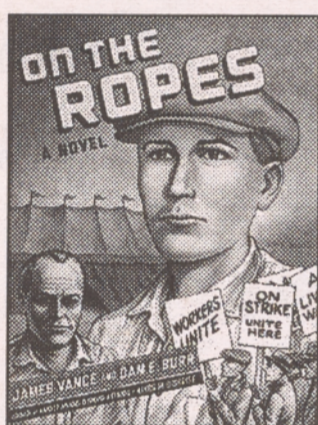


Great escape

Tough times and tougher politics set the backdrop for a new graphic novel about survival during the Great Depression

BY MIKE WOLD
CONTRIBUTING WRITER



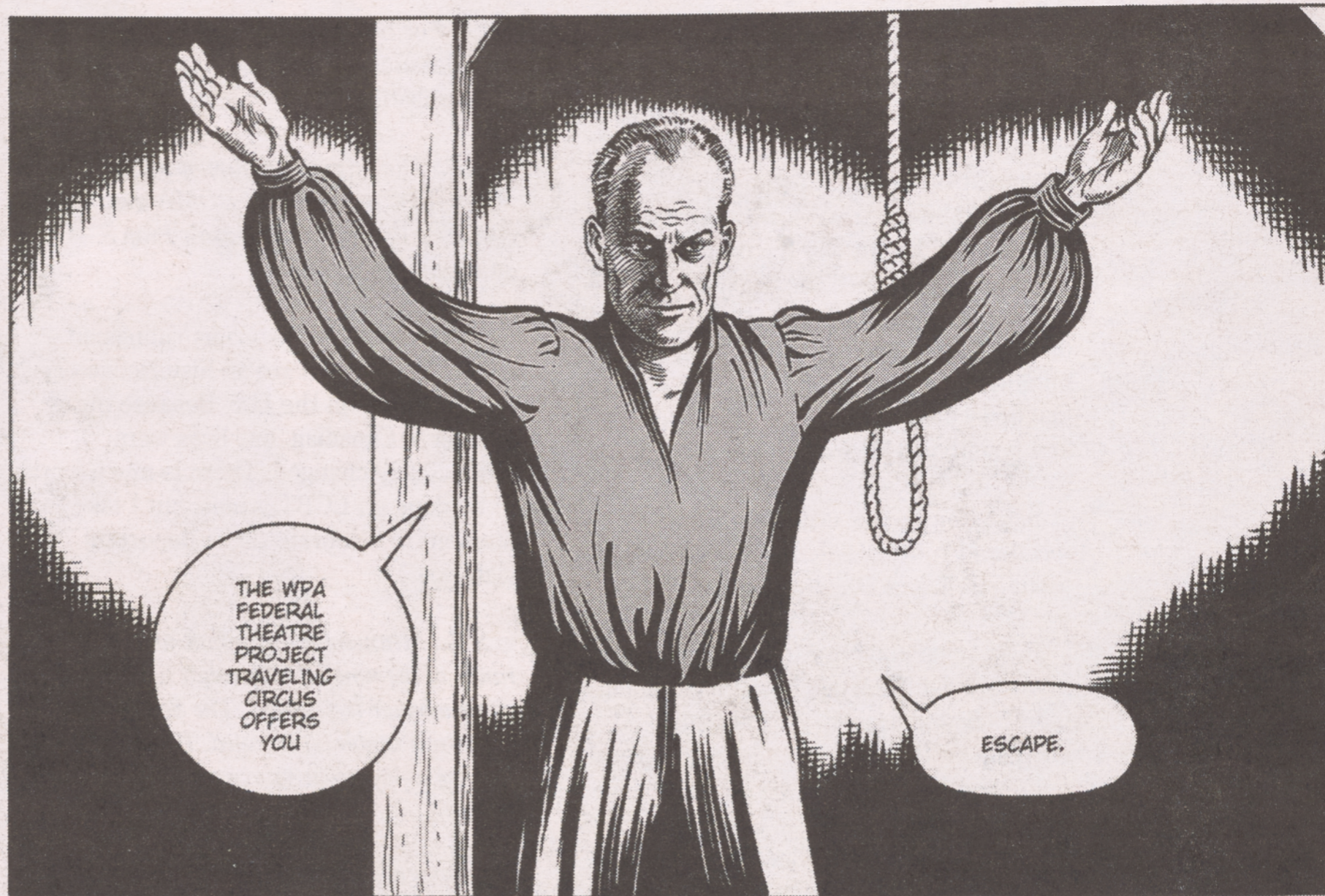
On the Ropes by James Vance and Dan E. Burr

Eight years into the Great Depression, people were wondering if there was ever going to be any way out. The Roosevelt administration had improved things somewhat — but a lot of people were still out of work and the country was in the midst of monumental struggles between unions and giant corporations to determine whether the American Dream was still alive.

