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# Salute to a Small Federal Agency

By CARL BODE

TODAY I stand at tall attention to a very small agency, the National Endowment for the Arts. With such a heavy title I'd expect to see in its beige cubicles and corridors: flow charts; memos in sextuplicate, each with its own color; photos of the President, adorned with laurel leaves; and throngs of functionaries in their dark suits or dun dresses, crowding the water coolers. Instead the NEA swings, as do its jazzed-up offices.

What it's done for the arts in the few years of its existence is so salutary that I yearn to protect it. I yearn to shelter it from the cornfed congressman whose culture consists of watching reruns of reruns of "Bonanza" while downing Pabst Blue Ribbon. I yearn to shelter it from the blinkered liberal on Capitol Hill who proclaims at budget time that it's going to be either bread or music. And who adds that this country can't afford the fine arts and social services too—though the NEA's total budget wouldn't build one large housing development.

I'm the more protective because I have history on my side. I can remember an episode of remarkable achievement which came to a tragi-comic end.

Once before, but then in an era of dire economic need, we created agencies for the arts. This was during the Depression and it wasn't for the sake of the arts but simply to keep the practitioners of the arts from starving. One agency in particular sticks in my mind and it can serve to represent the rest. It was the Federal Theater, founded to give a living to theatrical workers of all sorts, from stars to stagehands. It accomplished more in four years of bad times than had been done in a generation of good ones. The total cost to the taxpayer during the life of that agency was \$46 million—the cost of a single battleship in those simple days. For that amount the American public got more theater, more varied theater, and better theater than ever before.

I spare you statistics because nobody reads them. But the very range of productions which the Federal Theater organized and offered is impressive: classical drama, including Christopher Marlowe's "Dr. Faustus"; modern drama, including the plays of such newcomers as Arthur Miller and Clifford Odets; dance drama; drama for children; foreign-language drama, including plays in Yiddish; musicals, including "Sing for Your Supper"; black (or Negro then of course) drama by black companies, as well as an occasional white adaptation, including that thumping success "The Swing Mikado," which made Gilbert and Sullivan shake as they'd never shaken before; pageants, including "The Lost Colony"; and even puppet shows. There was live theater in 31 states and it was watched by 30 million persons.

In the face of this enormous achievement the Federal Theater was killed by Congress during the long, hot summer of 1939. The charges were that it harbored Communists and presented dirty plays.

The House Un-American Activities Committee, under Congressman Martin Dies, and the House Appropriations Committee led the onslaught. One highlight was provided by Congressman Joe Starnes, who demanded to know if this Christopher Marlowe fellow was a Communist. But the most memorable event was the reading aloud by Congressman Everett Dirksen, in his goose-grease voice, of the titles of some of the plays which had been given. The *Congressional Record* attests that the assembled House listened with laughter and applause.

Let me offer a few instances of what brought the House down.

MR. DIRKSEN: "There is 'Up in Mabel's Room.' There is an intriguing title for you. . . . Here is another, 'Be Sure Your Sex will Find You Out'." (Laughter) Then the State Department might take note of this, 'A Boudoir Diplomat.' Then there is

'Around the Corner.' That must be the elusive prosperity we have been seeking for some six or seven years. . . . Next we have 'Companionate Maggie', and then this great rhetorical and intriguing question, 'Did Adam Sin? . . .'"

Changing tempo and pitch, the congressman then addressed his convulsed colleagues with the voice of reason: "Now if you want that kind of salacious tripe, very well, vote for it, but if anybody has any interest in decency on the stage, if anyone has an interest in real cultural value, you will not find it in this kind of junk."

It was in vain that Congressman Casey from the other side of the House rebutted stiffly that the Dirksen humor was ribald. It was in vain that the heads of the Federal Theater pointed out that these frothy comedies represented merely the smallest fraction of its varied offerings. The House voted to destroy the Theater and hooted as it did so.

That was over 30 years ago. Now the National Endowment for the Arts has made a very effective new beginning. Though its budget grows, it remains slender when compared with that of nearly every other agency. Yet its achievements are already amazing, both in what it has done directly and what it has done by supporting state arts agencies like our Maryland Arts Council.

In trying to help the American theater the NEA faced a situation nearly as thorny as that of the past. It found that dramatic productions had become so wickedly expensive that no one, except a plump businessman on a plump expense account, could afford to see them. And all that the businessman

itched for was 'Up in Mabel's Room' anyway. The steep expenses of Broadway productions had forced the appearance of Off-Broadway ones. The rising expenses of Off-Broadway had spawned Off-Off-Broadway. The theater once again ailed badly. Then, enter the NEA smiling with encouragement and proffering a little money.

The NEA grants, both direct and through the state arts councils like ours, ordinarily require matching money, thereby doubling the resources for the drama. Once again, I decline to drown you in statistics on what or who has been helped throughout the United States; here instead is a short sampling from fiscal 1973:

To professional companies: Seattle's Contemporary Theater, \$7,500; Abingdon, Virginia's Barter Theater, \$7,500; Washington's Black Repertory Company \$50,000; and New York's LaMama Experimental Theater, \$90,000.

To experimental theaters and playwright-development programs: New Orleans's Free Southern Theater, \$25,000; Oklahoma City's Contemporary Arts Foundation, \$3,000; and New York's defiantly named Ridiculous Theatrical Company, \$10,000.

To professional theaters for young audiences, chiefly of children: Washington's Living Stage, \$30,000; and New York's Paper Bag Players, \$35,000.

So there we are. I've rarely qualified as a professional optimist, yet I readily concede that times look better for the NEA. Everett Dirksen's son-in-law, Howard Baker, is a Senator and he's voted consistently to support it. I trust that's a straw in the proverbial wind.

Mr. Bode is chairman of the Maryland Arts Council.

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