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Act Two, Scene One

Culture: Jane Alexander faces cuts at the NEA

JANE ALEXANDER IS NO STRANGER TO controversy. When she played James Earl Jones's girlfriend in the 1988 Broadway hit "The Great White Hope," hate mail forced her to take her name off her apartment building's directory. Since she took over as chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts last October, the brickbats haven't been personal. But she has heard the agency she defends decried from the House floor. Some artists who've gotten NEA grants were even called "porno freaks" by Rep. Robert Dornan, Republican of California.

Last week the 54-year-old actor talked about the NEA's latest run-in with Congress. It started with artist Ron Athey, who is HIV-positive, and a performance he did in Minneapolis last March. Inspired partly by African ritual, and to focus on the issue of AIDS, he cut patterns into the back of another performer with a scalpel and stuck himself with acupuncture needles. The NEA had made a grant to the Walker Art Center to sponsor a series of performances, one of which was Athey's. At most, \$150 in federal money supported the Athey event. Though that grant was awarded under the Bush administration, Alexander, a Clinton appointee, is catching the flak. This week the Senate is expected to consider a 5 percent cut in the NEA's \$170 million budget, proposed by Democratic Sen. Robert Byrd of West Virginia to protest federal support of Athey's work. The House has already voted a 2 percent whack, with the Athey performance figuring prominently in the debate. (After the Senate vote, a conference committee will hammer out the final cut.)

"They want to punish us," Alexander says bluntly. "They" are the well-organized Christian right and the swelling ranks of NEA opponents in Congress. Dornan proposes defunding the NEA: "I'd like to see [NEA supporters in Congress] say in front of their constituents, 'I'd rather give money to Ron Athey with rings through his nipples.'" But even lawmakers with less provoca-



KATHERINE LAMBERT

Waxing philosophical: It's not easy pulling the endowment out of the doghouse

tive arguments are questioning the agency's existence. Four years ago a House proposal to abolish the NEA got 64 votes; this year it got 118.

Alexander has defended Athey's piece as a "disturbing but important contemporary subject" and tries to be philosophical about the brouhaha. "The media and the public in general really love things that titillate them, that outrage them," she says with a brave, second-balcony smile. "So it's not surprising that art [like Athey's] is grabbed onto and run with in the media." But she wishes the media would pay more attention to the overwhelming majority of NEA grants that seed not-for-profit community arts centers;

that bring dance and theater to children in rural areas; that support promising unknown writers, such as former recipients William Kennedy and Wendy Wasserstein.

Poise and praise: Alexander's poise under fire has won her praise in the art world. Roy Goodman, a Republican member of the National Council on the Arts, which reviews all NEA grants, thinks she has won back some centrists who defected after the NEA funded a Robert Mapplethorpe show in 1988. "She did an extensive tour of Congress," he says, "and assured them that she would keep a weather eye out while making sure there would be a defense of artistic freedom. It was a no-nonsense, very direct approach."

Roger Mandle, president of the Rhode Island School of Design and a Reagan appointee to the National Council, says, "Jane has the artist's perspective. She's defended experimental art in every speech she's given."

But Alexander still has a long way to go to pull the NEA out of the congressional doghouse. Though she's had the political savvy to take tea with Sen. Jesse Helms and to embark on a nationwide tour to build grassroots support, she's clearly shaken by the agency's fragility in the face of the Athey tempest. Her acting career may be on hold, but her new job is turning out to be a very tough role.

PETER FLAHERTY with
MARC PRYSER in New York and
KATHERINE CHURCH
in Washington

Books: How the See Sees It

THE POPE IS GOING mainstream. In October

Knopf will publish Pope John Paul II's "Crossing the Threshold of Hope," the first general-interest book ever by a pontiff. A collection of essays on human rights, the family, abortion and other topics, it will be translated into more than 20 languages and sold in commercial bookstores for about \$20. There



are no plans for a papal book tour, but Knopf is rushing publication—in English and Spanish—to coincide with the pope's previously announced trip to New York, Baltimore and Newark.

Knopf is counting on the book's mass appeal. Its parent company, Random House, is believed to have paid as much as \$9 million to the Italian publisher Mondadori for the U.S. rights. "It's the closest one can have to a private audience with the pope," said Random House chairman Alberto Vitale. The pope's royalties will go to charity.

GIANNI GANANTE/SPINA