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It Can't Happen Here and the 2020 U.S. Election: An Interview with Leslie Frost

Interview

Faulkner Fox

Biography of Interviewee

- 1 Leslie Frost is from Durham, North Carolina, and a teaching associate professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 2016, Frost adapted and produced an 80th anniversary staged reading of the Federal Theatre Project's *It Can't Happen Here* at Historic Playmakers Theatre at UNC-Chapel Hill. In her monologue *Dreaming America* (2013), she traces how the tumultuous politics of the late 1930s shaped the stories and stagings of Federal Theatre Project (1935-1939) children's plays that participated in Popular Front culture. She is currently working on a playscript based on childhoods experience in North Carolina; she is also at work on a scholarly project centered on New Deal U.S. Post Office murals.

Links

- 2 *It Can't Happen Here*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=LNxzVdDxIik>
- 3 The Cat's Cradle: <https://catscradle.com/>

Interview

Figure 1

It Can't Happen Here starring Sofia Ventimiglia, April Mae Davis, Brandon Haynes, Mark Filiaci, Cynthia de Miranda, Carl Martin, Caitlyn Wells, Dan Toot, and Thaddeus Edwards (from top-left to bottom-right) Not pictured: Jackson Seymore, Lucia Foster.

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Faulkner Fox: What's the backstory of *It Can't Happen Here*?

Leslie Frost: *It Can't Happen Here* is a playscript Sinclair Lewis adapted from his 1935 novel about the fascist takeover of the United States by a democratically elected president. What "can't happen here" is an American dictatorship. Lewis based the character of Berzilius "Buzz" Windrip on politician Huey Long, who was governor of Louisiana and then U.S. Senator and widely known to aspire to the presidency. When the novel came out in 1935, Lewis had won the 1930 Nobel Prize for Literature and been awarded the 1926 Pulitzer Prize for *Arrowsmith*.

Huey Long was assassinated in 1935, one month after the creation of the Federal Theatre Project—one of four Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration's back-to-work arts projects. And even though there was Hollywood studio interest in it, Lewis donated the novel's theatre rights to the FTP, which was under the directorship of a former Vassar professor named Hallie Flanagan.

With collaborator John Moffitt, Lewis adapted his very sprawling novel into a playscript for Hallie Flanagan's extraordinarily ambitious idea of opening the play nationwide on October 27, 1936. Barely more than a year after the Federal Theatre Project was created! And she did it. The play opened October 27, 1936, in 21 cities in 17 states. What an incredible feat.

F.F.: What did you think when you first discovered *It Can't Happen Here*? What struck you? What resonated most?

Leslie Frost: I first encountered it when I was working on my dissertation on FTP children's plays. I was fascinated by Hallie Flanagan's extraordinary imagination and vision and courage. And administrative skills. I have such admiration for her in general, but this audacious vision really captivated me.

But I was working on pro-labor, anti-racist, and anti-fascist children's plays, so I read *It Can't Happen Here* with an interest in the main character's grandson. Young David is

into all the pageantry and spectacle and violence of the new fascist dictatorship. He wants to be in the youth corps; he wants to dress and shoot and drill like men in the paramilitary units. But he lies to them to protect his family, and he becomes the character whose escape signals an enduring American democracy, or at least the possibility of a democratic future.

F.F.: You told me that the original script was really sexist. Can you say more about that? What, exactly, did you feel you had to change for your own production?

Leslie Frost: Yes, the character who most clearly and consistently sees the fascist threat of the “Corporative Party” candidate has her bravery and intelligence and insight masked by her characterization as a sexually fearful “spinster.” The tone of her dialogue, and the stage directions, undercut so much of what she says and does. There were other problems with the script concerning language, mainly because it had obviously been written so quickly and as the result of a not-so-successful collaboration, but the characterization of Lorinda Pike was the biggest problem. She is such a bold, gutsy character; she feels the fascist vibe coming from the Corpo Party right from the beginning. I gave her language reflective of her character.

It was important to me that I keep the same structure and feel of the play. Its classic liberalism in characterization and plot is an important historical and literary element. So much of my work was to condense the plot and update characterization. But I rewrote Lorinda Pike more extensively and added a little love scene more expressive of the intimacy between her and the main character Doremus Jessup.

F.F.: The 2020 Zoom production was your second staging of *It Can't Happen Here*. You first adapted the play for a staged reading in 2016. Take us back to 2016. What were you thinking, hoping, wanting—as a citizen and a producer? Why did you want to do a production of *It Can't Happen Here* in North Carolina?

Leslie Frost: In the spring of 2015, I was driving through the American South visiting New Deal post office murals with the intention of writing a magazine article. These murals were painted on new government buildings in small towns throughout the country in the late 1930s and early 40s as part of the New Deal. They weren't a back-to-work project; the murals were commissioned through a U.S. Treasury Department-funded program.

And on this road trip, as I was listening to breakfast television, talk radio, and local people talking in various places, I started hearing Donald Trump's early campaigning. And I was really struck at the way this Queens-born real estate developer was echoing the rhetoric of Southern populist Huey Long. As I was driving all of these little blue highways to small town post offices and listening to the news, I daydreamed of how I might stage *It Can't Happen Here*.

