, the year of *I'd Rather Be Right*, 1937, found them all at a particularly prosperous point in their careers. Kaufman had written three overtly political musicals with George and Ira Gershwin and co-librettist Morrie Ryskind, starting with *Strike Up The Band* (1927). *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) and its sequel *Let 'Em Eat Cake* (1933) followed the adventures of a fictional president from election through deposal at the hands of a fascist revolution. Moss Hart wrote the text for *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), a Broadway revue with music by Irving Berlin commenting on current events. Rodgers and Hart's 1937 *Babes in Arms* addressed issues of racism and collective living. None of them ever disavowed liberal politics personally, but their increased material wealth – in a time of general economic hardship – might well have made any identification with the Depression's 'forgotten man' (as Roosevelt dubbed the victims of poverty) and their personal stake in the New Deal more remote. Kaufman had shown some inclination toward political activism early on; he was instrumental in the strengthening of the Dramatists' Guild in the 1920s, and when xenophobia rose in the early 1930s he lobbied Congress to lift immigration restrictions on foreign-born actors. In a 1933 *Nation* piece he even appeared to boast of having voted against Franklin Roosevelt the previous year from the left, in favour of Socialist Norman Thomas (Goldstein 1979: 219).² Four years later, though, Kaufman was not just a playwright but a celebrity director and producer as well. Instead of *The Nation* he was now appearing in *Life* photo-spreads of the lavish weekend parties he hosted at his new Pennsylvania farmhouse (Goldstein 1979: 281–85). Hart, who had bought a similar property nearby, started appearing with Kaufman in upscale magazine ads for New England Life Insurance (Meredith 1974: 554); his biographer Steven Bach points out that although his script for the 1933 revue *As Thousands Cheer* featured 'sharp, biting satire', by 1937, as a result of his business partnership with Kaufman and other commissions, 'something was mellowing: the times or the teller of the tale, now an investor, an entrepreneur, a ticket-taker' (Bach 2001: 166).³ After *You Can't Take it With You* (1936) netted extraordinary Broadway box-office receipts, a significant movie sale, and a Pulitzer Prize, Kaufman joked that after working with many other co-writers he was especially looking forward to his next collaboration with Hart: 'It's a case of gelt by association' (Meredith 1974: 542).

Although Kaufman and Hart seemed to have remained publicly silent about their politics during *I'd Rather Be Right*, their colleagues Rodgers and

2. According to Goldstein, the article (*The Nation*, 12 April 1933: 403) was a satiric mock-Socratic dialogue with co-writer Morrie Ryskind meant to promote *Let 'Em Eat Cake*.
3. Goldstein (1979: 270–71) indicates that Moss Hart was still hoping for a progressive project by 1936, specifically Dalton Trumbo's novel, *Washington Jitters*, which he brought to Kaufman for a possible adaptation, but they soon abandoned the idea.

4. \$100,000 in 1937 had the purchasing power of \$1,333,487.49 in 2005 dollars (Morgan Friedman 2000).
5. For a political analysis of *Babes in Arms* see Most (2004: 66–100).

Lorenz Hart (not related to Moss) remained outspoken Democrats. ‘Composer Rodgers voted for Roosevelt in the last [1936] election,’ reported the *New York Post* (Mok 1937). “‘I have the utmost confidence in him,” he said. “If the script hadn’t treated him with sympathy, I don’t believe I could have made myself write the score”’ (Mok 1937). Rodgers’s later collaborations with Oscar Hammerstein II would reinforce his image as a socially conscious composer, taking on in their musicals such controversial issues as racial prejudice, but notably avoiding any direct engagement with contemporary domestic politics. Lorenz Hart comes across in print as an even more impassioned liberal, claiming an unashamedly Democratic agenda for the new musical:

Mr Hart thought the play had been grossly misunderstood by critics and public alike. ‘They don’t seem to grasp’, he told your astonished reporters, ‘that the show is propaganda for a Third Term. I’m a Third-Term man. Watch my words – this play is going to help. It’s marvelous publicity for Roosevelt.’

(Mok 1937)

Although Rodgers and Hart may have helped the piece retain, as they said, ‘sympathy’ and ‘publicity’ for Roosevelt the man, the overall text of *I’d Rather Be Right* nevertheless skewered all he stood for. Hence the ‘astonished’ reporter above adds: ‘This, mind you, from the man who wrote this lyric’, and proceeds to sample some of Hart’s contributions to the show (Mok 1937). As the existence of such an interview already implies, an ambivalence surrounded this project as to the political motives of its creators, despite any professions of loyalty to the president personally.

