

the 1999 Nancy Hanks Lecture

ON ARTS AND PUBLIC POLICY



PHOTO BY JILL KREMENTZ

LECTURER

WENDY WASSERSTEIN

The 12th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture
Presented by Americans for the Arts
in conjunction with Arts Advocacy Day

THIS LECTURE WAS PRESENTED ON THE STAGE OF *FULL MOON IN THE EISENHOWER THEATRE OF THE JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS.*

Thank you. It's truly an honor to be here today. I've always wanted to be in *Full Moon*, and this is the only way I figured out how to do it. So in two hours, I'll be on that moon with the great Bill Irwin.

The other night at a New York dinner party at Liz Robbins' house, the arts lobbyist, I sat next to Jim Robinson, the chairman of *Scholastic Magazine*, who said to me, "I hear you're giving the Nancy Hanks lecture." He went on to tell me that Nancy Hanks was on his board and what an extraordinary woman she was. He said, "She single-handedly changed arts funding in this country, and she also taught me a very important lesson. She told

me you have to know when to ask for help." So for the extraordinary Nancy Hanks, and her legacy, I hope tonight can offer some deep appreciation and a little help from a friend.

When I look back on my own childhood, I would say in many ways the arts saved my life. Well, if not saved then gave it all the shape and a purpose. I'm often asked how I started

writing plays. I can assure you that my nice Jewish parents never said to me, "Wendy, darling, please, please go into the not-for-profit theater. Whatever you do, we want you to have a life that is as financially insecure as possible. Please date actors. Rely on the kindness of critics and for heaven's sake, have no responsible health insurance."

Well, this was definitely not the message

sent to me. However, when I was young, my parents did send me to dancing school for the usual ballet and tap dancing lessons in the hope that I would become well-rounded. I've always thought that my well-roundedness went directly to my hips.

Actually my dancing school was the June Taylor School of Dance, home of the Jackie Gleason dancers. I've often told friends that I'm not the only person I know whose seminal influences were June Taylor and Robert Brustein. After dancing school, my parents always took me, in their words, "to take in a play." We saw a very eclectic mix of Broadway and off-Broadway. I will never forget sitting in the front row of Edward Albee's *Seascape*, with my parents, Morris and Lola.

IT WAS ALSO DURING A PERFORMANCE OF *NO TIME FOR SERGEANTS*, WHEN I WAS TEN, THAT I BEGAN ASKING MYSELF WHY AREN'T THERE ANY GIRLS, WHO SEEM TO BE LIKE ME, ON STAGE? Frankly, that was when I formed an esthetic. For children, theater opens possibilities for the imagination. All you need are people and a light switch.

At about the same time my parents took me to the theater, my older sister, Sandra, began bringing me to the New York City Ballet. We gasped at Edward Villela and Jacques D'Amboise in the *Apollo* and *Stars and Stripes*. For me, the epitome of feminine grace was not the Hollywood idols of that time, like Sandra Dee, but the glorious ballerinas I saw on the City Center stage.

Where as adolescent life was completely chaotic; in the ballet, passion and exuberance were brilliantly contained. In fact, I still find one of the greatest solaces in life going to the ballet. In a world of spin, image makers and manipulated perceptions, the discipline and artistry of dance reminds me that there is a form of human achievement that is unarguably and profoundly true.

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I BELIEVE IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO SEPARATE THE ARTS FROM EDUCATION. As a child, I was diagnosed as someone with a reading problem at an early age. Words in books flew around the room for me. And I always thought I later wrote plays because there were no footnotes and no one could see my spelling or punctuation.

But at my elementary school there was a dancing teacher who took us to Prospect Park with a drum and called out colors as we danced. Of course, in retrospect, it sounds like a Brooklyn version of *Summerhill*, but for me it was an outlet of exuberance and creativity. We also put on plays at our school. Mini versions of Shakespeare. I'll never forget Caesar appearing in his mother's butterfly, Martex sheets. And I can still play Mendelssohn's score for *A Midsummer's Night Dream* on a triangle, though I'm not often asked to.

Most of the students from those early productions did not become playwrights or actors. But we did learn that there was a form of work in which people come together to create an entity in which they all deeply care about. We also learned discipline. If you rehearsed and studied your lines, ultimately you'd have a better time.

Arts for children is not simply icing on the cake. It is a way of including everyone in a joint and joyous venture. Moreover, for those children with imaginations, it's a way to build confidence in their uniqueness.