A year later when Trump won the Republican nomination, I pitched a staged reading on the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill campus to Jane Thrailkill and Aaron Shackleford, who were then directing the program UNC's Arts@theCore. I proposed that I stage a reading of this very relevant and historically important play in the Historic Playmakers Theatre on the 80th anniversary of the 1936 nationwide opening. In the 1930s, UNC had developed a very successful program in folk drama under Frederick Koch and Paul Green, and Hallie Flanagan chose Koch as her regional director for the South. I argued that the play's staging would draw attention to UNC's historically important role. Jane and Aaron went for it and gave me the use of the theatre and funding for the house—lighting, sound, and personnel. I enlisted director

Joseph Megel, or, more accurately I wore him down until he said yes in August, then cast the play from a mix of local theatre professionals and amateurs, friends, and students. The industrialist character and the preacher, for example, were both played by hip hop poet Dasan Ahanu. Only two of the nine actors were professional, and one was my neighbor who had formerly done radio voiceovers in Chicago. I then adapted the script and raised money to pay the cast.

I remember hoping that Trump wouldn't flame out too early, and then feeling terribly guilty about those unbidden feelings.

Historic Playmakers is a beautiful little theatre located on the University of North Carolina's historic quad, but it doesn't have wheelchair accessible bathrooms, so it isn't used much. It made for a wonderful site for our production, with its slightly dusty elegance. All but the main characters, Doremus and Lorinda, were cast as multiple roles. We had a musician who played outside on the theatre steps as people were coming in, and then came strolling down the aisle to the stage singing "This Land Is Your Land" to take his place as the Narrator.

We gave one performance to a full house which gave us a standing ovation. And then 12 days later Americans went to the polls and elected Donald J. Trump.

F.F.: Fast forward to the fall of 2020. Why did you think a reprisal, during a pandemic, was urgent and important?

Leslie Frost: If I knew what I know now about putting together a Zoom production, I doubt I'd have had the guts to try it! But as the summer went on, the rising level of violent rhetoric and behavior at Trump's rallies, and from the right in general, brought a whole new element of the play into relevance. I kept thinking about it, but I couldn't quite figure out how to make a production work. Then the Wisconsin Democrats brought together the cast of the *Princess Bride* to stage a reading September 13 to benefit the state party. They had some problems with the stream, and the actors hadn't rehearsed, but I thought the production was inspiring and I thought we might be able to pull something off that would motivate voters who believe in democracy. The next day I contacted Joseph Megel, who was on board immediately, and Carl Martin, Cynthia de Miranda, and Caitlyn Wells from the 2016 reading, who also said yes right away to a Zoom fundraiser in mid-October.

We were all nuts, or, I'd like to think, Flanaganesque, to even imagine we could pull it off. We had barely a month. But as the whole mechanism of our government seemed increasingly engineered to suppress the votes of Democrats, particularly Black Democrats, and the violent political rhetoric was so ongoing, it just seemed necessary to do something.

F.F.: Talk to us about the different challenges you faced in 2020 with doing a Zoom production.

Leslie Frost: I have to say, it was such an exciting experience, and I know Joseph felt similarly. We were able to bring together local professional actors with a New York City-based actor, a Texas-based actor, and an Illinois tech producer. We were only able to hold three full rehearsals and because our leads have young children, we weren't able to rehearse Act 3 all together.

I have to give full credit for the production's success to everyone, but without our tech producer, Will Cotter, no one but us would have known what great

performances we had. He was amazing. He and stage manager Rachel Anderson put together the template for each scene the night before the production and the Zoom “staging” went flawlessly. Chris Church from the Cat’s Cradle music venue in Carrboro, NC, usually manages live music; he was great too.

To make it happen, Joseph and I were with two actors at the Cradle. We also had our foley guy on stage, as well as musicians Daniel and Danny Chavis from internationally known band The Veldt. Each actor had a camera, and then we fed Will’s stream and the two cameras through the Cradle’s system, with Rachel and Joseph monitoring the overall visual/audio.

By that point, I didn’t have anything to do but the talkback with historian Tim Tyson, so I paced through the whole production. I heard it, and I looked over Joseph’s shoulder a few times, but I probably saw one tenth of the production live. The experience was unbelievably exhilarating and nerve-wracking. It was so exciting, but the power of the play depended on the technology working flawlessly. What an amazing job by our cast and crew!

F.F.: I know the 2020 production was a fundraiser for grassroots Get-Out-the-Vote organizations (because I suggested which ones you might want to give to)! Was the production in 2016 also a fundraiser? What do you think an artist’s responsibility is when her country is on the brink of fascism?

Leslie Frost: Yes, from the very beginning I imagined the 2020 production as primarily a fundraiser. We performed the 2016 reading on the anniversary of the FTP production, so even if I’d thought to organize it as a fundraiser—which I did not!—it would have been pretty late in the campaign.

The question about the role of an artist when her country is on the brink of fascism: it makes my heart race even to think back to last fall.