Rodgers and Hart, too, had risen in class status by 1937 after a professional drought in the early 1930s following their early success in the 1920s. By Meryle Secrest’s calculations, a string of successful productions plus sheet-music sales of popular songs from those scores, was netting the pair \$100,000 a year each, making them practically millionaires at the time, when that figure is adjusted for inflation (Secrest 2001: 181).⁴ Their show immediately preceding *I’d Rather Be Right* may have been the outwardly liberal *Babes in Arms* (1937) – which addressed racism and government welfare specifically, in addition to the overall crisis of the Depression – but in comparison to the more daringly leftist plays coming from the Group Theatre, Federal Theater Project, and other labour-sponsored companies, the politics of Rodgers and Hart’s work were necessarily circumscribed by the commercial Broadway environment they worked in and profited from.⁵

The audience

Although *I’d Rather Be Right* was conceived of and produced by professed Democrats, and apparently enjoyed by audiences across traditional partisan lines in relatively liberal Manhattan, an accurate reception analysis must focus on ideological and class distinctions rather than assumptions about party affiliation. (The blurring of party identification in New York at the time was evident in the re-election on the very day the play opened of Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, running as both a Democrat and a Republican on his ‘Fusion’ ticket.) As a commercial Broadway product(ion) the play

served not just aesthetic tastes but market interests – namely, providing entertainment to the wealthiest sector of New York and American high society, a sector not uniformly in support of Franklin Roosevelt. A 1936 Gallup poll found that ‘while 53 per cent of potential voters favored Roosevelt’s reelection, only 31 per cent of those listed in *Who’s Who* did’ (Kennedy 1999: 283). Indeed many names out of *Who’s Who* attended the opening night of *I’d Rather Be Right* on Broadway, leading George Jean Nathan to dub it ‘the biggest opening since the Grand Canyon’ (quoted in Green 1971: 148). The metaphor turned out to be especially apt given the gulf between the classes on display along with their political sympathies. The announced top ticket price of \$4.40 was already relatively high even for Broadway (Rodgers and Hart’s concurrent hit *Babes in Arms* was \$3.85 (Green 1971: 142); *The Cradle Will Rock* was advertised at just 55 cents by the Federal Theater and then sold at only \$1.65 even on Broadway (Green 1971: 144)), but opening-night top tickets for *I’d Rather Be Right* were \$5.50, with scalpers and ticket brokers asking for as much as \$100.⁶ News photo-spreads displayed throngs of people pushed aside by police as those in formal wear proceeded onto the red carpet. One caption pointedly summed up the conflict (perhaps with a political play on words) as between ‘“I’d Rather Be Right” and Those Who Got Left ... Out’ (Anon 1937b). Columnist Lucius Beebe outdid Nathan’s hyperbole, invoking an era of more gruesome class violence by suggesting, somewhat distastefully, ‘Probably no theatrical event has occasioned such civic tumult since the Astor Place Riots’ (Beebe 1937). Indeed, according to Stanley Green (1971:148), ‘two squadrons of mounted police’ were required.

Things were barely more harmonious inside the theatre, where anti-Roosevelt sentiment was vocal. The left-leaning critic Richard Watts, Jr. posited that the authors ‘couldn’t have arranged anything more satirical than the sight of the ermined high-hatted first-night audience, in costly orchestra seats, applauding the suggestion that the rich had already been taxed out of existence’ (Watts 1937, 14 November). The *Journal of Commerce* noted the presence of ‘many millionaires’ who had come ‘to publicly show their opposition to F.D. and his policies’ (Colby 1937). At some points the performance seems to have become *about* the audience more than the rehearsed text as the piece took on a life of its own as a kind of national Rorschach test. At the end, for instance, when the play’s President Roosevelt asks for an unprecedented third term (long before the real Roosevelt did), Heywood Broun observed the divide evident in the last election being played out across the class-stratified seating in the auditorium: ‘In the gallery there was applause, sporadic to be sure, and possibly playful. It fell upon stony ground in the orchestra, and after a few seconds hissing began. The men and women who hissed weren’t fooling. This was for real’ (Broun 1937). Referring to the only two states Roosevelt did not win in the election, Broun concludes the real-life president ‘can easily afford to let the orchestra go to Maine and Vermont as long as he carries the gallery. The gallery gods always have constituted and always will constitute old Vox Populi’ (Broun 1937). Such early disagreement within the audience over how to receive *I’d Rather Be Right* hinted at a continued ambivalence about its true politics, regardless of what its authors may have professed. This battle of boos and cheers did not stop after opening

6. A \$100 ticket in 1937 would amount to over \$1300 in 2005 dollars (Morgan Friedman 2000).

7. Roosevelt was constantly in battle with the Supreme Court, who struck down many early provisions of the New Deal.

night. Alisa Roost cites a *New York Post* article from 9 June 1938 – more than six months into the play's run – claiming the speech calling for a Roosevelt third term still 'generally receives hisses from the lower floor, answered by applause from the balcony' (Roost 2004: 27).

