

Nancy Hanks Lecture 2002

# The 15th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy

*Lecturer*

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I'm honored to have this opportunity to share my thoughts with this distinguished audience, a goodly number of whom are my friends from the Washington arts community and colleagues from Arena Stage and the Graduate Acting Program at New York University. Thank you so much for being here with me. I'm doubly honored to speak in the annual lecture series in memory of Nancy

Hanks and her achievements as chairperson of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) from 1969 to 1977, roughly 30 years ago. I've titled my remarks *Creativity and the Public Mind*. I'd like to speak first about the second part of the title, following Nancy Hanks and the NEA into our own times and then ponder the role art plays in human society and how the Arts Endowment has affected the creative process itself.

Nancy Hanks. I had the pleasure to know her somewhat, as a frequent theatre panel member and a grant recipient in my position as producing director of Arena Stage: that complex, private-yet-loving, tender-but-tough indefatigable woman who followed Roger Stevens to become the second chairperson of the National Endowment for the Arts. Tutored by Nelson Rockefeller to learn the ways of politics and then gaining valuable experience as vice president of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Nancy had no real artistic background and never tried to conceal that fact. But, somehow, she knew what artists needed, she knew about making institutions grow, and she had the courage and creativity to see that things were done the way she thought they should be. Under her stewardship the Endowment experienced a burst of energy and optimism that for a time promised a democratic culture in America at the highest level. Helen Hayes, at her last meeting as a member of the National Council of Arts, said, "I have stood on many mountain peaks, but this was my Everest." All of us artworkers in the field had those same feelings—the NEA beckoned us to our Everest, and why not? By her ability to defuse conflict and her knowledge of how to work a system to her will, Nancy was able to achieve the bi-partisan support of Congress, an increase in

appropriations of an astounding 1,400 percent from \$8 million to \$124 million, and by hook and by crook to keep censorial politics at bay. She became "a mother to a million artists" as one fan said and brought equal weight to bear on arts institutions, leading the arts for the very first time into national consciousness.

Nancy's years were turbulent years in American history: the women's liberation movement, the revolt against our involvement in Vietnam, and the revolution in the area of civil rights gave us a sense of upheaval and the exhilarating possibility of change. The arts were an important means of expressing deep-seated feelings of bitterness, rage, alienation; of rejecting traditional values and habits of behavior; of experiencing excitement, empowerment, and a newfound sense of freedom. First, through the enlightened support of W. McNeil Lowry of the Ford Foundation beginning in the mid-fifties and then with the new structure of public funding growing stronger and stronger, we dared to see the future and it worked.

We handled our setbacks with a quiet heart, perhaps too preoccupied with our new toys. When, in response to a \$750.00 grant for a one-word, seven-letter poem called LIGHGHT, the *Los Angeles Times* weighed in with two poems of its own, UGH and BLEACH, we laughed at the absurdity. *The American Literary Anthology/3*, which received a grant, turned out to contain a magazine called *The Brown Bag*. It was noted by Congress to be "a subversive organization, at least as subversive as Black Power....There you have a Bolshevik bomb, black, round, substantial, with a subversive fuse, to...disrupt poetic literary salons." Our response was something like, "There they go again!" As if the Congress was a bunch of naughty boys, bound to grow up soon.

In 1972, Erica Jong was one of 60 writers out of over 1,500 to receive a grant of \$5,000, which yielded up her best-selling novel, *Fear of Flying*. This event precipitated a flamboyant brouhaha. "Public Paid for 'Horny' Novel" was the title of a nationally syndicated column. "If some dizzy dame or guy wants to write about her or his most intimate sexual feelings, why should you or I be stuck with the tab for these ravings from a rest room wall?" The reporter's solution was to abolish both Endowments. Jesse Helms called the book a "reportedly filthy, obscene book" and suggested that the "\$5,000 be refunded." But Nancy pulled the fat out of the fire yet another time. Artistic judgments were not her responsibility, she stated;

they were the province of the advisory panels, made up of professionals in the specific fields, and it was up to the National Council to endorse the panels' recommendations. Nancy put everything on the line, up to the very structure of the Endowment itself. It was Democrat Sidney Yates, chair of the House Subcommittee on Interior Appropriations, who supported Nancy when she appeared before the committee. Prompting her, he suggested, "Perhaps time has a habit of changing values, customs, and attitudes." Nancy, of course, enthusiastically agreed. "One of the dangers art requires is that somebody may say that his creation is trash," he suggested. "You are indeed right, Mr. Chairman," she concurred.