You know, I do scholarly work on the 1930s New Deal arts projects because I’m continually moved by, and inspired by, the extraordinary idealism of artists who participated in both the Works Progress Administration back-to-work projects and the Treasury Department’s post office mural project. In the face of economic hardship and with bureaucratic pressures that must have often been mind-numbingly frustrating, people put on plays, painted murals, wrote delightfully idiosyncratic state guidebooks, and collected folk and blues music and oral histories. One reads disheartening stories of racism and political opposition, and there are moments of artistic and moral failure, but the collective efforts of so many people resulted in a string of artistic moments and collective cultural triumph that people remembered in their lives and that have finally gained their due.

I believe art makes a difference. I believe it works on an individual and collective level. While not all art is political, and not all artists can do political art, I believe it’s all of our responsibility to fight against authoritarianism. Art supporting that fight matters.

F.F.: I was a little reluctant, at first, when you approached me in 2020 because I was focused on the grassroots work that needed to happen—and I know you are really good at that work! I worried that producing a play would take away from the grassroots GOTV [Get Out the Vote] effort. Tell me why I was wrong about this! (I think I was wrong.)

Leslie Frost: I remember! You were right to worry and I think this time you were wrong about what the play would do, or maybe even could become as an example.

Thank goodness! I think you were wrong because I believe that the grassroots work is carried out by a few very dedicated people, and that many others need to be called into action. From the responses I and others received, I know the play brought together a community. I believe that people understood the chaos of current events differently through participating in our play.

F.F.: Talk to us about what, ideally, a play can do to raise people's awareness, get them motivated to fight oppression? How can watching a play, producing a play, or acting in a play, encourage and inspire people during desperate times?

Leslie Frost: I think artists participating in electoral politics have a mixed track record, and celebrities certainly don't have the cultural power to effect change I would have thought they did. I don't think the hard work of making art is a substitute for the hard work of grassroots activism. I do think art can help people get up in the morning determined to make a difference.

There's no doubt that art gives inspiration to people in desperate times, but I don't believe that's a substitute for civic and social justice or an economy that works for everyone.

Having said that, as I said, I think we brought people together in a way that created a sense of community. *It Can't Happen Here*, both as a historical artifact and as the weird, ephemeral moment of a live Zoom production, gave its audience a way of understanding what was at stake in the election. And I think its characters gave them inspiration. I would like to think our audience turned that *feeling* into some kind of action.

I know the professional actors said yes to the production because they wanted to do something meaningful and this was what they could do well. We would not have had our stellar cast for art alone. Each one committed to a risky venture because each wanted to make political art. Joseph's reputation helped, but they knew how little time we had to pull it together and each one was all in.

When it was all over and we were gazing at one another through the monitor (and I was dancing on stage as the band played on!) we were overjoyed together at what we'd pulled off. Who knows exactly what that means? Who knows what it will get harnessed to?

F.F.: What were some of the best things that happened during the 2020 production?

Leslie Frost: This question brings so many moments to mind. Watching the cast come together so quickly; the delight of April Mae Davis brilliantly finding the complexity in her character, Mary. Seeing Cynthia's feisty reading of Lorinda anchor so much of the play. Caitlyn Wells is an extraordinarily accomplished actor, a tiny, beautiful woman who brought all of Shad Ledue's loutish menace to brilliant life just as she did in 2016.

But I think the very best thing was working across the arts community in what's known as the Triangle—the cities of Durham, Chapel Hill, and Raleigh. Frank Heath, the owner of the Cat's Cradle, donated the space and tech. We were able to pay him, but he offered it for free. We generated a great audience because the *Indy Week's* Byron Woods wrote a wonderful story and KCHL's Aaron Keck interviewed me. Joseph Megel runs the UNC Process Series and has about 12 seconds a week when he's not working, but he didn't even hesitate to say yes to this project; he persuaded Brandon

Haynes and April to join. And then we worked with you and Durham for Organizing Action, the David Ladley Swanson Fund, and FlipNC to connect art to nonpartisan progressive political action. We didn't persuade the majority of North Carolinians to vote against fascism, but I think together we gave it everything we had to give.

F.F.: What's next for Leslie Frost?

I'm working on a playscript based on an experience I had when I was eight years old. My dad was a fighter pilot who had just returned from Viet Nam and we moved from southern California to a rural, coastal North Carolina town. It was my first experience with American racism and what was still, fundamentally, an apartheid system. It's been shocking to realize how powerfully that racism still animates our culture and I've been thinking a lot about that year as a little girl in North Carolina, because we moved to Connecticut the day after second grade ended. So trying to put that experience into theatrical form is my creative focus right now.

Figure 2

Leslie Frost.
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ABSTRACTS

This interview followed producer and adaptor Leslie Frost's Zoom livestream production of *It Can't Happen Here* from the Cat's Cradle in Carrboro, North Carolina, October 18, 2020.

L'entretien porte sur le spectacle en ligne de la productrice et autrice Leslie Frost, *It Can't Happen Here*, diffusé par le Cat's Cradle à Carrboro, North Carolina, October 18, 2020.

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