Some critics had their doubts right away about the seemingly liberal writers' intentions for their show. Watts's hedging conclusion was that it was 'by no means vicious in its attack, but there can be little doubt of its bias' (Watts 1937, 3 November). Sidney Whipple of the *New York World-Telegram* considered it 'daring' in giving 'voice to many sentiments that the economic royalists have been thinking for, lo, these many years' (Whipple 1937). The *New Masses* magazine, of course, went further, linking *I'd Rather Be Right* to oppositional forces in the corporate media of the time:

F.D.R. may be the hero of the New Deal or the *bête noir* of reaction, but he is certainly not a figure of fun, the new pose being struck for him by the anti-administration press. They haven't been able to kill him off at the polls with arguments, so a concerted campaign to make a capering fool of him is now going on. Whether they know it or not, the authors of *I'd Rather Be Right* have subscribed to this idea.

(*'Sights and Sounds'* 1937)

Perhaps only the militant leftist readership of *New Masses* could see that the 'fun' surface likeability of the fictional protagonist masked a more serious opposition – of quite serious 'arguments' – underneath.

The text

Indeed, whether they knew it or not, Kaufman and Hart (and to a lesser degree Rodgers and Hart) certainly give a platform in their piece to many of the charges that Republicans levelled in the presidential campaign of 1936. Even though the president ended up winning in a landslide in that election with over 60 per cent of the popular vote and an Electoral College tally of 523 to 8, the race was bitterly contested. The *New York Times*, the morning after election day, summed up the Republican strategy as focusing on: "dictatorship" and general accusations of administration designs against individual liberty; waste, extravagance, political manipulation of relief and spoilsmanship generally; and contempt for the Constitution' ('Roosevelt Sweeps The Nation' 1936). All said, 'accusations' are explicitly dramatized in *I'd Rather Be Right*, from the rampant cronyism and patronage indulged in by its cartoonish Cabinet members to the scolding, identically bearded old men of the Supreme Court always ready to pounce on the president whenever he breathes word of a new law.⁷ Election-year charges of 'designs against individual liberty' mostly came from business sectors in reference to the New Deal's increased tax burden on personal wealth and corporate earnings, as well as regulation of labour practices ('Roosevelt Sweeps The Nation' 1936). When *I'd Rather Be Right* opened nearly a year to the day after the election, these issues were still very current and they attract the play's most pointed political critiques.

A conservative position on these debates is encoded in the libretto's very structure. As a hook on which to hang their isolated set pieces, Kaufman and Hart introduce a plot that seems dramaturgically perfunctory unless it

is read as political allegory: the marriage of a young couple, Peggy and Phil, is jeopardized by Phil's boss's refusal to give him a raise – which he will not do until the government eliminates its budget deficit, thus fostering, presumably, a more favourable business climate including lower taxes. The lovers, who compare themselves to the tragically thwarted Romeo and Juliet, are foiled not by the boss, who is depicted as powerless, but directly by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the profligate spending required by it.

The play's debate over the federal budget mirrors very closely the economic discourse of 1937, when, after what seemed like a period of recovery from the early Depression, Roosevelt found himself presiding over a downturn, what Republicans dubbed the 'Roosevelt Recession' (Kennedy 1999: 350). 'In May 1937', historian David Kennedy notes, 'the economic recovery had crested, well short of 1929 levels of employment. By August the economy was once again sliding measurably downward; in September, rapidly downward. In October the stock market cracked [...] Corporate profits plunged nearly 80 per cent' (Kennedy 1999: 350). Roosevelt's opponents – most prominently, business leaders – were eager to claim that these alarming developments finally exposed the threat posed by his attempted state regulation of the economy. Kennedy explains:

One school of thought laid the blame for the recession on the administration's antibusiness policies or, somewhat more benignly, on the inevitable uncertainties brewed by the New Deal's 'regime change' in the rules of the economic game. Repeated budget deficits, escalating regulatory burdens, threats of higher taxes, mounting labor costs, and, most important, *persistent anxiety about what further provocations to business the New Deal had in store*, so the argument ran, sapped the confidence of investors and inhibited the commitment of capital to new enterprises.

(Kennedy 1999: 351 [emphasis added])

In *I'd Rather Be Right*, Kaufman and Hart strategically personalize and displace this corporate 'anxiety' onto the average, naïve, and sympathetic *inamorati*. Phil, for example, laments: 'It just seems you can't count on anything any more. It takes the heart out of you. Nobody knowing where they're going – what's happening. The budget, the budget!' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 10). In keeping with the play's allegorical tone, such plaintive chants seem, then, magically to call forth the president himself to the stage, as if to be called to account. 'We can't get married unless I get a raise,' Phil pressures him, 'and the Boss won't give me the raise until he knows what *you're* going to do. He says you've got to balance the budget before he does anything' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 16). The central reasoning here – basically that the boss is right and the government wrong – is never refuted in the piece; in fact, this very challenge is what sets the plot proper in motion by forcing Roosevelt to take responsibility for the characters' anxieties, take the pressure off the boss, and go ahead and balance the budget. The scene provides any like-minded businessman in the audience the vicarious experience of confronting the president himself. Thus the play claims a pro-corporate bias from the start, announcing an identification, as we

8. Kaufman and Hart exhibit a similar unease with taxes in *You Can't Take it With You*, when Grandpa Vanderhof is visited by the IRS for simply refusing to pay them out of principle. Steven Bach cites at least one contemporary critique of the play – in the popular theatre monthly *The Stage* (March 1937, pp. 41–44) – taking Kaufman to task for economic hypocrisy (Bach 2001: 149).

shall continue to see, with the employer over the employee and with the tax-payer over the beneficiary of tax revenues.

