

The New Criterion

Notes & Comments April 1991

The NEA goes multicultural

On NEA staff training in "cultural diversity" & other matters.

Two communications from the National Endowment for the Arts, that graveyard of once-fond hopes for the support of high culture, have recently arrived at the offices of *The New Criterion*. Each has something important to tell us about the state of our governmental cultural policy in this age of multiculturalism.

The first communication, signed by Brian O'Doherty—director of the NEA's Media Arts program, the division of the agency that funds film, radio, and television—was an announcement of outstanding February arts events on PBS and public radio. Twenty programs, five of them on television and fifteen on radio, were honored by inclusion in the announcement. The five television events were "The Colored Museum," described as "George C. Wolfe's powerful, funny, and controversial comedy about black racial stereotypes"; "The Alvin Ailey Dance Theater: Steps Ahead," featuring "Alley's 'For Bird—With Love,' the late choreographer's homage to Jazz legend Charlie Parker"; "Celebrating Bird: The Triumph of Charlie Parker," in which "Musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Count Basie, Jimmy Dorsey and Thelonius Monk also appear in clips" and "talk about Bird's music, his fatal addiction and his lasting impact on Jazz Music"; Peter Sellars's production of *Così fan tutte* (discussed elsewhere in this issue of *The New Criterion*); and David Mamet's adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. This, according to the NEA's bulletin, was PBS's February coverage of the arts: one film about America's racial situation, two jazz-related programs, a degraded Mozart production set in a Westchester diner, and a production of Chekhov.

The story was much the same on public radio. Of the fifteen programs cited, four were installments of "Marian McPardand's Piano Jazz," a platform for assorted jazz performers and groups; four were installments of "Bluesstage," a series devoted to blues performers, including, in February, Bo Diddley; and four were installments of "Afropop Worldwide," which this month featured Afro-Latin jazz, a Sudanese electric band, African and Diaspora popular music, and Calypso music from "Carnival in Trinidad 1991"—a festival that "promises to be the most creative in recent memory"—including "songs about this summer's dramatic attempted takeover of the government by extremists." In addition, there were the "American Jazz Radio Festival," the folk-music program "Mountain Stage," and, to reward any traditionalists who might still be around, "St. Paul Sunday

Morning,” a talk-and-play classical chamber-music series often using personnel from the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. One does not have to be a statistician to notice that, as devised by the practitioners of what might be called the new balance, only one public-radio program on this list of fifteen was concerned with high culture. Furthermore, it is impossible to escape the conclusion that the reasons for the appearance of the other fourteen were not aesthetic, but purely and simply ethnic.

The second NEA communication was not originally meant for us to see; it arrived in an envelope without a return address. This leaked document was a memo, written on official stationery, to John Frohnmayer, the NEA’s maladroitness chairman, from A. B. Spellman, the director of the agency’s Expansion Arts program (a vehicle for channeling money to minority artists, arts groups, and arts institutions), and Eva Jacob, an agency policy and planning officer. The memo’s subject was “Cultural Diversity: Staff Training,” and it articulated all the politically correct clichés now enforced everywhere in and by government.

In just three sentences, the memo conveyed the piety and smugness of the whole multicultural movement:

In the course of this effort, we will need to recognize our own limitations and cultural assumptions. We need to be made aware of the extent to which our own education and understanding of the field has [*sic*] been limited by those assumptions—who has been excluded in the standard versions of our history, what other versions need to be considered. These are sensitive and difficult matters, which will require self-examination and will undoubtedly engender some conflict.

Here, at the level of those responsible for what foolishly used be called the “Governmental Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” in cultural affairs, is the assured acceptance and promotion of the radical case against our civilization: that what we have regarded as the historical greatness of our culture is—when correctly read—no more than a record of exclusion, insensitivity, and heedlessness. Accepted, too, by these avatars of the new radicalism is the happy prospect of mandating “self-examination” (so reminiscent of the old Communist goal of enforced confession and self-criticism!) and of social and personal conflict—but then, as we know, you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs.

It is always important to know what our public agencies have in mind for us. What they now have in mind for us in culture clearly portends the ruin of our common civilization and, if we do not take timely action against these potential usurpers, of our common society.

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