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Choice of Theater Blamed for Cutback

By DAVID F. DONNELLY JR.

B 6/10/66

Cutbacks in the proposed repertory program for school children were attributed indirectly today by Providence Schools Supt. Charles A. O'Connor Jr. to the virtual write-off of the Albee Theater as the site for the project.

Mr. O'Connor said proposals recently submitted for the program's federal funds are written to make maximum use of the Rhode Island School of Design Auditorium. The decision to recommend this facility in the budget requests, he con-

firmed, necessitated several reductions in the scope of the program.

When originally announced by Mr. O'Connor and other officials the program was expected to provide theater for about 80,000 junior and senior high school students from Rhode Island and possibly nearby Massachusetts and Connecticut. As now submitted, the program will cover an estimated 41,000

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students from Rhode Island high schools.

Mr. O'Connor said maximum use of the 1,000-seat RISD auditorium for the program in the next year would make it impossible to include more than 41,000 students. Each student is expected to see four plays, each of which will be presented five times weekly for eight weeks.

The Albee Theater, on the other hand, seats more than 2,000 persons. By using that facility, Mr. O'Connor said, it would be possible to include the originally-estimated 80,000 youngsters in the program.

The school superintendent said there were several reasons for the choice of the RISD auditorium. Paramount among them, he said, was the preference of the Trinity Square Playhouse, the nucleus project in the fund proposals.

In the proposals, the Trinity Square group criticized the facilities at the Albee. It was said, among other things, that renovations would be needed at the theater — a step that was promised by B. A. Dario, Albee owner, if his theater was selected.

RISD Preferred

Mr. O'Connor said the Trinity group also preferred the more intimate surroundings of the RISD auditorium. It would be difficult, Mr. O'Connor quoted them as saying, to present the plays in a larger house such as the Albee.

The superintendent also said there were financial considerations involved in the RISD recommendation. The Trinity group, which has pledged \$30,000 to \$40,000 of its own funds to the theater program, was willing to pick up the rent tab at RISD but not at the Albee. In all, the superintendent added, Trinity will receive about \$350,000 for its presentation of the plays.

"If the federal government decided now that the theater should provide for 80,000, there would be a budgeted figure to take care of it," Mr. O'Connor said. "This would be the School of De-

rather than the School of Education and Welfare." Mr. O'Connor said his primary concern from the beginning of the program was that it "would be part of the English curriculum of the school system, not just a spasmodic attempt to let them (school children) see another play." He indicated

steps and provision of collateral texts for them.

Several Consulted

Mr. O'Connor said the decision to recommend use of the RISD auditorium was based on numerous consultations of federal and local officials. Among those whom he said were consulted were Dr. Albert Bush-Brown, president of RISD and a board member of the National Council on the Arts which is expected to approve part of the program's funding; Milton Stanler, executive committee chairman for the Foundation for Repertory Theater in Rhode Island; and Renzo Raisis, the Albee's artistic director.

The suggestion to include junior high school as well as Massachusetts and Connecticut pupils in the program was made, Mr. O'Connor said, to assure maximum participation in the program.

"When they originally talked to us, they wanted to make sure it would be sustained or supported fully," Mr. O'Connor said. "Then they said we could go into as many communities as we wanted and get as many as we could fit into the house." The "mere factor of the number" made it impossible to include the junior high and out-of-state pupils, Mr. O'Connor said. Rhode Island senior high school pupils from all schools, private and public, will account for the 41,000 estimated in the request for funds.

Fund Request Grows

Originally, Mr. O'Connor said the program would cost about \$500,000 a year. The request for funds now totals \$785,000 of which \$165,000 will come from the National Endowment for the Arts, \$30,000 to \$40,000 from the Trinity Square group, and the remainder from the U.S. Office of Education under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

"Our budget hasn't changed appreciably from the beginning, but their's has," Mr. O'Connor said. "I have never been consulted nor have I ever attempted to arrive at the cost of mounting the plays or operating the theater. This has been done by the experienced personnel of the arts and humanities (foundation) in collaboration with Health, Education and Welfare."

In the application for federal funds, it was stated that use of the Albee Theater would cost an additional \$229,000. This estimate was based in part on rental fees which would be charged for the theater and the addition of costs of transporting young-

ated he placed great emphasis on providing texts for pupils to study the plays under the program.

The superintendent said the funds which will be paid to the Trinity group should enable them to seek out high-quality performers from throughout the country to participate in the plays. This, he said, is the intent of the program's Washington planners.

Mr. O'Connor also took issue with criticisms that the plan-ning of the program has been shrouded in secrecy. Among those who participated in planning from the beginning, he said, was William F. Robinson, Jr., state commissioner of education.

"This business of secrecy is a myth," the superintendent stated. "I announced at my school committee meetings what we were attempting to do. I told them on a day-to-day basis how this program would be funded."