Considering that for most of the 1930s 'three-quarters of all families earned less than two thousand dollars per year' and 'fewer than one American household in twenty paid any federal income tax at all,' the very preoccupation with taxes in *I'd Rather Be Right* implies an upper-class perspective in itself (Kennedy 1999: 276).⁸ When asked to solve the deficit problem, the president's Cabinet is depicted as downright giddy over the prospect of levelling new taxes; 'Hot dog! New taxes, boys! Wheel!' exclaims the play's James Farley ('rubbing his hands,' no less) who, in life, was Roosevelt's campaign chairman in 1936 (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 32). The scene that most bluntly dramatizes the supposed victimization of the taxed, though, is an encounter with Phil's boss himself, Mr Maxwell, who is discovered selling balloons in the park – a mock-'forgotten man' he appears 'ragged and unshaven' with his balloons substituting for the archetypal apples or pencils famously peddled on Depression-era street corners by such downtrodden victims of capitalism (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 46). Again, the blame is put squarely on Roosevelt himself. 'I am selling balloons, Philip,' Maxwell says within deliberate earshot of the president, 'because your friend there has made it impossible for me to make a nickel out of the wholesale furniture business' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 47). No economic counter-argument is offered about other forces of capitalism that may be contributing to his plight. Instead, Roosevelt only entreats Maxwell to give Phil the raise anyway since he seems 'a mighty nice man' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 47). The boss then responds with the scene's set piece, a lecture-demonstration on the punitive effects of taxation: as he rattles off a comically exhaustive list from the federal tax code and several more state and sales taxes, he noisily pops one balloon after another until there are no more left – just as there is presumably nothing left of the sizeable 'two hundred thousand dollars' his business took in last year (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 49–51). Even when, 'thank God, I die', another blow is dealt by the estate tax – which only afflicted an especially high-income bracket (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 51). After bursting the New Deal bubble so thoroughly, Maxwell exits in a huff and leaves the president to clean up the mess.

The balloon scene was cited by many critics as a comic highlight of the evening, and it is clear that the appeal went further than just the spectacle of thirty balloons popping in rapid succession. Further into the show's run, a *New York Herald Tribune* article revisited the moment upon the occasion of the federal tax-filing deadline in March. '[S]ome rather bitter jesting is indulged in, in connection to excessive taxation', it says of the scene and 'because of its timeliness has been arousing particular sympathy' (Toohey 1938). The article continues to detail the audience response elicited from actor Florenz Ames as Maxwell:

On Monday and Tuesday nights, for instance – the eve and day of the annual tax headache it was difficult for him to talk through the applause and laughter which greeted his lines [...] Ordinarily this final sally [i.e. the line about the estate tax] is greeted with a fair volume of mingled applause and laughter,

but during the early point of last week the response was so overwhelming that it looked once or twice as if Ames might have to return and take a bow.

(Toohey 1938)

Again, the applause and sympathy would have come most from those few prosperous Americans actually paying these taxes – which even Roosevelt openly called ‘wealth taxes’ (Kennedy 1999: 275–80). These patrons may have represented only the upper 5 per cent of the country, but they usually made up a much greater share of the typical Broadway audience.

Another controversial cornerstone of the New Deal criticized both during the 1936 election and in *I’d Rather Be Right* was Social Security, which Roosevelt had successfully lobbied Congress to approve in 1935. Toward the end of Act 1, while Peggy and Phil still fret over their financial prospects, a nameless bureaucrat suddenly enters out of nowhere, ‘carrying a bulging briefcase’, handing out Social Security cards (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 68). ‘Don’t lose them,’ he tells the twenty-something couple, ‘they’ll be very valuable when you’re sixty-five years old’ (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 69). Phil’s naïve response is, ‘Well, this solves everything. Sixty-five! We only have forty years to wait,’ highlighting a perceived ineffectualness of the new government program (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 69). In this vein, Rodgers and Hart contribute the song ‘Sweet Sixty-Five’, which out of context – or based solely on the sweet and sprightly melody – may seem an affectionate anticipation of lovers growing old together. The published Random House script only summarizes the song in what seems to have been a deliberate and specific omission; however, the lyric works to echo Kaufman and Hart’s more satirical point. The opening verse reminds us that Peggy and Phil will only say ‘Farewell to fears/ In forty years,’ and, as it somewhat morbidly puns, ‘We’ll be in Heaven/ In seventy-seven/ A.D.!’ (Hart and Kimball 1995: 235). The refrain adheres to the song’s romantic narrative, avoiding any overt political reference; yet such lines mocking old age infirmity as ‘You’ll always be sure of me,/ I’ll be too weak to wander’ and ‘We’ll walk down Lovers’ Lane/ If our knees will allow’ continue to deflate the rosier retirement scenario the Roosevelt administration would probably have preferred people to associate with Social Security (Hart and Kimball 1995: 235).

