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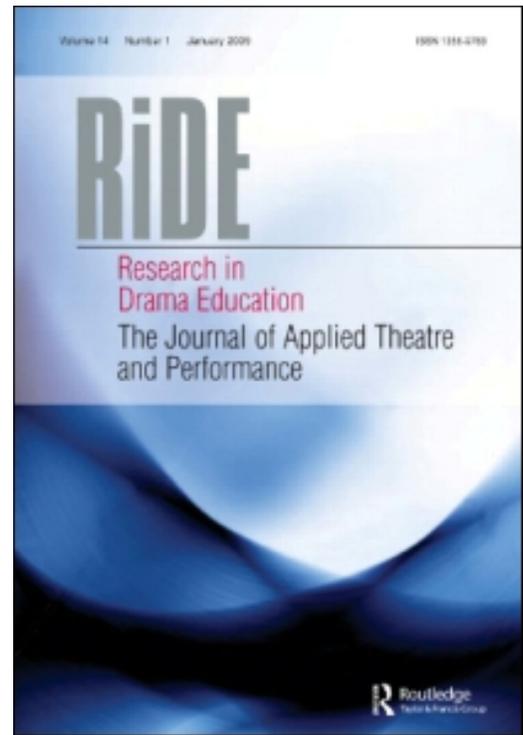
## **The Unreported Arts Recession of 1997** **By Dudley Cocke**

In the U.S. community-based arts field, the financial crisis did not occur in 2008, but in 1997. What happened then to those nonprofit arts organizations built for the majority of Americans is an unreported story, the consequences from which the field has not recovered.

The story of the 1997 arts recession begins in 1980 when the right wing, spurred on by Ronald Reagan's election, instigated a campaign to defame the National Endowment for the Arts. The ultimate goal was complete elimination of the federal agency established in 1965 by an act of Congress with the mandate to dedicate itself "to supporting excellence in the arts, both new and established; bringing the arts to all Americans; and providing leadership in arts education." The Reagan administration and Congress tried but failed several times in the 1980s to eliminate the NEA. Then in 1997 the agency's leader at the time, Jane Alexander, knuckled under to right wing political pressure, abolishing all of the NEA's more than a dozen discipline-based divisions (each of which had been armed with its own defense), installing in their place a few generic themes ("creation and presentation" is an example), and limiting organizations to one thematic application a year.

For the community-based arts field, the restriction to only one annual NEA application was especially problematic. Most progressive nonprofit arts organizations preferred competing for public money, because it was the people's tax money – and they saw their work as public work. Consequently, the more developed community-based arts organizations were receiving support from multiple NEA programs. With the new single application rule, Appalshop, where I work, abruptly lost 90 percent of its federal arts funding, which represented 20 percent of its annual operating budget.

The 1997 restructuring of the NEA delivered a second punch: discipline-based knowledge and expertise – which had been on a trajectory of becoming broader and deeper – disappeared from the nonprofit arts discourse. A "dumbing-down" effect took hold. A good example of this regression is the limited opportunity the public now has to see new and experimental plays from different cultures and geographies – a result of abolishing the NEA Presenting Program. Appalshop's theater wing, Roadside Theater, which I direct, lost 70 percent of its performance fee income with the collapse of the national touring market for new plays, which had been leveraged on NEA support for arts presenting as a discipline. Prior to 1997, Roadside had visited



more than 1000 communities in 43 states, never failing to reach an audience reflective of the racial, economic, and cultural diversity of each host community.

The restructuring also eliminated the NEA Folk Arts Program and, equally important for many community-based organizations, the Expansion Arts Program, a legacy of the civil rights movement. The directors of Folk Arts and Expansion Arts, Bess Lomax Hawes and A. B. Spellman, respectively, were thoughtful leaders who, during their tenures, helped others in the NEA understand the gifts offered by the artists their programs supported – programs that put a premium on expanding participation to include the majority of Americans as audience members and as art makers. Some of us noted a similarity between the NEA of the 1980s and early '90s and the Justice Department during the 1960s civil rights struggle: both had been examples of central government effectively collaborating with those working at the grassroots on behalf of disenfranchised Americans.

Like other discipline-based programs at the NEA, Folk Arts and Expansion Arts had paid artists and managers to visit and evaluate projects and come together on “peer panels” to make grant decisions. The exchange and dialog that resulted from these intense interactions helped community-based arts practitioners recognize themselves as part of a century-long U.S. democratic arts movement – and name cultural equity as the key concept supporting Article 27, Section 1 of the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This article affirms, “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”

During the period when the NEA – by far the nation’s largest single arts funder – commanded respect for egalitarian cultural values and the excellence of the art it supported, more and more private foundations had taken their cue from the federal agency. After its 1997 accommodation of the right wing, the NEA lost its vision and its reputation, and community-based arts, now without an inspiring federal advocate, attracted fewer and fewer private funders.

As community-based financial resources were declining, community problems were escalating. Inaugurated in 1981, Reaganomics’ over-emphasis on deregulation and privatization had caused widening wealth and income gaps, feeding a host of social ills that disproportionately afflicted lower- and middle-class people, precisely those served by community-based arts organizations. Incarceration, for example, had become a growth industry with more young African American men behind bars than in the classroom. By 1997, construction of a new prison was begun somewhere in the U.S. every 30 days. Faithful to the privatization mantra, the two new “super-max” prisons built in the 1990s to bolster the weak economy here in rural Virginia’s Wise and Dickenson counties were partnerships between government and for-profit corporations, continuing a tradition of profiting from human suffering. With budget reductions becoming routine, community-based arts organizations found themselves without the resources to respond to such local cultural emergencies.

By the turn of the millennium, a number of us on the front lines realized that the constant pressure of mounting community problems combined with the threat of insolvency had pushed our organizations into separate corners. Competition for funds had superseded cooperation, and the shared critical discourse, which the field had relied on to build and sharpen itself, had broken

down. In turn, ethical and artistic standards had been compromised in the field as a whole. The results of this downward spiral resembled the aftermath of a classic case of divide and conquer.

The near meltdown of global financial markets in 2008 only made things worse as it added to community problems and further strained cooperation among community-based organizations and their leaders. Further complicating matters, young people knew only the reality of privatization, and many of the most “marketable” (some would say, most talented) veteran community artists and cultural activists had retreated from the front lines to safer, better paying jobs. For those remaining in the democratic arts movement, life had become fairly miserable as long-time organizational allies abandoned a shared set of goals, and colleagues often mistook each other for the enemy.

The prospect that the U.S. economy will not recover any time soon may yet cause re-evaluation of our national priorities. Perhaps we will recognize our short supply of civic virtue. If so, there are thousands of artists ready to help communities engage in discussions about their future. These artists bring with them tested, bottom-up community cultural development methodologies to solve community problems. They are students of the status quo’s formidable resistance to change, and they know how to convert a sense of urgency into action. They understand how culture is more powerful than politics, and how imagination and compassion are linked. But to succeed, these veteran artists will need the insight and energy of young people, who, as they become increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress on the linked global issues of pluralism, equity, and sustainability upon which a reasonable future for their generation depends, will soon enough have to act on behalf of us all.

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<http://roadside.org>