

1994

Appropriations (1994-1995): Note 03

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Time again to bash the arts

It has become an annual ritual in Congress, something akin to the Pamplona bull run: Each year, a handful of congressmen stampede to the microphones to denounce the National Endowment for the Arts, snorting anathemas and goring the agency's tiny budget. Every year, the endowment's defenders save it from extinction. But most years, a little more of its funds are pared away.

By all rights, this year should have been different. NEA Director Jane Alexander — a popular actress and a gifted ambassador for the arts — had explained and defended the agency to more audiences than previous directors ever attempted. She won high marks for diplomacy and openness.

But appropriations time rolled around once more; and, like clockwork, out came the bulls. First out of the chute this year was Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va. The red cape that set him off: One arts grant in Minneapolis — for \$150. (That's *not* a typo; we're talking about one-half the price of a coach-class flight from Minneapolis to Wheeling.)

The \$150 was part of a grant to the distinguished Walker Arts Center, which used it to book an appearance by performance artist Ron Athey. Mr. Athey does an unsavory little routine in which he draws blood from an accomplice, blots the blood with paper towels, then hangs the towels from a clothesline. Although Mr. Athey is infected with the virus that causes AIDS, the accomplice is not. Still, an audience member complained, and the matter got into the newspapers.

A bad use of \$150 in government funds? Maybe. But a reason to slash 40

NEA'S ANNUAL GRILLING

It costs you 68¢ a year to aid American culture. Every year, someone claims it's too much.

percent from the endowment's budget for theater, visual arts, and newly commissioned work? Senator Byrd and a cadre of practiced NEA-bashers think so. Wiser heads need to prevail.

The NEA costs each American 68 cents per year. In exchange, it supports ballets and folk-dance clubs, schools and museums and community theaters — and, yes, a few risky, cutting-edge arts groups that may (or may not) advance American culture. It has put an average of \$1.7 million a year into the arts in Florida. It supports dozens of local programs, from the New World Symphony to *Teatro Avante* to a program for inner-city kids at risk.

There's no way to do all that, in thousands of small grants to adventurous institutions across 50 states, without occasionally offending someone. So the Walker Arts Center, spending one ten-billionth of the federal budget, offended someone. Is this shocking?

Every federal expenditure riles somebody. But the NEA's \$170 million budget also incubates American culture, from the Greater Miami Opera to a Liberty City music program, from abstract sculpture to illustrations for children's books, from Shakespeare to Neil Simon. These are good things, necessary to a fast-changing, comparatively new nation. The supported artists (frequently young, often ingenious, always amazing) enrich America far beyond the pennies that it costs to support them.

Put the congressional bulls back in their pens. This annual fuss over a small and beneficial program is tedious, cynical, and hurtful. Ms. Alexander deserves a break, and her agency deserves a hand.