The entire representation of Social Security in this brief, relatively gentle, scene may have had special critical resonance for audiences familiar with Republican attacks on the programme. In the final days of the 1936 campaign, behind in the polls, the Republican National Committee, according to the *New York Times*, arranged for the printing of anti-Social Security ‘propaganda’ on payroll envelopes ‘in an effort to win back unorganized labor,’ warning them not to let Roosevelt enact such a dangerous scheme (‘Roosevelt Sweeps The Nation’ 1936). Among the scare tactics employed in these messages was that Social Security ‘would require all participants to wear stainless steel identification dogtags around their necks and that there was “no guarantee” that workers would ever see their payroll-tax deductions [...] returned to them as old-age pensions’ (Kennedy 1999: 281–82). Since payroll deductions had begun immediately after the election – in January 1937 – the issue was especially current for the audience of *I’d Rather Be Right* that November and the doubts

planted by Republicans regarding the programme's solvency might have clouded the sunny sounding 'Sweet Sixty-Five'. The seemingly useless Social Security cards themselves might have connoted the menace of government intrusion, even if they were only paper, not steel. 'The Man', as the dispenser is called in the script, eerily identifies Phil and Peggy on sight and is next seen checking off a long list of citizens' names like a G-Man Santa Claus, bearing not gifts, but only more taxes (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 49).

The theatre

The 1935 Works Progress Administration also comes in for criticism in *I'd Rather Be Right*, in a form especially familiar to the New York theatre world. The Federal Theater Project (FTP) makes an appearance as an example of government waste and meddling where it does not belong. Immediately after Mr Maxwell's exit, 'Into the scene – suddenly, and for no apparent reason – there stroll a dozen or more beautiful girls, in gay musical-comedy costumes' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 52). Their director announces that they are 'the Federal Theater, Unit No. 864', mocking the sterile bureaucratic number-language not only of the FTP (Orson Welles famously ran Unit 891) but also of Social Security cards and many other New Deal programmes (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 53). Their nonsensical entrance turns out to reflect an equally arbitrary mission: 'Whenever we see three people together, we're supposed to give a show' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 53). No such rule existed at the FTP, of course, so what is the moment satirizing? On the one hand it recalls stereotypical labour-union regulations requiring a minimum number of *workers* at a site, not patrons, thus anticipating the anti-union barbs coming later in the show. But, more pertinently, the joke seems to reference the FTP's mission to actively bring theatre to all Americans across the whole country, performing not only in theatres but in parks, tents, and other non-traditional venues. As the director boasts to an increasingly incredulous Roosevelt, 'It's pretty hard to go any place these days without tripping over the Federal Theater. Went into my own bathroom the other day, and there they were!' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 53). In other words, from the perspective of those elite Broadway professionals Kaufman and Hart, one might as well round up any three people anywhere as your captive audience if you are performing theatre outside of proscenium houses and for free.

The result of such idealistic art run amok – to the tune of 'six hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars', it is announced – turns out to be (deliberately) inane theatre and an implied waste of taxpayer money (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 54). As Roosevelt himself is led to admit, he has no business being 'Franklin D. Ziegfeld' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 54). The troupe performs a proudly pointless Lehár homage by Rodgers and Hart called 'Spring in Vienna': 'Nothing happens', the director promises. 'It's just Spring in Vienna'; to which Kaufman and Hart's stage directions add, '*it seems the Director was quite right*' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 55). As an intended critique of the Federal Theater Program, though, this is an odd scenario. As the *New York Sun* at the time questioned, 'The Federal Theater has been accused of a good many things but not, so far as I have heard, of operetta' (Anon. 1937c). On the surface the number's target

may not have been the experimental repertoire encouraged by the FTP, but instead the utterly commercial fad of operettas still popular on Broadway throughout the early 1930s – of which Moss Hart himself was a veteran, having penned the book back in 1934 for *The Great Waltz*, an all-Strauss extravaganza. Lorenz Hart's atypically vapid lyrics for 'Spring in Vienna' wink self-deprecatingly, as well, at his own mercenary work on Hollywood's adaptation of Lehár's *The Merry Widow* (1934). At a loss over how to skewer the real Federal Theater, could these writers have fallen back on poking fun at what they already knew well?

