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## National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities (1965-1967): News Article 04

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# THEATRE

When President Johnson and Congress agreed to the creation of the National Council on the Arts, the American intellectual and cultural community heaved a great sigh of relief to the effect of at-last-this-country-is-going-to-subsidize-art. The community also quivered with the stock fears of Government censorship. But what has really happened?

What really happened was that the Government's knowledge of the arts in general and the theatre in particular was abysmally limited to only the most well-known, most well-publicized, most commercial artists and art areas. And the chairmanship of the Council was handed over to Roger Stevens, a Broadway producer with a heavily commercial record (sprinkled, I grant, with a few serious plays). Perhaps only coincidentally, Mr. Stevens had been a loyal supporter of the Democratic Party.

The record of the National Council, then, was predictably a joke. For example, a plan called Project Discovery (the kind of title you might anticipate) was to provide mammoth grants in conjunction with the Humanities Division of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Fine. Nothing as lovely as a mammoth grant for a resi-

dent theatre. Only these were grants that no independent, professional, artistic director would touch. And why? Because there were upsetting stipulations, the most upsetting being that most performances had to be played for student audiences.

Now I am all in favor of exposing young people to the theatre. It is something one really can't be against. And they ARE the audiences of the future, cliché though that may be. But the artistic drive and professional standards of a resident theatre can only be hurt

when performances are not being constantly played to paying, adult customers. Moreover, playing for students means getting mixed up with boards of education and that means having plays being approved by teachers, and THAT means Shakespeare and schoolroom classics and little else. Professional educators in general are almost as official, as mundane, as fretful and as artistically conservative as politicians.

Two theatres were chosen for the first Project Discovery grants. One was The Trinity Square Repertory Company in Providence, R. I. I might add that Senator Pell, again coincidentally, of that same state, was largely responsible for getting the National Coun-

cil's appropriation through the Senate. In defense of Trinity Square, its play selections have not been reprehensible at all and it had been actively working with schools long before the grant was given. But on the other hand, the second recipient — The Repertory Theatre of New Orleans — was actually CREATED for Project Discovery. And despite the amount of money involved its directorship was rejected by many talented and hungry men — William Ball and Ellis Rabb among them. Finally, Stuart Vaughan, who happened to be out of a job at the time, accepted. He scheduled "Charley's Aunt," "Romeo and Juliet," "Our Town," and "The Rivals." Can you think of four plays less likely to upset a board of education? Can you think of four plays less likely to excite a contemporary student? Can you think of four plays less stimulating to an acting company?

Finally, Andre Gregory accepted another Project Discovery grant for the race-troubled Watts area in Los Angeles (will do-gooder clumsiness ever come as a surprise?). This is an especial pity because Gregory had created one of America's most exciting resident theatres in Philadelphia be-

fore he left over a stupid misunderstanding. He is the last director in the world who should be involved with Governmental-educational thinking. A man committed to adventure and radicalism, he MUST be left alone. It would be tragic to think of Gregory on a Project Discovery program if it weren't so funny that he of all people would be on one in the first place.

Other National Council work has been equally awkward. Grants of \$25,000 were arranged for theatres producing new plays, but only when those plays were approved by a Council-chosen committee (which approved archaic, silly plays like "Does a Tiger Wear a Necktie?"). Jerome Robbins was given a sizable grant for a musical theatre laboratory and that, as a matter of fact, was marvelous.

Always the suspicious connections, always the money - with - strings, always the political influences, always the heavy-footsteps of Government machinery and Broadway-Hollywood thinking. How foolish for anyone to worry about political censorship of the arts. The Government and its Officialism are too unsophisticated for that.

—MARTIN GOTTFRIED