The Endowments were not abolished. Nancy wrote in a letter to Jesse Helms that "Nurturing the broad range of the Nation's creativity is far more important than a few tempests that arise....I say that because of my conviction that one cornerstone of any culture is the nurtured talent of its creative artists." We hunkered down to our work.

Of course, political pressure is a given for any government agency, and we were alert—though not sufficiently alert—to the tensions between the Endowment and Congress. The balances were always tenuous and easily disturbed. The issues prefigured during Nancy's tenure were to run away with themselves and the threats to abolish the agencies, though at first quite unbelievable, soon gained a sense of possibility and we came to feel threatened in a new way.

The issue of censorship erupted like a Vesuvius in 1989 and 1990, more than a decade after Nancy. New York Senator Alphonse d'Amato tore up a copy of Andres Serrano's photograph, *Piss Christ*, on the Senate floor, while Jesse Helms claimed in a loud voice that Serrano wasn't even an artist. And both of them called for the elimination of the arts agency. We remember when the "decency clause" became a part of the NEA's reauthorizing statute; to receive funds we were required to take into consideration "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public" and also know that "obscenity is without artistic merit, is not protected speech, and shall not be funded."

John Frohnmayer was to live with the havoc this statute wreaked and finally in 1992 was asked to resign after three tumultuous years as chairman. He had denied grants, over the approval of the panel, to Karen Finley and three other performance artists who became known as the NEA Four. They had brought suit against the NEA, their claims were settled out of court, and then expanded the suit to the Supreme Court,

challenging the constitutionality of the "standards of decency clause." Congress was embarrassed and angry.

The American Family Association and the Christian Coalition grew in power over the years and brought into Congress a continuing series of new outrages in an effort to eliminate the agency. While the American people supported arts funding in a general way and offered their taxes willingly, there was never any kind of counter-culture groundswell against censorship. The arts community itself did eventually come to the fore and did its best, but: it couldn't find effective language defining what it stood for and lacked good media coverage; its supporters didn't have enough votes to exert any real pressure; and outside of the Hollywood few, artists are poor and had nothing meaningful to offer to campaign chests. As a strong political force that could affect policy at the highest level, we were better as artists.

Jane Alexander was the first artist ever proposed for chairman of the NEA, and of course we were thrilled: she would know how to affect policy at the highest level—the president himself. Nancy Hanks had had the ear of President Nixon and of President Ford and for a short time of President Carter. When Jane came to Roger Stevens for advice, he immediately said, "Always talk to the president." Jane tells us in her recent book, *Command Performance*, that from 1993 when she was sworn in until the fall of 1997 when she resigned, she could secure only one official appointment with President Clinton—in March 1995 for about twenty minutes. She was seeking his overt support of the NEA against Republican attacks on controversial art, reassuring him that funds were now granted only for certain specified projects unlikely to cause problems.



Guthrie Theater Artistic Director Joe Dowling, together with former Arena Stage resident actors Gail Grate and Henry Strozier, introduced the 2002 Hanks Lecturer, Zelda Fichander.



The President replied, “that sounds good, they’ve got to understand the public won’t pay for that”—meaning controversial art.

It’s interesting that the first President Bush, in deposing Frohnmayer, wrote to him similarly: “the taxpayer will simply not subsidize filth and blasphemous material.” So I guess you can say that the Arts Endowment has had bi-partisan attention.

Jane concluded after her meeting with Clinton that the President regarded the arts as a “soft issue.” “Winning was what it was all about,” she writes, whereas she had wanted Clinton “to be not only a skilled politician but also a visionary, with lofty ideals and a dedication to the finest creations of human beings.” She wanted more than there was to be had and finally came to know that and left.

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She notes that when Sid Yates was asked whether he felt politics and art were antithetical, he answered that as support for the arts gained around the country, the cry for accountability of public funds would increase as well; the tension between “high culture” and democracy, he believed, was inevitable. She adds that “he may not have liked the erotic

photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, but he never doubted the artist’s right to make or exhibit them.” Yates quoted Ogden Nash: “Smite, smut, smoot, rough, and tough, smut when smitten is first-page stuff.”

