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ARTICLE

The Politics of Public Humanities in America

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Abstract

This article takes a worm's eye view of the National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts and comments on the political realities that inform their operations. My work as a scholar and an applied theater practitioner with Aquila Theatre received program support from both agencies and has represented them at the White House, US Capitol, and US Supreme Court. I suggest that the traditional division that exists between arts and humanities, as reflected in the policies of both endowments, should be erased for the betterment of public-facing humanities, and, as a humanities program director, I want to address the structural problems of fundraising and the politics of money that inform the granting decisions of these US federal agencies.

Keywords: classical drama; fundraising; national endowments; politics; public programming; veterans

Scholars and artists drawn to the humanities – because of the thrill of living in the world of ideas or the aspiration to create more knowledge and understanding – often find the funding of the humanities and its related politics to be an opaque mystery. That was my experience before my work as an academic and an applied theater practitioner with Aquila Theatre, where I received program support from both the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Since then, I have represented these agencies at the White House, US Capitol, and US Supreme Court. I testified on behalf of the NEH before the United States Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies in May 2014 and have served as a panelist for the NEH in 2017 and 2021, the New York Department of Cultural Affairs in 2018, and the Whiting Foundation in 2022.

Now, after 34 years of treading the boards of humanities public programming, let us go behind the scenes and talk about money and politics.

As universities ponder ways to place appropriate value on the public-facing work of their scholars, it is worth noting that both the NEH and NEA grew out of a concerted effort by the academy in the early 1960s to address the growing focus on the sciences to the perceived determent of the appreciation of arts and humanities by the public. The American Council of Learned Societies, Phi Beta Kappa, and the Council of American Graduate Schools banded together to form a National Commission to investigate the state of humanities in America.

This work led to a congressional act in 1965, which created the NEH and NEA with an initial annual budget of $20 million.[1]

In FY 2024, the budget for the NEH was $211 million and the NEA in $210.21 million. This represents an infinitesimal 0.00624 percent of US federal expenses of $6.75 trillion. The modern American numbers are not particularly impressive, considering that the fifth century BCE Athenians were said to have spent as much on theater as they did on defense.[2] Although David M. Prichard has called this tale a "wild exaggeration" and calculated that in reality, between 5 and 15 times more was spent on defense than public festivals, today that number would still be equivalent to $450 billion on arts, humanities, and festivals.[3]

What makes these agencies distinctive in the American funding landscape is that they offer taxpayer-funded grants. Most arts and humanities organizations are 501 (c) 3 not-for-profit organizations, akin to a UK charity. These are non-shareholder companies organized for the public good whose proceeds must be used to further their charitable purpose. In the US government, funding for arts and humanities programs is scarce and hard to obtain at the local, state, and federal levels. These granting agencies, which the NEH and NEA either partially fund or significantly influence, demand stringent standards of organizational conformity and compliance from the organizations they support. What might seem prudent fiscal responsibility at first sight often acts as a serious intuitional barrier to small, grassroots, innovative, underrepresented, socially active, and new initiatives.[4]

In short, if you want to start an organization in the United States that promotes arts and/or humanities outside of an existing established intuition, first find between 10 and 20 very wealthy people and ask them to join your oversight board. To do this, they are expected to give substantial amounts of money personally. Government funders see these board donations as a measure of a nonprofit's stability. Without these funds, it becomes challenging to attract grants, and many fledgling organizations get caught in this catch-22 of implied privilege.

Donations to nonprofits are tax deductible, which makes giving advantageous for those in the wealthiest tiers of American society. This also means that they get to choose which organizations they donate to. If a group of avant-garde artists wants to create poetry and performances that critique large corporations, big banks, and the stock market, they will not have a lot of luck soliciting donations from people who depend on these for their wealth. In effect, arts and humanities programming in America is subject to the same kind of moneyed cultural influences as the political scene, mainly by the same exceedingly small number of people.

Even if a new nonprofit navigates this first significant hurdle, which also heavily favors people from privileged backgrounds with access to those wealth networks, much of the

[1] For the history of the NEH see Miller 2014. For the NEA, Bauerlein and Grantham 2008.

[2] Plutarch *Moralia* 349a. Compared to the 2024 NEA/NEH budget of $421.21 million, the National Institute for Health (NIH) federal budget was nearly $48 billion. Although most of this is spent on medical research grants, the NIH funds public programs. It should be noted that the NEH also funds humanities research. The National Science Foundation's federal budget in 2024 was $9.06 billion. This organization also funds public programming and research. For an international comparison, the UK government allocated £2.37 billion ($2.958 billion) to cultural services (source: https://www.campaignforthearts.org/news/what-did-the-2024-autumn-budget-mean-for-the-arts/).