I AM OFTEN ASKED HOW MY FIRST PLAY WAS DONE. Frankly, my mother, Lola, was walking down the street and ran into Louise Roberts, the former secretary at the June Taylor School of Dance. Louise asked my mother, "How's Wendy?" Lola began hyperventilating, "Wendy isn't going to law school, she's not marrying a lawyer and now she's writing plays!"

I think to soothe my mother's spirits, Louise told her that she now was in charge of a new not-for-profit dancing school called the Clark Center which was across the hall from Playwrights Horizons at the Y on Eighth Avenue and 52nd Street. She said she would give Bob Moss, the artistic director of that theater, my play. I have been associated with the theater now for twenty-five years.

I am telling you that story not to go on and on about my mother, which I could do at length, but to underline that my generation of playwrights has been nurtured by the not-for-profit system. I remember when Playwrights Horizons moved from the Y to 42nd Street and the former Maidman Playhouse. In fact, the Sex Institute of Technology was still upstairs.

We had a gala opening when Joan Mondale came to christen Theater Row. Not-for-profit arts institutions are often pioneers in urban revival. The new 42nd Street, the Disney restored theaters and E walks would not be there today if arts organizations, sponsored by the Endowments, local arts councils and artistic directors, like Andre Bishop, had not taken the initiative to change the urban landscape.

Of course, standing before you today, I know I am preaching to the converted. I don't have to convince you of the importance of theater, dance or any of the performing arts or that new plays in this country are nurtured in the not-for-profit system from Washington State, Seattle Rep, to this stage right here at the Kennedy Center.

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every time an audience attends a live theatrical event. We laugh together, cry together and listen together. You also know that in a country obsessed with the millennium, the

true character of a nation is defined by its cultural life. If we all know this, why are the arts in this country prone to slipping under a narrow definition, “Elitist?”

A few years ago, I came to Washington to lobby for individual grants to authors with a group called Poets and Writers. I came with the actors Melanie Griffith, Joanne Woodward and the author, Walter Mosley. At that time, Jane Alexander, who had been on Broadway in my play *The Sisters Rosensweig*, was the chairwoman of the National Endowment for

the Arts. At that point, the then-Speaker of the House had refused to meet with her. At a breakfast that morning, the Speaker arrived and told Miss Griffith if his novel was ever made into a film, he had two parts for her.

During coffee, I was asked to talk about my NEA grant. I mentioned that I had won a \$12,000 grant in 1984 that aided me in completing my play, *The Heidi Chronicles*, and in my mind, that was a small investment for a play that ran on Broadway for two years, toured the country for two years and kept many people employed and many inner cities lively. The Speaker looked up at me and said, “You know Arthur Murray never needed a grant to write a play.”

Now from my years of dancing school, I know who Arthur Murray is. I even know his autobiography is called *Put a Little Fun in*

Your Life — Try Dancing. But I was quiet. I knew we needed the funding. On my way out, the Speaker turned to me and said, “I’m terribly sorry, I meant Arthur Miller.” I replied, “Yes, and he did have a grant. It was called the WPA.”

It’s a good story and by the way, we did save those grants. But it’s not as relevant as the congressman I met that day who told me, sure, his daughter loved her ballet class but that didn’t mean the government should fund it. The arts he said were extracurricular. Furthermore, they were no longer the popular culture. This is far more disturbing than the Murray/Miller controversy.

Not-for-profit arts in America are a \$37 billion dollar industry. Individually we read statistics that opera is thriving, and museum exhibits have given Jackson Pollak and Van Gogh rock star status. So if everything is on the upswing, why is there still a lingering fear that the arts remain not a priority but a national extracurricular activity?

I remember the year I won a Guggenheim grant for playwriting. I felt enormous pride as if I had received a mandate to continue my work. But when I called my father and told him I had won an \$18,000 grant, he said to me, “No daughter of mine is going on welfare!”

IT’S ANOTHER FUNNY STORY. But the truth is that for a grant with the distinguished reputation of a Guggenheim, it is a very small amount of money when you consider what a first year lawyer or marketing researcher is paid in our country. It reflects a question of priorities. How much do we really value our artists? Are we giving them a message that to be successful is to find approval in the commercial arena? Has the word “elitist” crept in because the American public has been skewed to believe that artists don’t work for a living?

The arts for all their strength remain valuable. We are a constant source of hot buttons and politicizations. At the slightest whiff of controversy, we are forced to fear that all funding will disappear. Anyone who speaks out about the NEA will be asked inevitably about Maplethorpe, Karen Finley and now I'm sure, sub-commandante Marcos.

THE POINT IS IF THERE WAS A CLEAR-CUT COMMITMENT TO THE ARTS, THEN WE ACTUALLY COULD HAVE A DIALOGUE. Arts administrators are constantly forced to second-guess censors. Arts are by their nature controversial. Except in a society of socialist realists. Furthermore, our hot buttons seem to be about books and plays that those who hold the most adamant opinions have never seen. Bill Ivy, backstage, just told me the tide is turning. He had just met with 37 Congress people. Well, let's hope this is just the beginning of a big-time, permanent comeback.

The arts reflect profoundly the most democratic credo, the belief in an individual vision or voice. Our popular culture on the other hand, be it Hollywood or television, is based on a common denominator. When a movie previews, an audience votes on note cards if they did or didn't like the ending. A producer will re-shoot a film in the hopes that he can fulfill the audience's expectation and sell more tickets. On the other hand, I remember distinctly an evening during a preview performance of *The Heidi Chronicles* when Joan Allen asked me if I minded if she said an "a" instead of a "the" in a certain line. There is no where that respects the integrity of creation more than the arts.

At the O'Neill Theater Center conference every summer, Lloyd Richards would begin by saying the conference was devoted to the playwright and to each one of us finding his or her distinctive voice. The arts' belief in

human potential gives each of us – both the audience and the creator – pride in our society's ability to nurture individuals.

Is it elitist not to search for a common denominator? Is it elitist to believe in an individual's ability to craft his or her talent? At another dinner recently, the eminent sociologist Robert Mentor said to me, "Why is it that individual excellence is celebrated in sports but questioned in the arts?" Why is it that we sit in awe of the basketball superstar Michael Jordan and of course, Michael Jordan, the chairman of this board, but we believe that artists with similar outstanding talents should not be funded?

Why can't we celebrate the excellence of our artists without the undertow of elitism? There is no reason for our arts culture to be siphoned off to a marginal position from our national culture. No one wants to see *Xeroxes* every night but no one wants to see *Lethal Weapon IV* every night either. The truth is the national culture is a texture of both. But that will become more and more one-sided unless we make the arts a part of the next generation of Americans' lives.

I believe I became an artist because I had the good fortune of being taken to plays when I was young. Coming of age at a time when women's voices were suddenly being heard was further incentive to create.

THE HABIT OF THE ARTS AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

STARTS YOUNG. It is the job of all of us here to make them accessible to young Americans. It is also, I believe, the responsibility of all American artists to somehow contribute beyond their own work to the future of their art form.

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Because the theater meant so much to me in my youth, I started a program at The Theater Development Fund this year to take New York City High School students to plays. My theory was I would put them in touch with my world, and I would see if it had any relevancy to them. I wanted students who were bright but had no previous interest in the theater, getting an agent, or meeting Drew Barrymore.

We chose eight DeWitt Clinton High School seniors, a mostly low-income high school in the Bronx. DeWitt Clinton, by the way, is the alma mater of Arthur Gelb from *The New York Times*, Neil Simon and Ralph Lauren. This is the next generation. Our goal was to see eight plays, have post-play discussions and for them to keep a journal.

The first play we saw was *On The Town*.

Afterwards, we went out for pizza. They loved the music. They thought it was really modern. I told them who Leonard Bernstein was. As we talked, they told me they liked it a lot. I explained Betty Comden and Adolph Green were New Yorkers who had written this show when they were each twenty-four. At the end of our afternoon, I asked them if they would recommend the show to friends, and they said to me, "No, it's not cool to go to plays."

NOT COOL TO GO TO PLAYS IS ALL OF OUR ISSUE. Of course it's not cool to go to plays if the price is \$60 a ticket. No high school student from a low-income or middle-income family could recommend that. But it's also not cool if you're told in advance that it had nothing to do with your world. A bright boy in my group told me his friends made fun of him when he signed up to be in our pilot project. "What do you want to do that for?" What's not cool is when the arts are perceived as something that's "good" for you like gym or remedial math. In fact, I'd say over the past twenty years, the image of gym has wildly improved while the image of the arts has dimmed.

The arts are the soul of a nation. They are also a culture's reflection of itself. In the arts, the students from DeWitt Clinton could find the power to express themselves and the world they hope to create. For both the not-for-profit sector and the profit entertainment industry, it is for all our benefit to have a generation of Americans who will each individually question ethics, morality, character, humor and what beauty really is.

For every congressman who would say the arts are elitist, I would answer museums, plays and dance are not responsible for violence in elementary schools or hopelessness in adolescence. If the American family is changing and socio-religious structure is

changing, one sure way to find identity, commitment and joy is through the arts.

There has never been a time when there has been more information about weekend grosses, how much money movie stars are getting for their next picture or what Gwyneth Paltrow did or didn't eat last night. But these are not the ideas that form the conscience of a nation.

I next took my DeWitt Clinton seniors to see the musical *Parade* based on the book by Alfred Uhry about the lynching of Leo Frank in Atlanta. Afterwards, we sat backstage at Lincoln Center as the stage manager, Roy Harris, explained to them the mechanics of the scenery. We talked about the play, its theme of anti-Semitism and the entire issue of prejudice and race. They told me they had no idea that it was possible to lynch a white man in Atlanta. They told me it gave them a new perspective on their world.

When I told them that Hollywood filmmakers who determine which audiences will go to which film, would never assume that they would like *Parade*, they told me, "They don't know anything about us! They think they do, but they don't."

THE ARTS GIVE A GENERATION THE ABILITY TO DEFINE ITS OWN TIME. It seems to me on a very grassroots level, the future survival of the arts in this country may have something to do with the artists, playwrights and dancers opening their worlds to the next generation. If painters could take eight DeWitt Clinton students to a museum for a year, if a dancer could take students in Chicago to performances, if a musician could take sophomores to concerts in Atlanta, we might, on a fundamental level, rebuild a constituency and eliminate the curse word of "elitism."

There is nothing more inspiring for students than to meet an artist who has managed to make a life of creation. Whether the

students become playwrights or merely learn to love their work and think for themselves. And, frankly, there's nothing more inspirational for an artist than being in touch with the future.

Recently I read an article about a playwright's work which said the author writes well but writes wrong. The arts, our culture's form of self expression, seems to consistently get bogged down in issues of what is right and wrong, correct and incorrect, for us to do and say. There seems to be an impossible agenda on all sides that the arts must live up to. Perhaps it is finally time to celebrate excellence, to celebrate craft, discipline, ideas and creation.

Not only am I a recipient of a NEA grant, but I have also been the chairperson of two NEA panels. The panel system works. Extraordinary plays have emerged from grants made to those authors. Maybe it's time we stop constantly turning inwardly fearful and instead, figure out a way to move stronger into the future. The entire budget for grants to individual authors could not buy a Hollywood producer's summer share.

We are not dealing with an obvious national mandate, and it's time we did. A national campaign, co-sponsored by a partnership of the entertainment industry and the not-for-profit arts agencies, could vastly improve the image of the arts. The world of movies, television, graphic design and high technology is all fed by those of us who developed a specific voice or craft in the not-for-profit arena. If the profit world is so enthused by our achievements, isn't it time they give back to initiators?

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funder asked me how could I possibly believe the arts were more important than health or science? For a moment I felt like Marie Antoinette demanding “let them eat ballet.” But frankly, I don’t believe the arts are extracurricular. A society is defined by its culture and that culture begins in early education. We must respect the potential of our children as opposed to deciding that only a few deserve to experience the joy of cre-

ation. The decision to limit the arts is in fact elitist.

Finally, there must be a more creative form of subsidy. Recently I was at a dinner for the Guggenheim Foundation in which Vartan Gregorian and the novelist Michael Cunningham both said that receiving that grant changed their lives. In other words, incentive goes a long way. If this society won’t support its artists, or can’t support its artists, at least we could signal to them our hopes for

their work and our support.

Being an artist is an unbearably lonely job. Having an incentive for continuing work is one way to keep a community, if not fully subsidized, then at least, recognized. In a world of polls and positioning, the arts remain the true arenas in which an individual can fearlessly look at the world and say, “Here’s where we’re going.” The arts, our

benchmark, and popular culture are separating. It’s our challenge to bring them back together again.

The task of all of us here tonight is to give the next generation of artists and Americans a chance to find and define the character of this nation. In a country so profoundly dedicated to the individual vision and freedom of interpretation, the potential is magnificent. The arts remain the soul of this country and with all of our support and the legacy of Nancy Hanks, it will be the source of an inspired vision for the next century.

Thank you very much.

About the Lecturer

A PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING PLAYWRIGHT WHOSE WORK REFLECTS BOTH WIT AND WISDOM, WENDY WASSERSTEIN is a native New Yorker, born in Brooklyn and raised in Manhattan. In 1989, her play, *The Heidi Chronicles*, earned her critical acclaim and a Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critic's Circle Prize, the Drama Desk Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and the Tony Award. Her play, *The Sisters Rosensweig*, has enjoyed runs on Broadway and London's West End. Wasserstein wrote the screenplay adaptations for *The Heidi Chronicles* and *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and her adaptation of *The Nutcracker* was performed at The American Ballet Theatre at The Met.

Wasserstein's off-Broadway play *Uncommon Women and Others* was produced at the Phoenix Theatre in 1978, and her other credits include *Isn't It Romantic* and *Miami*. For PBS's Great Performance series, she has written *Drive, She Said* and adapted John Cheever's *The Sorrow's of Gin*, as well as her own *Uncommon Women and Others*. Wasserstein's publication credits include a collection of essays, *Bachelor Girls* (Knopf); *The Heidi Chronicles and Other Plays* (Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich); *The Sisters Rosensweig* (Harcourt, Brace), and a children's book, *Pamela's First Musical* (Hyperion). Recently, *An American Daughter*, Wasserstein's latest play, opened on Broadway, and her screenplay, *The Object of My Affection*, was made into a major motion picture.

Once a contributing editor of *New York Woman* magazine and *Harper's Bazaar*, Wasserstein is currently a contributing editor of *New Woman*. She has supported emerging playwrights, serving on the Very Special Arts Playwright Discovery Artists Selection Committee for more than 10 years. Wasserstein also serves on the Council of the Dramatists Guild, on the Board of the British American Arts Association and The MacDowell Colony Board. She has taught at Columbia University and New York University. She is also a member of the Theatre Development Fund's President's Council, an advisory group of leaders in the theatre. Wasserstein has been involved with kids as a spokesperson for Kid's Night on Broadway, and with inner-city high school juniors who have little or no exposure to theater, taking them to several shows and leading post-performance discussions.

Wasserstein received a Bachelor of Arts and honorary doctorate from Mount Holyoke College and a Master of Fine Arts from the Yale School of Drama.



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NANCY HANKS served as president of Americans for the Arts (formerly the American Council for the Arts) from 1968 to 1969, when she was appointed chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, a position she served through 1977. Until her death in 1983, Nancy Hanks worked hard to bring the arts to prominent national consciousness. This year marked the 12th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy by Americans for the Arts. Americans for the Arts established the lecture series to honor her memory and to provide an opportunity for public discourse at the highest level on the importance of the arts and culture to our nation’s well-being.

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- 1998 Dr. Billy Taylor, jazz musician and educator
- 1997 Alan K. Simpson, former U.S. Senator
- 1996 Carlos Fuentes, author
- 1995 Winton Malcolm Blount, Chairman of Blount, Inc., philanthropist, former U.S. Postmaster General
- 1994 David McCullough, historian
- 1993 Barbara Jordan, former U.S. Congresswoman
- 1992 Franklin D. Murphy, former Chief Executive Officer of the Times Mirror Company
- 1991 John Brademas, former Congressman, President Emeritus of New York University
- 1990 Maya Angelou, poet
- 1989 Leonard Garment, Special Counsel to Presidents Nixon and Ford
- 1988 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., historian

About Americans for the Arts

AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS is the national organization dedicated to building a better America through the arts. To this end, Americans for the Arts works with cultural organizations, arts, business and government leaders and patrons to provide leadership, education and visibility to advance support for the arts in communities across the country. Americans for the Arts has a National Policy Board comprised of more than 80 national public policy leaders, advocates and philanthropists from the corporate, government and nonprofit communities who inform the direction of Americans for the Arts, as well as provide valuable leadership for the arts and cultural life of the nation.

AMERICANS FOR THE ARTS offers the largest selection of publications on arts-related policy and careers, and its National Arts Policy Clearinghouse is the nation's leading centralized resource for arts information and research. Americans for the Arts' Institute for Community Development and the Arts, researching more than 1,000 models of cultural programs as agents for economic and social change, works closely with cultural leaders and elected and appointed officials to link the arts to solutions for important challenges facing America's communities, such as crime, unemployment, illiteracy and racial tension. *Arts Link*, the official newsletter of Americans for the Arts, includes the latest information on legislative activity and arts education, as well as news about private and public resource development, arts policy research and innovative community development programs. Americans for the Arts' annual conference brings together the nation's largest gathering of artists, art agencies, business, foundation and corporate leaders for information sharing, networking and professional development. Americans for the Arts' website www.artsusa.org provides on-line access to a wide range of information and research.

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