Matters of content have been brought under control. An era of grand possibility on the federal level has slipped away. No more grants to individual artists—they’re the ones who cause all the trouble. No more sub-grants on the part of institutions—in case they might bring in individual artists who cause all the trouble. In fact no more general support for institutions, which is what they most need. Grants only for projects in certain designated categories are awarded.

The NEA continues to serve well and importantly in areas that remain to it, especially on a state and local level, and in the areas of arts-in-education, architecture,

and access to the arts. Surely we must press to keep the Endowment alive and see it better funded. But many of us who were ardent believers in a long and high reach for public funding have come to doubt that the tension between the artist and the politician will ever be resolved. I was one of those ardent believers and am now one of the doubters. I regarded the content controversies of those ebullient early days too lightly, as ludicrous or transient, rather than as deeply rooted expressions of our political system. And we lost our best opportunity to organize our forces, early on, when the conflict was still in motion.

Let’s speak for a bit about the nature of creativity itself so we know precisely what it is we must struggle to protect. In general, our public representatives don’t know what the creative process is or perhaps even how to regard its products. It’s not that politicians can’t at the same time be artists or appreciate art or that artists or art appreciators can’t at the same time be politicians. We have examples of good men and women who combine these talents. In our country, however, political power more and more equals money times votes and art is acceptable principally for its spin-off benefits (civic enlightenment, preservation of our legacy, community health, economic assistance to downtown, and so forth) rather than for its pith.

I once had the honor of introducing at an event at Arena Stage the Nobel Prize-winner, Isaac Bashevis Singer, recently deceased, who wrote his novels in Yiddish, thus restoring the language to literary stature. In preparing to introduce him, I went back to his works and became acquainted with the whole range of his wonderful characters. Their culture is Jewish, and we encounter them rooted in the religious and social life of the *shtetl*—the village—of Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century. But so powerful is Singer’s ability to create fictional people whose realness is beyond dispute, we can know them above their nationality. Gimpel the Fool, for example, could be one of us.

Gimpel introduces himself with his name and occupation: “I am Gimpel the Fool. I spin yarns,” he says. And Singer lets him speak a truth that is universal for every storyteller: “I wandered over the land and good people did not neglect me. After many years, I became old and white. I heard a great deal, many lies and falsehoods, but the longer I lived the more I understood, that there were really no lies. Whatever doesn’t happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn’t happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year—what difference does it make? Often I heard tales of which I said ‘Now, this is a thing that

simply could not happen!’ But before a year had elapsed, I heard that it actually had come to pass.”

In Gimpel’s words lurks not only the source of the storyteller’s yarn but also something deeper, something about the very biologic nature of man—our life as a species—animal, human. Something about the wild, anarchic stuff in us that we try to tame so that we may enjoy the order and the delights of civilization. About that flimsy veil between the thin layer of the conscious and what Freud called the *Zyuder Zee* of the unconscious—between waking and dreaming, between what we know and what we don’t want to know—a sense that comes from always living between two worlds. And about our life’s struggle to sort out the differences between how we perceive the world and how it “really” is.

Of course, we are the same, you and I—all leaves from the same tree—but how are we to know each other across our separate experiences, religions, habits of life, wantings, sufferings, pasts? This grotesque misunderstanding, this confusion and enmity, this war between us! “Now this is a thing that simply could not happen! But before a year had elapsed, it had come to pass.” If Gimpel were among us, he could well be pointing to the 70-foot crater where the Twin Towers stood so recently and 3,000 of us were incinerated on a golden day that started out like any other.

We have always had our *griot*, our storyteller, who seeks to unravel these mysteries for us, hoping to find hints, clues, by walking in the shoes of another, gathering up the cultural strands of time and weaving them into a tapestry of meaning, trying to pierce the opacity of the world, and of our human nature in particular. Camus has told us: “If the world were clear, art would not be necessary. Art helps us to pierce the opacity of the world.”

On September 11, I became a part of the primal rush of students and grown-ups as well to the agora, the market place, which in this instance happened to be Washington Square Park, the destination for a shared ritual of grief. A link fence surrounds the marble Arch, which terminates Fifth Avenue downtown at Waverly Place, the neighborhood of New York University. It is here that public expressions of sorrow coalesced. Within days after the attack, the fence was swathed in immense white canvases and, on its northern side, a giant American flag. All of these—the flag included—served as vast communal parchments and hardly a square inch of space was not crowded by a fury of written gratitude or confusion, pacifism, or unbridled rage. English, Russian, German, French, Italian, and languages I couldn’t differentiate

spelled out thoughts and feelings, hopes and despair, in every color of the magic markers stacked in small mesh bags hanging every six feet or so for people to grab. *The New York Times* recorded this in detail for the future.

The storyteller was the community itself. The parchment wall around the monument received a thousand authors. The language of grief had been passed along person to person, block by block—then sweeping over the area on television—then block by block once again. Ritual grief transmitted from eye to eye, satellite to satellite, and then the rhetoric to give it expression converged into a single communal place.

And, then, there were the “Missing” fliers—copied photos of missing loved ones posted there on the fence at Washington Square as well as on fences, trees, buildings, lampposts across the city. Personal remarks by family members had been affixed to the fliers. A lament: “Missing, my two lovely twins, age 28.” As if the details could lure him from where he’s hiding: “He had a tattoo on the base of his back, no facial hair, his right big toe had only half a nail.” Amended by hand: “Gennie Gambole had *not* been on the 102nd floor, but on the 105th.” In a child’s scribble: “We need you, daddy, please come back.” And instead of a proper funeral: “Yesterday. How we long for yesterday.”

The scanned photographs attached to the fliers echo a ritual from ancient Greece in which sculptured images of the deceased appeared on graves. The dead were often pictured in some final activity before traveling to Hades, living a moment of their lives for the last time. Inevitably, the family members who devised the “Missing” flier—like the Greeks who sculpted graves for their dead—had chosen the happiest images they could find. So the missing people stood smiling in wedding pictures; they were poised above birthday cakes, with babies and puppies and at graduations. I pass the marble Arch each day on my way to NYU and back home again and I reflect on the singleness of our human destiny.

And it seems that making something useful is not enough, we must embellish it, in some way memorialize it. We elaborate our homes with great attention to their style and materials and décor, or spend concentration and energy on how we adorn our bodies—what shall it be? Cloth or leather? Buttons, buckles, or bows? Wear corsets or breathe free? Or paint our bodies and face, or put rings on our fingers or through our ears or nose, or tattoo favorite symbols on our flesh? Or elaborate the process of satisfying our animal hunger until our meals become a ritualistic artform.

How shall we think of these things that we do and have always done? Or of the walls of the caves of France, great natural chambers covered with paintings of astonishing vividness of form and facility of design, the first record of civilization that we have. Or of the Gothic cathedrals of Europe, built over centuries by whole communities? Or the pyramids of Egypt?

What is this need to make the ordinary extraordinary? Whether it is wood, stone, or clay; movement or sound or speech; story or idea or visual image or a conception of space that we want to move from its existence in nature to a more evocative, meaningful existence in art? For here we are, in every society, adorning ourselves, our artifacts, our surroundings, making music, creating dances, dramatizing stories, painting and sculpting and writing novels and poetry, assembling in the market place to express our collective grief. What lies behind these universal practices? The extraordinary care and attention given to these matters and their ubiquity are clues that, in some way the biologists have not yet plumbed, they are, indeed, involved in the issue of survival and are not frivolous cultural overlays.

It seems that we humans are creatures without defenses but for our creativity. Subject to huge vicissitudes of fortune in the course of a lifetime—“poor fork'd animal” Shakespeare identifies us. Aware, despite our talent for denial, that those we love may die and that we ourselves will die, and that in the end, life's a failed enterprise. On top of that insult to our self-importance, we can't run very fast, we lack the tough hide of the elephant, the long neck of the giraffe, the teeth of the shark. We're subject to a range of bodily and emotional illnesses. Each of us is isolated in our own separate skin—the only creature who is outside of nature—and, unlike the other animals, we find out to our surprise and sometimes-indignation that the world was not made for us at all; we only dwell in it for a time. (Some of us don't learn this and do great harm to the environment.) The gods, or the one God, or our internalized conscience exact a heavy price for the pleasures of this life that they allow us.

We suffer the feeling that we have little real power over anything much. Aeschylus said it 2,500 years ago: “We are but flies to the gods. They kill us for their sport.” As far as I know, he has never persuasively been contradicted. Floods, earthquakes, wars, suicide bombers, anthrax and smallpox, draught and starvation, psychic trauma, untrustworthy leaders upon whom we project our dependencies, economic cycles of poverty and plenty, seem to be beyond our control.

