

Fascists stage provocation at Broadway show *Parade* about 1915 lynching of Leo Frank

Sandy English, Tim Avery
26 February 2023

On February 21, a group of neo-Nazis staged a provocation outside a new Broadway production of *Parade*, a musical about the murder of Jewish-American Leo Frank by a lynch mob in Georgia in 1915. Such a provocation in the theater district, centrally located in Manhattan, is unheard of in recent memory.

The fascists, who numbered about a dozen and identified themselves as the “National Socialist Movement” and the “Empire State Stormers,” accused those waiting to get into the theater of paying \$300 to “worship a pedophile” while New York Police Department (NYPD) officers stood by and watched. The few officers dispatched to a central area like this, where hundreds could be summoned almost immediately, indicates a deliberate leniency in relation to the far right.

The fascist flyers denounced the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which was founded in 1913 in response to Frank’s frame-up for the murder of 13-year-old Mary Phagan, and referenced the “Goyim Defense League,” a group that blames Jews for the COVID-19 pandemic and inspired at least one anti-Semitic shooting that took place recently in Los Angeles.

On February 22, *Parade*’s producers said in a statement, “If there is any remaining doubt out there about the urgency of telling this story in this moment in history, the vileness on display last night should put it to rest.” The show’s lead performer, Ben Platt, also denounced the fascists in a statement on Instagram.

On Friday night, right-wing Democratic Mayor Eric Adams appeared on stage before another preview of *Parade* and pointlessly declared, “We have the largest Jewish population outside of Tel Aviv. And when you come out and really cross-pollinate ideas and culture, that’s the beauty and a symbol of New York City.”

In his brief comments, Adams made no reference to any efforts by his administration to fight anti-Semitism or fascism. Anti-semitic incidents have risen sharply in recent years, particularly after the election of Donald Trump in 2016.

Parade has a book by Alfred Uhry, the author of the play *Driving Miss Daisy*, on which the 1989 film of the same title, directed by Bruce Beresford, was based, and music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown. It originally premiered on Broadway in 1998 and won several awards. The revival is being staged at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre.

The musical concerns the arrest, trial, conviction and lynching of Leo Frank, the manager of a pencil factory in Atlanta.

On April 27, 1913, the body of 13-year-old Mary Phagan, a worker at the factory, was discovered in the basement. She had been strangled and likely raped. Although police had several suspects, they arrested Frank.

A trial followed, during which the prosecution alleged that Frank (born 1884) had sex with factory girls in his office. The right-wing segregationist press in Georgia intimated that Frank was a rich Jew who preyed on girls. Such sentiments were whipped up in the most backward layers of the population and certainly had an impact on the jury. The leader of the Populist Party, Tom Watson, a reactionary by 1913, said, “If Frank’s rich connections keep on lying about this case, SOMETHING BAD WILL HAPPEN.”

Frank was found guilty of murder and sentenced to death. His appeals were rejected by the Georgia Supreme Court and the US Supreme Court heard the case, but refused to issue a ruling. Frank’s case was later reviewed by Georgia Governor John Slaton, who commuted his sentence in June 1915 from death to life

in prison because of inconsistencies in the evidence, an act which earned him over 1,000 death threats. Slaton was warned after his decision that he had activated lynch law. He and his wife were forced to leave the state.

In a well-organized operation, Frank was abducted from jail on August 15 and driven 175 miles to rural Marietta, Georgia, Mary Phagan's hometown, where he was handcuffed by the local sheriff and hanged from a tree.

The identities of the organizers of the lynching were unknown until 2000 when it was revealed that prominent citizens were behind it, including the former governor of Georgia, Joseph Mackey Brown; former mayor of Marietta, Eugene Herbert Clay, who was later president of the Georgia Senate; and the then mayor of Marietta, E. P. Dobbs, as well as wealthy bankers and lawyers.

The trial, conviction and lynching of Frank were national news and activated a struggle by Jews against anti-Semitism. The Anti-Defamation League was founded in response to the Frank case. The case was also closely followed by the socialist movement. Abraham Cahan, the novelist, and editor of New York City's *Forward*, the Yiddish-language socialist daily read by hundreds of thousands of workers, traveled to Georgia and interviewed Frank.

Historians agree that Frank was entirely innocent of the murder of Mary Phagan.

The new production of *Parade* is indeed timely. It comes in a period of rising anti-Semitism and the attempts of the American far right to integrate itself into mainstream politics. Saturday was declared a "National Day of Hate" by an Iowa fascist group, which proclaimed that the "one true enemy of the American people is the Jew," and urged other fascists to "shock the masses with banner drops, stickers, flyers and graffiti. Inaction is unacceptable." The post gained traction on social media, and the tweets of the ADL, exposing the action, elicited right-wing and anti-Semitic comments.

In all this, the fascists are assisted directly by the Republican Party, which cultivate these elements, but also by those that seek to legitimize them as part of a supposed "anti-war" movement in response to the conflict in Ukraine.

The Democratic Party, for its part, has promoted the

politics of racial and gender identity, creating a foul atmosphere which fascists find congenial.

There is no question but that those who protested at the preview of *Parade* have been emboldened, at least in part, by the charges of "pedophilia" made by the cohorts of #MeToo, against prominent Jewish filmmakers, such as Roman Polanski and Woody Allen. Right-wing thugs like Glenn Beck and Pat Buchanan have attempted for years to whip up anti-Semitism coded as attacks on "Hollywood types."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact