

# THE CRADLE WILL ROCK

## THE STORY BEHIND THE ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

*The Cradle Will Rock* is a 1937 musical by Marc Blitzstein. Originally a part of the Federal Theatre Project, it was directed by Orson Welles and produced by John Houseman. The original production was shut down four days before its scheduled opening at the Maxine Elliott Theatre by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which stated that due to budget cuts, the WPA was reorganizing its arts projects and all openings of WPA plays, musicals, concerts, and art galleries were to be delayed until after July 1. However, many asserted that the musical had been censored because the pro-union plot was "too radical." The theatre was padlocked and surrounded by security to prevent anyone from stealing props or costumes, which were U. S. Government property.

Welles, Houseman, and Blitzstein, seeking a way to privately produce the show, rented the much larger Venice Theatre and a piano just in time for the scheduled preview on June 16, 1937. The 600 audience members, who had gathered outside the Maxine Elliot Theatre, travelled 21 blocks north to the Venice Theatre. The sold-out house grew even larger when the show's creators invited people off the street to attend for free. The musicians' union refused to play for the show unless Houseman could provide their full salaries, and Actors' Equity Association stated that its members could not perform onstage at the new theatre without approval of the original producer (the federal government). The show's creators thus planned for Blitzstein to perform the entire musical at the piano. Just after beginning the first number, Blitzstein was joined by Olive Stanton (the actress playing Moll) from the audience. During the rest of the performance, various actors joined in and performed the entire musical from the house.

Beginning on June 18, Helen Deutsch, press agent for the Theatre Guild, agreed to serve as the financial backer for *The Cradle Will Rock*. Two days later, Houseman announced that, should the production prove successful, the two-week run would be continued indefinitely. Houseman also announced that the musical would continue to be performed with Blitzstein playing piano onstage and the cast members singing from the audience, stating, "There has always been the question of how to produce a labor show so the audience feels like it is a part of the performance. This technique seems to solve that problem and is exactly the right one for this particular piece."



**"...AND WHEN  
THE WIND  
BLOWS...THE  
CRADLE WILL  
ROCK!"**

