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## Statements and Speeches (1975-1979): Speech 09

Robert Brustein

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## STATEMENT OF ROBERT BRUSTEIN

I am grateful for the opportunity to testify before this committee on behalf of the National Endowment for the Arts because, over the last ten years, I have had the peculiar advantage of being at once the analyst, participant, and beneficiary of its wise administration. As Dean of a drama school at Yale, I have witnessed the Endowment's effect on theatre training; as artistic director of a professional company, I have seen its influence on theatre organization; as a drama critic for various periodicals, I have observed its impact on theatre production; and as a panel member of the theatre division for two years, I have also had the opportunity to see the way its decisions were reached and executed.

From these several vantage points, it has been easy for me to conclude that the National Endowment for the Arts is, at present, the single most important force in the American theatre; indeed, it is doubtful that there would be a serious American theatre were it not for the Endowment's help and support. What this agency recognized from its inception was that theatre was not just a pleasant relaxation for residents of and visitors to New York City, but rather an important aspect of spiritual growth for all American citizens. From the beginning, the National Endowment emphasized three cardinal points: 1) that the American theatre must be decentralized, 2) that it must be institutionalized, and 3) that it must aim for artistic standards of excellence.

Decentralizing the theatre meant the birth of the resident theatre movement where companies have now begun to evolve in virtually every major city in the United States, and many of the smaller ones (New Haven, for example, with a population of 150,000 now has two well-supported permanent companies in residence). Institutionalizing the theatre meant that the demands of the box office would

no longer rule the stage, and that a permanent staff could continue to grow together over a period of years, evolving imaginative fiscal and artistic methods. And improving the theatre meant a process of growth and continuity that would permit American companies eventually to compete with any National theatres in the world.

What the Endowment recognized was that America -- so diverse in its geographical, ethnic, and racial makeup -- could never have a single representative national theatre, like those in England, France, and Sweden, but would rather be made up of many resident and experimental companies, each reflecting the needs of its constituency, and, taken as a whole, representing the pluralistic nature of the country itself. As a result, the Endowment now provides, with the help of expert panels, support to all qualified institutions, regardless of their size or popularity, maintaining at the same time strict and objective standards for determining assistance to the performing arts.

With this help, and in terms of numbers, the American resident and experimental theatre movement has grown considerably over the past ten years. But institutional theatre is still young here, and much, much more remains to be done. It is only a short while since Americans began to realize that the theatre was not just a fly-by-night commercial product -- like TV, popular music, and most movies -- but also had the potential to be an important artistic force, like opera, dance, the novel, and the visual arts. Given our late start, we are still very far from where we should be. At the present time, the United States contributes less to the arts per capita than any other major country in the world, including Canada (indeed, the city of Vienna alone outstrips all Federal giving in its aid to the performing arts). So this is the opportunity not so much for self-congratulation (though we have come a long way from the thirties), but rather for consolidating and advancing our gains. The National Endowment for the Arts,

with its wise leadership, good organization, and expert panels, is one of the few American institutions that has managed to command the respect and support of its constituency at a time when a growing cynicism is dominating the national mood. It is for this reason, as well as for its devotion to excellence in an age of mediocrity, that I strongly recommend to this committee that its life be extended indefinitely, and its appropriations vastly increased.