And yet. And yet. There *are* things we can do! And, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said: “That which a man does, that he has.” We can know beauty and try to create it. We can reach for immortality through what we leave behind. If an actor, we can surrender ourselves to possession by an imagined “Other” or, if a political activist, to a compelling cause, or if a mother, to the miracle of birthing and raising a child. We are, then, capable of transcendence and of ecstasy. We can, through imagination and empathy, reach across the distance between us and experience intimacy; make palpable in the world whatever we can imagine (and alas! we can imagine blowing things up as well as taming them); and by our capacity to play—for we are *homo ludens*, playing man, as well as *homo sapiens*, thinking man—we can fantasize alternative universes—other ways that things could be—and make artworks that are our new worlds. And in that sense, we have all the power there is.

Through art, we can confront the final core of uncertainty at the heart of things. On the whole, artists do this far more bravely than engineers or lawyers or politicians. In a culture of specialists, the artist is something else. Reality is malleable and can accept any construction put upon it: how one sees it is how it is. The personal vision of each individual artist speaks to us of the elasticity of human perception and makes us wiser and better fit for survival.

And in making art, we draw in a conscious way on the deep, rich mother lode of the unconscious. What comes to the artist from that hidden place surprises and enlightens her. And she, in turn, by making the familiar strange, the ordinary extraordinary, shows the rest of us what we may never have seen. Quite literally, she illuminates, she throws new light upon reality. In that way she has the power to make and remake the world.

*Tikkun Olan*. In Hebrew, “To repair the world.” We are the only animal who strives to do that. It's our creative mission. And this mission gives us our identity.

For the individual artist, there is also the precious opportunity to know one's self. The artist can see life more clearly through the eyes of his creative self. Can he not, then, see *himself* more clearly through those same eyes? As creator, you see or feel or imagine a thing and begin in a certain way that is yours alone—that is only *yours*—to bring it to life. The thing yields to you, for it's your creature and wants to be born. Along the way of its emergence, it will no doubt acquire a life of its own, it will rebel, challenge you perhaps, and ask of you what *it* wants rather than what *you* want. You may see things in



a different way, or you may feel ambivalent or resistant or confused or angry, or you may not have available within you at that particular moment what it wants. But if you insist on making a go of it because your will is strong or you just can't help yourself, you will keep at it, listen to the imagined object as attentively as you can and try to batter down anything that stands in the way of achieving it—self-doubt, fatigue, fear, despair, guilt, rage, panic, the drying up of impulse, whatever. Especially you must stand your ground against that *Watcher at the Gate*—so labeled by Schiller and quoted by Freud. The *Watcher* is critical, judgmental, and would censor the flow of thoughts and images out of which the artwork will emerge. You must get rid of him and hang on to the notion of your singularity—think that without you, this special vision would be lost to the world. Albert Einstein, when asked how he would have felt had there been no experimental confirmation of his general theory of relativity, is said to have remarked: “Then I would have felt sorry for the dear Lord—the theory is correct.” Good for him!

Because of your urgent love for this demanding child you have put out there from inside yourself and because of your total absorption in it, you will come to allow yourself to be revealed to yourself. And in time you will know what has to be done next and how you must *shape yourself* in order to be able to do it. And so the dialogue will continue back-and-forth and, hopefully, it will consummate in something that pleases you. And, then, will please someone else.

Here's an untitled poem by William Butler Yeats:

*The friends who have it I do wrong  
Whenever I remake a song  
Should know what issue is at stake  
It is myself that I remake.*

We are each an original. We come into the world at the cost of alternative ovulations, alternative lives really. The chances of our being our parents' son or daughter is in the vicinity of one in ten million. The fundamental identity that we are born with may not at all suit the identities of our mother and father; we may be born into the wrong house or even into the wrong destiny. But if we have the talent to create a beautiful thing that wouldn't be there but for us, we feel blessed. And in addition to repairing the world, we have the opportunity to repair ourselves, make ourselves whole, a project that can engage us for a lifetime and for which, I believe, we have landed on the earth.

We know that censorship of a certain kind is a good and necessary thing, serving a vital function in human life;

we couldn't construct a civil society without it. We're born animals and we need to accommodate to that fate. We teach our children and re-learn it ourselves how to repress and re-channel our anarchic desires, which are intuitively selfish and anti-social. Children have to share their toys and their parents mustn't shout “Fire” in a crowded theatre. Self-censorship, repression, the internalization of certain cultural habits and codes, passed along primarily by our parents, is the price we pay for civilization. Freud in his landmark book, *Civilization and its Discontents*, acknowledged that the rewards of civilization were well worth the price. He even suggested that repression is the very seedbed of art where metaphor and symbolization, the basic grammar of artistic expression, are born.