As over-determined as the satirical focus may be here, the invocation of the Federal Theater Project at all opens a revealing window onto the impact of political theatre on Broadway at this particular historical moment, when many politically themed revues were produced and two explicitly leftist productions from the non-profit theatre achieved surprising commercial success. Earlier that summer, in June, Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* was cancelled by the FTP, but became a spectacle of protest theatre independently and reopened on Broadway on 27 November, just three weeks after *I'd Rather Be Right*. On that very same night, the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union premiered *Pins and Needles*, which turned out to be the most successful of the many 1930s topical revues, eventually running over three years on Broadway. By billing their own show as 'a musical revue', the *I'd Rather Be Right* team positioned themselves directly in relation to such shows, some of which they themselves had participated in (Kaufman and Hart 1937: title page) (Moss Hart wrote the book to *As Thousands Cheer* in 1933, for instance, where Irving Berlin songs alternated with skits about Herbert Hoover, Mahatma Gandhi and other public figures). Some even noticed in *I'd Rather Be Right* the influence of the Federal Theater itself, in such episodes as the balloon popping, which Brooks Atkinson called 'worthy of the living newspaper technique' (Atkinson 1937: 28). So interested in *Pins and Needles* were Kaufman and Hart that the following year they co-produced – and contributed sketches to anonymously – the same writers' follow-up revue, *Sing Out the News*, 'consistently antireactionary and strongly pro-FDR liberal' (Green 1971: 166). To alternate so swiftly between projects of opposite ideological slants may indicate detached professionalism, but it may also signal true political ambivalence. That they declined to put their names on any of the anti-Republican material they wrote for *Sing Out the News*, a Broadway failure, while they were openly enjoying royalties for *I'd Rather Be Right*, a hit, suggests Kaufman and Hart were torn between their self-identified liberalism and the political demands of Broadway market forces.

In helping to bring this 'uptown version' of *Pins and Needles* to Broadway (Goldstein 1979: 306), Kaufman was doing the same thing as when he hired Abe Feder, from Welles's Project 891, to design the complicated lighting for *I'd Rather Be Right* (which called for great fluidity of location within a unit set). His reaction to the emergent non-profit theatre seemed to be to mock and undermine its values on stage, while simultaneously co-opting its workings for commercial purposes – even if in service of the opposite ideological side. As a businessman, Kaufman was buying out his competitor. Malcolm Goldstein maintains that the Federal Theater was in competition,

9. I use the term 'labouring' in the sense employed by Michael Denning – referring to the spreading and mainstreaming of the values of organized labour.

it need hardly be said, with the commercial theatre in which Kaufman, Hart, and [producer Sam] Harris made their living. Some of the freshest jokes of *I'd Rather Be Right* have to do with the Federal Theater; in offering them, the authors were, as *Variety* might have put it, 'kidding on the level' (Goldstein 1979: 297).

In this way *I'd Rather Be Right* documents a theatrical reaction to aesthetically experimental and politically leftist forces within the form of the musical revue. The ambivalence with which the authors 'kidded on the level' about this serious challenge is typical of the ultimately serious kind of satire at work in the whole show, from conception through to performance.

The star

The casting of actor-songwriter George M. Cohan as Roosevelt, though not part of the original conception of *I'd Rather Be Right*, might have seemed politically innocuous, given the halo of patriotism surrounding his oeuvre of popular songs including 'Over There' and 'Grand Old Flag'. Contrary to Ethan Mordden's suggestion that *I'd Rather Be Right* was conceived of as a 'star turn' (Mordden 2005: 2), Cohan actually seems to have been the third actor considered for the part. Charles Winninger, the original Cap'n Andy from *Show Boat*, turned it down (Goldstein 1979: 290). Kaufman also admitted favouring at one point Frank Morgan, soon to play the Wizard in the 1939 MGM *Wizard of Oz* (Anon. 1937d). But his personal history also ended up doing a great deal of reactionary work for the show in performance. Whatever intentions the writers of record had in mind, Cohan's contribution serves as a reminder of how in the theatre an actor, too, can be a co-author in the performance of a written play.

Part of what made Cohan's appearance in *I'd Rather Be Right* so momentous was that since his career had peaked during World War I, he was now more famous in the theatre community as the actor who refused to abide by the 1919 actors' Equity strike. As an independent producer of his own work, he considered Equity to be in conflict with his interests ('Every dollar I've got in the world is in this fight,' he said) and never joined it even after losing this battle, requiring special dispensation whenever appearing on a professional stage later in life (Morehouse 1943: 140). After the strike, he privately bragged of being 'the only scab on Broadway' (Morehouse 1943: 143). *I'd Rather Be Right* marked his second project with his old partner Sam H. Harris after a long break in their friendship; in covering a much publicized reconciliation between the two men just the year before, newspapers openly speculated that they had split over the 1919 strike, a rumour Cohan had to repeatedly (defensively) deny ('Cohan and Harris' 1936). Cohan's opposition to organized labour – or to the labouring of his own profession⁹ – was one of the most well-known things about him in 1937 and he clearly continued to harbour such feelings in private (see McCabe 1973: 234). As late as 1939, *Variety* reported his refusal to join the American Federation of Radio Actors under the headline, 'Cohan's AFRA Balk Echoes '19 Stand' (Anon. 1939).