The central metaphor in “On the Ropes” is escape. Escape artist Gordon Carey puts his head in a noose on a gallows twice a day, his hands locked in manacles behind his back; Fred Bloch, his assistant, opens the trap door on the count of five; Gordon drops and has his hands freed fast enough to grab the rope and keep the noose from closing. James Vance’s graphic novel, set in a WPA-sponsored circus, makes an explicit connection between Gordon’s act and what’s going on across the country: “You came here to see the real thing. Real, like livestock slaughtered and rotting in the fields, because the price of feed couldn’t be found. Watching your children sleep at night, holding your breath so hard ... like the slightest breeze could blow your family apart ... praying, God, don’t let us end up like those people down the street. Don’t let the bank turn us out. Don’t let our babies starve. Don’t let this world kill us.” And every time, Gordon escapes.

But the real person escaping is Fred, who’s had too many close shaves in his life, including losing a leg while hopping a freight train.

In this story, a sequel to Vance’s acclaimed graphic novel, “Kings in Disguise,” Fred is on a secret mission for a radical group: He’s passing along



BY JAMES VANCE
AND DAN BURR

communications about a union strike planned at Republic Steel in Chicago, in hopes thugs working for the steel bosses can’t intercept the missives. In doing so, he’s put his head in a noose: The thugs are on his trail.

Don’t worry if this is sounding too much like leftist, proletarian fiction. Interwoven with the noir plot is what amounts to a meditation on cynicism, idealism and naiveté. Fred, only 17, embodies the last two: He’s the only “red” in the circus, and at one point Eileen, who is sweet on him, says, “Mary and Joseph, do you swap your brains for those little red cards?” The author must have more than a passing acquaintance with leftist groups, and he deftly displays the competition, divisions and elitism that show up in the small group known as the Workers Brigade.

As the book’s creator, Vance seems to lean toward the cynical, though not to the extent of his character Virgil, the anti-union thug who lost his ideals when the Bonus Army, a veteran’s movement petitioning Congress for aid, was smashed by U.S. troops. Virgil vowed he’d never be on the losing side again. Vance also shows how cynicism has corroded the life of Barbara Woodruff, a writer who is digging into Gordon’s past. She agrees to look at Fred’s memoir of his childhood in return for dirt on his boss and mentor. As she puts it, “Most of us don’t want a better world, kiddo. We just want the old one back.”

She convinces Fred to cut all the politics out of his book in a passage that, although voiced by Fred, may reflect the author’s own struggle to balance outrage and cynicism: “The more I sliced, the more that it took on a newer, sleeker, shape, I found myself hating it a little less... but it wasn’t

really mine anymore.” However, Barbara’s outrage cuts through her cynicism and spurs her to action when she and Fred improbably witness a police massacre of striking workers and the subsequent cover-up.

That’s just the narrative part of this novel, which, without the graphics by Dan Burr, would be like listening to the audio of a movie. Some of Burr’s scenes will stick with the reader even more than the narrative, from a near-collision between a truck and a train, to Gordon’s repeated escapes on the gallows, to the violent climax at the end. Burr is equally creative with sedate scenes, showing a good eye for composition and a knack for memorable faces and expressions.

The format works well for Vance’s theme, though graphic novels have their weaknesses. One is that there aren’t enough words for all the internal process. Motivations mostly conveyed by facial expressions and reactions, such as Fred’s decision to betray Gordon’s secrets, don’t always seem convincing.

The use of extensive flashbacks sometimes feels clumsy, especially when they come so close to the end that they interfere with the drama of the climax.

These are minor points, however; the story is compelling enough to carry the reader through. Vance frames the narrative in a way that suggests there may be more Fred Bloch novels on the way. He says he knows the rest of Fred’s life story, but can’t say if he will ever write another piece of it. Let’s hope he does.

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