Being the antennae of their species, artists have picked up on all of this. Their task, however, is different from that of other members of the community. It is to push through the dense and tall barriers of custom and habit that society has put up for its own perpetuation and to see the world freshly. The artist struggles for de-repression, to recover the child-like anarchic spirit that was once hers, and that now she plans to join with her adult knowledge of craft and with hard work to make a new thing that the world has never before seen. To play within form is the difficult way of the artist. And to rediscover that earlier inner freedom is perhaps harder than to learn how to use one's materials, the force of culture being so strong.

The artist is a lonely creature. His only constituency while he's at work is himself. He lives every day out on a limb. And much as he may wish otherwise, the unseen presence of who is going to look or listen or read and judge and award and buy hovers around him. The society of his times never leaves him; indeed, it provides him with his themes. But sometimes he needs to be lonely.

August Wilson says: “When I was writing *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, I realized that someone was gonna stand up onstage and say the words, whatever the hell

**“To play within form is the difficult way of the artist. And to rediscover that earlier inner freedom is perhaps harder than to learn how to use one's materials, the force of culture being so strong.”**

they were. That's when I realized I had a responsibility to the words. I couldn't have the character say any old thing. There couldn't be any mistakes." He says he communes with himself in the crepuscular gloom of the basement of his home and, if he's lucky, taps into what he calls "the blood's memory," that "deepest part of yourself where the ancestors are talking." In his mind's eye, the audience is there in the basement with him, waiting to see what he's going to show them this time—the audience who, in various disguises pass through his dreams and keep him on the edge as he prowls through his working days.

**"...can you imagine Picasso conducting a poll to see whether people were ready for him to leave his Blue Period and move on to something else—something, say, more abstract?"**

Institutional leaders are lonely too. The hardest part of my years at Arena was to stay tuned into the life of my community—its preoccupations, its mood, its artistic tastes—and yet not let myself be bound by these. I would try to intuit what needs, what hopes and fears, what feelings, might be beneath the surface of their individual lives, that

they themselves might not even be aware of, and speak to those. To do that, I had to stay in contact with my own inner life, to get below the surface of my daily business and know what I was thinking and feeling in this ever-changing moment of time and place. I thought that if I could find myself, I would find the audience. I was looking to be innovative that is, to bring them something new and unexpected, whether it were of today or centuries ago, to surprise them, to delight and teach them through something I myself had found surprising and illuminating, and let them be the ones to decide whether we had succeeded or not. And, of course, sometimes our coming together was successful and sometimes it wasn't, but that's how we understood it would be. The marketplace of ideas—this is the best of what our democracy has to offer. I know that other people work this way as well and want their relationship to the work to remain direct and personal.

Because we have less money than we once had, because we need more and more votes at the box office, because we seek to please our audiences in order to stay alive, we have come to adopt the tools of the politician—the

opinion poll and the focus group. While useful for demographic or market studies, these are dangerous to the artist and in the end diminish her intuition—that ability to access information so rapidly that it seems to bypass the brain and, at the same time, to feel right. Intuition is an especially potent gift for an artistic leader to have.

The artist must know. Unlike the politician, the artist must lead and not collect other peoples' opinions, unless they are collaborators. Most people won't know until they receive the artwork and experience it directly—hopefully with an open heart and mind—whether it delights them or not, whether it opens a door for them, or not—so why ask them ahead of time? Taken to the absurd dimension, can you imagine Picasso conducting a poll to see whether people were ready for him to leave his Blue Period and move on to something else—something, say, more abstract? Or for Ibsen to have gathered around him some of his regular audience in 1879 and ask how they would react to a play about a woman who left her husband and children in order to become a complete human being? Nora's door-slam was heard around the world. What she did was so controversial that social invitations requested that it not be discussed at dinner. The homogenization of art pulls its claws, plays to the surface of the public's taste.

There are other forms of censorship that press on needy arts institutions. The issues of donor intent and donor control versus institutional integrity are as old as the practice of philanthropy. The tension between giver and recipient is often healthy and can make for some innovative and surprising gifts. But the passions, values, and strategic objectives of the donor need to match the vision, mission, and goals of the organization. Leaders of arts institutions understand that how the money is raised dramatically affects their ability to carry out the mission.

