

nationwide research revealed collective theatre deficits in each of the past three seasons—the report rightly acknowledges that “artists have subsidized theatres through devotion to their profession despite inadequate compensation.”

Among the most controversial of the future directions listed in the Theatre Program chapter is the NEA's intention to examine “the various proposals for a national theatre.” Here the Endowment may have stumbled into a hornet's nest. There are currently almost as many “national theatre plans” as there are theatres, and the subject is fraught with conflict. The professional theatres on the roster of nationwide NEA grantees consider themselves a collective national theatre and are unlikely to be supportive of designating any single theatre or showcase as America's National Theatre. In a recent *New Republic* article Robert Brustein echoed the sentiments of many: “It is debatable whether national theatres are possible or even desirable in countries of great size and diversity.” Obviously unheeded by the NEA, Brustein called for a moratorium on all discussions of an American National Theatre, at the risk of leaving our “leaders speechless and our reporters without copy.”

Whether the NEA is interested in the concept or merely reacting to political pressure in raising the issue is not known. However, one high-level Endowment spokesman recently stated that the agency would oppose anything tending to stratify the arts, such as the designation of National Treasures or National Landmarks. Since the NEA currently gives no special funding to a “national company” in symphony, opera or dance, there is no precedent for such a move in theatre.

According to the report, other possible future directions for the Theatre Program include: funding national tours, promoting second homes for companies, commissioning new works, establishing fellowship programs for actors and designers, and supporting trustee seminars. The NEA also intends to explore whether musical theatre is best served within the Opera-Musical Theatre Program, where it now resides, or within the Theatre Program.

Areas not mentioned in the theatre chapter that were raised at the NEA's

1982 Theatre Seminar or in subsequent forums include: documentation of important theatre work; media drama production; special problems involved in producing the classical repertoire; methods of broadening theatre audiences; increased “research and development” time for rehearsal and exploration of new material; upgraded national theatre criticism; and opportunities for international exchange of theatre companies.

The Challenge Grant Program, first established as leverage for new non-federal support, now concentrates on building endowments and working capital, permanently reducing deficits and encouraging long-term commitments to new artistic projects. The program has tended historically to favor the larger, wealthier institutions, with by far the greatest percentage of funds going to museums and symphonies (though theatres were better represented in the most recent round of grants). The Advancement Program, known as “Son of Challenge,” is designed to improve stability of emerging arts organizations; according to the report, a study of the program is planned in 1986.

The Expansion Arts Program supports organizations “rooted in, and

deeply reflective of, a minority, inner-city, rural or tribal community.” Although the five-year plan provides the ideal opportunity to study this program, the report is oddly silent about its future. Not addressed are several problems raised persistently since the program's inception in the early '70s. Among them is the fact that Expansion Arts overlaps the NEA's discipline programs, making it possible for grantees to receive substantial funding from two or more programs at once. Another frequent charge is that the program is “racist” because it segregates ethnic arts from the Endowment's other programs; however, defenders believe that channeling funds through this program is justified because emerging organizations often receive far larger grants from Expansion Arts than they would from the more competitive discipline programs.

Beyond the Theatre Program, Expansion Arts, Challenge and Advancement, theatre professionals must concern themselves with the scope of the entire agency. A surprising number of other NEA programs impact directly and indirectly on both theatre companies and artists, including the Opera-Musical Theatre, Inter-Arts, Media Arts, Museum and Music Programs, all of which cited interest in exploring initiatives relating to theatre within the report.

When the dust settles and the arts fields have had an opportunity to examine the details of the NEA plan, some will take exception to the fact that arts professionals were only cursorily involved in the process before the plan was submitted to Congress. Yet a public airing of points of view, rather than the submission of a compromise plan negotiated in private, may lead to a more open and democratic process in the end. The document, lacking not only the integral participation of the fields it seeks to serve, but also the formal endorsement of the agency's own advisory Council, will undoubtedly stir a lively public debate on the arts.

It is now up to arts leaders to participate in the planning process by both responding to the report and adding other concerns to the agenda for future discussion. Whether intentionally or not, Congress and the Endowment have surely created both the opportunity and the necessity for such a debate. □

“THE
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'artistic deficits.' ”*