[3] Pritchard 2012.

[4] For more details on the operations of the NEH and NEA, see Koch 2018.

organization's leadership time is absorbed by board management and never-ending fundraising. Not to mention that boards can pull funding or fire the leadership at will over anything they consider politically or culturally contentious.

Another valid criticism of the nonprofit system is that the donations effectively pull tax revenue out of the federal pot. Some argue that it would be better to eliminate this structure and raise more tax dollars for arts and humanities distributed by a competitive review model, as in much of Europe. In the American funding landscape, the NEA and NEH operate under a taxpayer model where federal funds are available to public humanities projects through an open and competitive peer-reviewed system. However, other structural impediments exist: most NEH public program grants require matching funds and institutional support. The proposals can run to over 200 pages; they take months and much expertise to prepare. Additionally, as both agencies are directed by political appointees and dependent on presidential and congressional budgetary support, navigating their current political "vibe" is essential.

Aquila Theatre is an organization that had always fused scholarship with the arts and classical theater as an excellent way to disseminate humanities programming. This was achieved via public pre- and post-show talks, participatory workshops, reading groups, scholar essays, online content, and engagement with underserved rural and urban communities. Aquila developed a large 50-city US theatrical tour and had the delivery system and cost-sharing funds in place.

The first few attempts at NEH funding failed despite developing partnerships with the University of Iowa and the University of Texas at Austin and working with their experienced grant writers. The issue we faced was the strict division between arts and humanities, which at the time was vividly represented by the NEH and NEA facing each other directly across the vast atrium of the Old Post Office building in Washington DC, which subsequently became the Trump Hotel (now closed). Our collaborative proposals fell between this artificial disciplinary fault line. Both agencies told us to "go across the hall" on the same day!

Then, in 2004, came a break. Republican administrations have tended to be hostile to the endowments since their creation by Lyndon Johnson in 1965. Under George W. Bush, this was no different. Both agencies were under threat yet again, and the chair of the NEA, the poet Dana Gioia, took a proactive approach to navigate the culture wars. Gioia saw that Aquila and the Acting Company were both touring Shakespeare across the United States, and he thought this was a way to show his congressional funders that the NEA was not just funding "bicoastal" projects but bringing work to the "heartland." He hypothesized that at that time, Shakespeare would be a noncontroversial choice, and so he created a new program called "Shakespeare in American Communities." The logo for this initiative was the bard against an American flag with the tagline that America was founded by people with Shakespeare in one hand and the bible in the other – messaging designed to appeal to conservative politicians. Gioia also secured an additional $1 million from the Pentagon to take Shakespeare to military bases. However, when the program got underway the following year, several of these performances were canceled due to troop deployments to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

As most of these touring Shakespeare performances were scheduled anyway, this program was a political sleight of hand, but it helped the NEA and put a good deal of federal funds into the budgets of local performing arts centers across America to present classical theater and related public programs. Then, in 2005, just three months into Bush's second term, the White

House held its first artistic event celebrating the NEA, and Gioia asked Aquila to perform in the East Room. This was Aquila's rambunctious New York production of *Much Ado About Nothing* with its 1960s Avengers theme (the British TV show with John Steed and Emma Peel, not the Marvel comic). This was a risk; the show was modern, quite loud, a bit risqué, and certainly a cheeky take on Shakespeare. During the rehearsals that afternoon, the White House staffers began to fret.

After a surreal banquet where we dined with Václav Havel, Tom Wolfe, and the Bushes, the actors gathered in an adjacent room where the secret map of the D-Day landing was prominently displayed. A nervous Gioia popped his head in to remind us of what was at stake – if this went badly, then Bush's support might well fade away, and that could spell the end of the endowments. So, no pressure then! Aquila's actors were heroic that night on that little low stage fronted by potted plants in the East Room. Bush was right on the front row, and occasionally, our Benedict locked eyes with him, posing those Elizabethan questions directly to the President; it was almost too much – except it was not. Bush was enthralled; I even received a thumbs-up and a shoulder squeeze from the man himself. That year, the funding for both agencies increased. I think those artists had a lot to do with it.