This element of Cohan's public profile might have reinforced *I'd Rather Be Right's* already sharp barbs at organized labour, particularly in a scene meant to dramatize the futility of one of the New Deal's most important

labour measures, the Wagner Act. In creating the National Labor Relations Board this 1935 law not only formally enforced the recognition by all large employers of employees' right to organize but also mandated that they at least bargain with striking employees instead of resorting to lockouts. Kaufman and Hart ruthlessly travesty this landmark advance for labour in a skit where the feckless Roosevelt finds himself having to mediate (as per the law) a dispute between the boss and assistant at a merry-go-round, two thick-accented Italian immigrants 'of the traditional big-mustached sort' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 88). Puzzled by his own law – brought on stage in what the stage directions call '*a huge legal manuscript*' – Roosevelt makes no progress since he cannot get the boss to understand what it means to 'recognize' his employee other than saying: 'Sure I recognize him. He worka for me eleven years. Hello, Tony' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 92, 94). Beneath the low ethnic humour lies the serious charge that the benefits of the New Deal go more to foreigners than to native-born and white (and supposedly more entitled) Americans like Peggy and Phil. It also would have been well known to anyone who followed the 1936 election that the Democrats relied heavily on immigrant labour as a constituency and owed them in part for their wide victory margin (Kennedy 1979: 284–85). Roosevelt's impotence before the two Italian stereotypes in this scene dramatizes a common accusation that he was beholden to such people.

Another conservative message that comes through in this scene, one that the anti-union Cohan presumably shared, is that a progressive labour policy only leads the government to meddle in the relationship between employees and the bosses who supposedly know them best. Having made the situation even more intractable, the play's Roosevelt throws the Wagner Act to the ground and wonders of his own hard-fought bill, 'maybe the Supreme Court passed this just for spite' (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 96). One can imagine Cohan saying this line in the manner described by a *Look* magazine caption to some production stills, where he is said to 'mimic one of the famous fireside chats in typical Cohan fashion – out of the side of his mouth' (Anon. 1938). Once again, as with the FTP, Roosevelt is seen disavowing his own policies. This is, in fact, what ultimately allows him to be sympathetic as a fictional character if not as a representative for a political programme. In acknowledging the error of his ways he ends up agreeing with the play's implied anti-populist audience.

The most notable problem surrounding Cohan's performance as Roosevelt, though, lies in his reported intense opposition to both the man and his policies. The evidence for this is largely anecdotal since Cohan seems to have been careful not to challenge a popular president in the press, and he always maintained he was at least nominally a Democrat (see 'Cohan Denies' 1937).¹⁰ In fact, he had initially celebrated Roosevelt's inauguration in 1932 by dedicating to him some new lyrics for 'Over There', praising him as 'What a Man'. But soon into the New Deal he balked at the party's turn to the left – especially its embrace of the most militant elements in organized labour and the baiting of the wealthy. Even the awarding of a congressional medal in 1936, paying tribute to his patriotic songs from World War I, could not reconcile

10. The most reliable account of Cohan's private anti-FDR feelings is probably John McCabe's 1973 biography. The opinion is seconded by Matthew Goldstein (1979), Steven Bach (2001), and Ethan Mordden (2005).

11. The song is most familiar today as the final number in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, (Curtiz 1942) where James Cagney recreates Cohan's performance in *I'd Rather Be Right*. For this post-Pearl Harbor film Lorenz Hart was commissioned by Warner Brothers to write some additional, more jingoistic lyrics (Hart and Kimball 1995: 237).

Cohan to meeting Roosevelt in person. (Contrary to the more genial story told in the 1942 biographical film about Cohan, *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, Cohan put off his official visit with FDR for four years after being offered the award.) According to biographer John McCabe, Cohan was at first reluctant to play Roosevelt when Sam Harris approached him with *I'd Rather Be Right*, unwilling to take part in what he feared would be a liberal tribute (McCabe 1973: 240). Perhaps reading the script changed his mind.

This unspoken tension between actor and role surfaced at the play's very first performance, a pre-Broadway tryout in Boston on 11 October 1937, and might have exposed the show as an explicitly anti-Roosevelt project from the start had the incident not been immediately contained. Rodgers and Hart had written for Cohan a patter song, 'Off the Record', which name-dropped and lampooned many Washington personalities.¹¹ In an early lyric, now lost, one of the targets was former New York governor and former (losing) Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith, a hero to American Irish Catholics, including Cohan, who counted him as a personal friend. Smith broke from Roosevelt in 1934 and helped form a splinter group, the American Liberty League, with other pro-business Democrats disaffected with the New Deal. This *de facto* defection from the Democratic Party seems to have mirrored Cohan's own political evolution in these years (McCabe 1973: 234). In a well-covered speech to the Liberty League during the 1936 campaign, Smith broke publicly with the administration, decrying in surprisingly blunt language what he perceived as Roosevelt's class-baiting tactics, his deficit spending, and outright 'Socialism' ('Al Smith's Speech' 1936). Smith and the president were now officially bitter rivals and whatever lyric Hart devised about their squabble must have reflected this deep ideological schism. It was apparently pungent enough that Cohan refused to sing it, even behind the mask of his quasi-fictional character.