Another issue at a time of external pressures is the issue of transparency—how to maintain the openness of a place, its ethos of shared truth. "But I'd shut my eyes / in the sentry box, / So I didn't see nothing wrong."—Rudyard Kipling. If there's bad news, no one wants to be the messenger; that's entirely human. But openness requires that board and staff, artists and staff, artists and board stay in touch with each other's work-in-progress. Complacent cultures and vacant sentry boxes hamper creativity. There can be a general sense within an institution that a policy or a trend or a wrongly-weighted budget is not to the good, but no one wants to tell the boss because the boss wouldn't like to hear it. After a string of box office flops, Samuel Goldwyn is said to have told a meeting of his top staff: "I want you to tell



me exactly what's wrong with me and MGM—even if it means losing your job.” That isn't what we mean to happen, but the point is made!

Where are we now with the NEA and funding?—for to the artist, poverty is also a form of censorship. The peak was reached in 1992, with an appropriation of \$176 million. After the huge cut in 1996, the figure fell to \$99 million; it stayed there until 2001 when it rose by a smidgeon to \$105 million. This \$105 million must be compared to Nancy's \$124 million, which in year 2000 dollars would give us \$279 million! One hundred and five little million measures the recognition, acknowledgment, and moral support that the federal government wishes to bestow upon the arts, in America, at the millennium. President Bush did issue a proclamation in October for National Arts and Humanities Month, focusing primarily on the healing power of the arts—which was appropriate. And he has signed Appropriations Bill H.R. 2217, guaranteeing a \$10 million increase in NEA funding for 2002, while Congress considers another \$2 million for 2003—token raises for a job well done: no more consternation on the Hill; no hullabaloo in the media; no dirty pictures. All is quiet.

In his departing remarks, Bill Ivey, recent NEA chairman said: “I believe we must face the challenge of developing our Big Ask....The Big Ask cannot just be about more money for the NEA or for state arts agencies or any entity, although our large vision, our shared vision, will in fact require additional support. We need a bigger, more comprehensive, more real conversation about art and society than has been conducted in the past.”

Money will follow imagination; in the arts it always does. We should strive for more NEA support in the valuable areas it has marked out for itself. But for the Big Ask, I suggest we must talk about going outside of the Endowment, to places and people interested in supporting the individual artist or creative institutions and not frightened by a controversy now and again. We need to think outside the federal box. There is, for example, a Boston-based nonprofit agency called Philanthropic Initiative that works with individual foundation and corporate donors to identify compatible recipients. Going at it from that angle might be refreshing. The Foundation Center tells us that there are 11,000 new foundations created since the mid-1990s; some of these must be arts-oriented and perhaps could be persuaded into fresh patterns of giving, maybe into a regional or even national pool of funds that could serve artistic ideas outside the pale of the federal government. As Mary Schmidt Campbell, dean of the Tisch School of

the Arts at New York University, has suggested: The very well-funded National Science Foundation, created after World War II to pay for the training of scientists, might provide a template for training a new generation of artists, from whom a flurry of new artworks could be expected.

The mass media megacompanies shortchange the arts. While they routinely raid nonprofit arts institutions for talent—look at TV and film credits and you'll find a who's who of the nonprofit performing world—they don't give back. When pressed by Jane Alexander to help fund the Endowment, the evasion was that they already contributed to the government by way of taxes. We shouldn't stand still for that. Perhaps setting up some other entity would persuade them to support the arts in a way they should and surely can afford.

Maybe the government is right after all—controversial art should be funded by the private sector—and I can't believe I'm saying that.

These are early thoughts which I dare to speak in the hope they provoke conversation and, yes, controversy.

Thank you for your attention.



Bob Lynch and Zelda Fichandler thank Joni Maya Cherbo, board member of The Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation, for the sponsorship of the Hanks Lecture.

## About the Lecturer

Zelda Fichandler was the founding director of Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. and its primary artistic force from 1950-1990. Her history-making example, force of personality, and eloquence as a speaker and writer have made her a leading national figure in the performing arts and Arena Stage a model for scores of cultural institutions established around the country. Zelda's personal vision for theatre has had a transforming effect on the entire field, switching the axis from Broadway to the rest of the nation in the production of new work. She is considered a parent of the regional theatre in America.