At that event was Jim Leach, the former Republican member of the House from Iowa and then chair of the NEH. He saw for himself a public program in action, in this case, using performance to create excitement about dramatic literature – "that's the Humanities, right?" He seemed convinced. For a moment, this little theatre company that initially grew out of a group of working-class artists from South London and Scotland that became a US nonprofit in 1997 had the ear of one of America's cultural elites. Leach then connected us with the director of NEH public programming, the inspiring Tom Phelps. We finally had a toe in the door.

Connecting with NEH gave us insights into where the agency sought to impact, which I advise all NEH grant seekers to do. Public libraries were in a transitional period at that time due to increased internet usage and a lack of local funding and support. How could libraries become grassroots-level outlets for public humanities programming? Could performance be linked to reading and discussion groups? We sought advice from the Urban Library Council and the Brooklyn Public Library, who became partners on the project and helped us understand the libraries' requirements. This was a needs-based bottom-up approach rather than the top-down programming we had been proposing. Partnerships were key, and we added the NYU Center for Ancient Studies and the Society for Classical Studies, who guided us with consultants and scholarly resources.

Officers at the NEH read our drafts and gave us feedback; their advice and perceived buy-in were invaluable. Along the way, we learned that specific texts were considered too controversial (this problem is far worse now); one earlier grant failed because it featured *Catch-22* in conversation with *The Iliad.* The problem, it seems, was Heller, not Homer. One Republican Senator on the appropriations committee sat through my testimony about what we were doing with ancient drama and veterans, then seemed to awaken from a deep sleep and barked that he wanted to fund "all the plays of Earnest Hemmingway!" (there is only one). We also needed buy-in from librarians nationwide, and we had to learn from them what would work in their spaces and for their audiences. I spent much time in public libraries, one of the few places in American public life where no money is exchanged between patron and staff.

So, we called Greek drama "ancient dramatic literature," we focused on the use of the classics in the Federalist Papers and other American foundational documents, we talked

about the idea of democracy, how Athenian drama related to it, and what it meant to Americans. We learned the programming value of building content around well-thought-out thematic units. Instead of entire plays, we proposed "live readings," or short excerpts anchored by scholars that could be staged anywhere. Participants would join reading groups, libraries would receive new translations, and we would hire and train over 60 scholars across America to connect with the theater company on the road in those libraries, present public talks, and help moderate the live events.

Finally, we were funded: first to visit 16 communities, and then in 2010, a massive expansion to 104 public libraries, museums, and art centers in 38 states called *Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives* (AGML). Over three years AGML ended up reaching 78,889 people and offering 224 events.[5]

One of the themes of AGML focused on the veteran experience. We found that Greek drama, originally written, performed by, and for ancient combat veterans, resonated with modern ones. Veterans who had served in Vietnam, Korea, and even WW2 attended and spoke, and then new vets from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began to show up. As the program developed, it was re-funded and named *The Warrior Chorus*, and we were able to train and pay veterans to lead the events and craft programming.

We focused on women veterans and provided a public forum for their voices. We also developed an app called *You|Stories* with the ability to upload short vlogs made by veterans inspired by ancient material. The Humanities material helped create a framework and a context where in-depth discussions could be had, and audiences could hear from the veterans. One of the program's veteran leaders called it "helping Americans to become literate about the costs of war."

During this period (2009–2016), we found that veteran community members were effective bridge builders between audience members of different political preferences. The attitude among most Americans toward veterans at this time had shifted significantly since the post-Vietnam/American war period, not veneration, but indeed respect and an acknowledgment that these program leaders were not the kinds of people typically associated with humanities programming. It was essential to have professors guide veterans in readings and then join in public conversations with them, not as authority figures but as part of an ensemble of presenters. This helped increase the discursive participation of most audiences. The focus on ancient literature also enabled the presenters to move away from the often-volatile present political moment and instead nurture productive conversations on often difficult themes.

The humanities material also spoke truth to power: *The Warrior Chorus* was invited to the White House during the Obama administration to present their work to an invited audience of veterans, their advocates, and Pentagon brass. They performed short readings from Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Homer, interspersed with commentary. In that audience were members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the highest-ranking military officers in the United States, and the decision-makers of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The veterans used the ancient texts to speak forcibly and directly to these generals in a way that would have been impossible in the military. This was powerful indeed. One former airborne infantry soldier directed the suicide speech from Sophocles' *Ajax* directly at those generals,

[5] A special edition of *Classical World* included papers on the first Aquila NEH-funded program, *Page and Stage*, by Banks 2010; Buxton and Painter 2010; Connolly 2010; Dutsch 2010; Meineck 2010; and Tessman 2010.