So, in front of a packed house on opening night in Boston, Cohan reportedly ad-libbed, without warning, his own substitution. Newspapers the next day sought out the behind-the-scenes story of Broadway luminaries at war with each other, since Hart was visibly shocked and incensed at this unauthorized rewriting of his material. Kaufman, as director, swiftly negotiated a truce to ameliorate any whiff of controversy and persuaded Cohan to apologize in print and minimize the seriousness of the episode. Either reporters were not resourceful enough to obtain an exact quote of Hart's offending words and Cohan's contribution, or else Kaufman successfully squelched all details. Cohan himself only admitted to omitting 'just something about Al Smith and the Liberty League', calling Smith a 'dear friend' (quoted in Nolan 1994: 232). He declined to repeat his own invention. One intrepid *New York Times* writer, though, did gather this much a few days later:

A footnote from Boston on the small argument over the lyrics inserted by George M. Cohan into 'I'd Rather Be Right': On the opening night, having come to the end of a topical song entitled, 'Off the Record', Mr Cohan went into an encore with some verses he had written himself – something about a third presidential term, dictators and uniforms, concluding with a line to the

effect that 'I suppose I'll get my two weeks' notice for this.' It has been out of the show since the premiere.

('News of the Stage' 1937)

In his Liberty League speech, Al Smith, without mentioning Roosevelt by name, clearly implied that the president was a 'demagogue' and likened his approach to governing to that of Lenin and Stalin ('Al Smith's Speech' 1936). The Republican Party itself had openly brandished the word 'dictatorship' in the 1936 campaign ('Roosevelt Sweeps The Nation' 1936). In the minds of those opponents who would boo and hiss Cohan-as-Roosevelt's fictional pleas for a third term at the show's conclusion, the real-life FDR sought tyrannical power and a presidency-for-life. Whatever Cohan actually said that night on the stage of Boston's Colonial Theatre – in front of an audience, no less, from 'a banker's convention in town to whet the edge of its skepticism toward the new deal' (Anon. 1937a) – it seems that the terms 'dictators', 'uniforms', and 'third presidential term' together made for a rare outing of sincere (i.e. not satirical) reactionary rhetoric coming from the star of the show himself. The creative team may have been able to contain this outburst from full exposure in the newspapers, but on stage its traces must have survived over the hit play's run of 290 performances in Cohan's authoring of his own performance.

Conclusion

Perhaps an assumption that American theatre and its practitioners have historically been politically liberal has obscured the more reactionary elements in *I'd Rather Be Right*. Although it might be routine today for progressive critics and scholars to critique conservative social values, latent or not, in such canonical musicals as *Annie Get Your Gun* or *The Sound of Music* (see Most 2004 and Wolf 2002 respectively), examinations of explicit right-wing political and economic discourse in the Broadway repertoire have been rarer. In this regard the personal political profiles of artists may be a less relevant influence on the politics of a particular piece than the demands of Broadway as a business. And in 1937 business did not like Franklin Roosevelt. 'They are unanimous in their hate for me,' Roosevelt himself said of what he called 'organized money' during the campaign, 'And I welcome their hatred' (Kennedy 1999: 282). What he got in return from the business sector after his re-election was even more hatred. Kaufman and Hart, and Rodgers and Hart, seem to have met this anti-FDR demand – from a core Broadway constituency – with a musical made to order. Their own bias against the culture of the New Deal might be most clear in the area touching them most directly, the proliferation and government support of radical non-profit theatre. But because theatre is live and collaborative their individual intentions as authors may have ended up being less consequential than the audience participation witnessed in the vocal condemnation of their protagonist from certain seats, as well as the effect of their star actor in live performance, who was not above stepping outside of his character to echo such comments.

At the very least, the script is full of moments of political ambivalence toward the New Deal. It is reactionary in the sense of resisting or recoiling from radical political changes coming from the Left. Such a stance is

evident in Kaufman's working title for the show, *Hang On to Your Hats, Boys!* – a line uttered by Roosevelt in his climactic announcement of his designs on a third term (Kaufman and Hart 1937: 109). If Steven Bach is correct in reading into the play's final title 'a mild political pun' then one might wonder if the authors are sending a hidden message of ambivalent resistance to the radical climate of the 1930s (Bach 2001: 164). As their own prosperity and interests distanced them more and more from the leftward shift in the government and in the country, maybe they wondered if even such liberals as themselves might have more in common – and do better business – with those on the 'right' after all.

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