Zelda embraced a vast sweep of dramatic literature which reverberated through the commercial and non-commercial theatre world and into film and television. She directed many of Arena's productions including *Mrs. Klein*, *Uncle Vanya*, *The Three Sisters*, *Death of a Salesman*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and *A Doll House*; and the American premieres of new Eastern European works, *Duck Hunting*, *The Ascent of Mt. Fuji*, and *Screenplay*. Arena Stage was the first American theatre company, sponsored by the State Department, to tour the then-Soviet Union. Her *Inherit the Wind* played in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1973, the company performed her *After the Fall* at the 1980 Hong Kong Arts Festival, and in 1987, her production of *The Crucible* appeared at the Israel Festival in Jerusalem.

As a producer, Zelda nurtured all of Arena's plays, making a home for important European playwrights like Brecht, Frisch, Ionesco, Mrozek, and Orkeny, alongside significant American revivals of works by Albee, Miller, Williams, O'Neill, Thornton Wilder, Kaufman and Hart, and classics by Shakespeare, Shaw, Moliere, Ibsen, and others. Broadway, too, has felt the impact of Zelda's work, especially with the development of new plays. *The Great White Hope*, *Indians*, *Moonchildren*, *Pueblo*, *A History of the American Film*, *The Madness of God*, *Raisin*, and *K2* all started at Arena Stage. She left the artistic leadership of Arena in 1991 to her close associate, Douglas C. Wager.

Zelda also made Arena the theatre of the "second chance," where plays like *Summer of the 17th Doll*, *Saturday, Sunday, Monday*, and *The Comedians* found life after commercial failure in New York.



Zelda's concern for the development of young actors led her, in 1984, to take on, in addition, the role of chair of the Graduate Acting Program and master teacher of acting and directing at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts, a position which she continues to fill. Graduates of this premier program now occupy leading positions in film, television, and the stage, winning top awards in the various media. From 1991 through 1994, she also served as the artistic director of The Acting Company, a young company of actors that tours a classical repertory throughout America. The link between professional theatre and training is important to Zelda as a means "to attract young people to the benefits of company work and to train them to perform in the broadest repertory." The idea of "company" has animated her work since the beginning, and her goal now is to establish in New York an acting company composed primarily of graduates from the Graduate Acting Program. Many agents, casting directors, and stage directors consider the program at Tisch to be the most innovative and creative in the country.

Zelda received the National Medal of Arts in 1997 from President Clinton, the Common Wealth Award for distinguished service to the dramatic arts, the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award, The Acting Company's John Houseman Award for commitment to the development of young American actors, the Margo Jones Award for the production of new plays, Washingtonian of the Year Award, the Ortho 21st Century Women Trailblazer Award, and the Society for Stage Directors and Choreographers' George Abbott Award. The New York commercial theatre world awarded Zelda and Arena Stage the Antoinette Perry (Tony) Award in 1976, the first to be given to a company outside New York. In 1999 she was inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame, making her the first artistic leader outside of New York to receive this honor.



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Americans for the Arts is grateful for the support of The Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation, which has been a long-time supporter of the advancement of the arts and literature in the United States and The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, which works to enable both public and private sectors to understand the importance of the arts for youth development, community improvement, and economic prosperity nationwide.

## About the Nancy Hanks Lecture

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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. During her eight-year tenure at the National Endowment for the Arts, the agency's budget grew 1,400 percent. Until her death in 1983, Nancy Hanks worked hard to bring the arts to prominent national consciousness. This year marks the 15th Annual Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy, established to honor her memory and to provide an opportunity for public discourse at the highest levels on the importance of the arts and culture to our nation's well-being.

## Past Nancy Hanks Lecturers

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2001 Frank Rich, *The New York Times*, op-ed writer and former theater critic  
2000 Terry Semel, immediate past chairman and co-CEO of Warner Bros. and Warner Music Group  
1999 Wendy Wassertein, playwright  
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, Blount, Inc., philanthropist, former U.S. Postmaster General

1994 David McCullough, historian  
1993 Barbara Jordan, former U.S. congressman  
1992 Franklin D. Murphy, former chief executive officer, Times Mirror Company  
1991 John Brademas, former U.S. congressman and president emeritus, New York University  
1990 Maya Angelou, poet  
1989 Leonard Garment, special counsel to Presidents Nixon and Ford  
1988 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., historian

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