and the discussion that followed was direct, passionate, and heartfelt. This was humanities in action, empowering and contextualizing deep conversations on thorny but essential subjects. Since then, these veteran-led readings have been staged in hundreds of venues all over the United States, Greece, and the United Kingdom, and the program was a significant influence on the NEH's *Dialogues on the Experiences of War* program, which is still running (at least at time of writing).[6]

NEH funding for *The Warrior Chorus* dried up after 2017, as the NEH and NEA again became political hot potatoes in the culture wars – all 17 members of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities resigned, and the Trump administration proposed that both agencies should be shut down. The program was invited to perform at the US Capitol and was eventually refunded in 2021, but the political earthquakes that have beset the agency have not subsided. With a Republican congress back in power in 2022, external pressure mounted regarding Aquila's touring performance of *The Great Gatsby*, which had been connected to the program. *Gatsby* has become a controversial book in certain states, with some school districts even removing it.

Pressure from a member of the House committee, perhaps? Although never overtly expressed, Aquila felt the chill as those old disciplinary gates were closed again and funding diminished.

Over the years, I have noted a substantial rise in the reporting and accounting required of both federal and state grants. That old saw that one needed to use their funding to hire a full-time employee to manage their funding seems like it has come to pass. This also results from politicizing such public funding, where agencies are under enormous pressure to justify every cent and programming decision to an increasingly hostile legislature. On the one hand, one might applaud this kind of oversight, but the same kind of extreme scrutiny does not tend to be applied to other parts of the federal government where we learn time and time again how required procedures are not followed, and some individuals or companies have failed to make necessary filings. If a small- or mid-sized nonprofit made such an error, funding would be halted and possibly derailed for future years. A prominent example was the Shuttered Venue Operators grant apportioned during COVID-19 to help both commercial and nonprofit venues closed due to the government lockdown. Large commercial companies immediately received up to $10 million each. At the same time, many smaller arts and humanities nonprofits were initially denied any funding because their taxes were filed on a June-July fiscal year, a standard nonprofit practice. This did not mesh with the calendar year accounting practiced in the for-profit realm that this incredibly laborious application required. It took months for this to be rectified. Meanwhile, many arts and humanities organizations shuttered for good without this support, and many more struggled without lawyers and lobbyists to complete the application.

As I write, the future of the NEH and NEA is again in serious doubt. In a funding environment primarily dependent on personal contacts and elite fundraising, these agencies offered a rigorous, open, and peer-reviewed way of developing new public humanities projects. However, that peer review process has been viewed in some quarters as "too progressive" in that it draws on established professional scholars.[7] One might argue that as federal government agencies, they ought to reflect the ideological project of the elected

[6] Gibbon 2016.

[7] Koons 2024 has said, "Because peer review involves using professors to evaluate applications, and because the vast majority of the professoriate is ideologically progressive, the use of peer review becomes suspect."

representatives in power or that, at the very least, funded projects should be "nonpartisan." However, the kind of recalibrations that occurred in the past between the NEH administration of, say, a Lynne Cheney, appointed by Reagan (1986–1992) or a Bro (William) Adams, appointed by Obama (2014–2017) were still built on foundations of sound scholarship and peer review, even if their priorities differed.

The question is, can the NEH and NEA even withstand the current stripping of government agencies the US faces? If they do, they will undoubtedly emerge changed, possibly functioning as funding sources for politically partisan cultural projects. Alternatively, they may become decentralized, with state agencies taking up the shortfall (if they can, bearing in mind their budgetary constraints). However, the loss of national arts and humanities funding and the prestige and countrywide reach it brings cannot be underestimated. Despite the sometimes byzantine regulations and inaccessibility of the endowments, their logos attached on a poster or website project something important: that the United States is a country that values the arts and humanities as playing a significant role in public life. NEA or NEH funding is prestigious; it attracts attention, generates media and public interest, and acts as a seal of approval for other program partners' funders to participate.

The diminishment and possible extinction of the endowments will represent a considerable step back for public programming in America. What, then, is the answer? Enshrine the endowments in the constitution (unlikely)? Devolve public programming to the states (a loss of national identity and reach)? Accept that the government should not be in the business of funding arts and humanities (a very bleak prospect)? In any event, it seems to me that scholars who care about public humanities (and arts) should be in on this vital discussion. Although both agencies could do more to be accessible, be understanding of the difficulties in presenting public programming, and more flexible in their rigid disciplinary exclusions, do we really want to envision an America where the NEH and NEA no longer exist?

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