

10,000 arts groups threatened

Massive cutbacks in arts funding by US companies, governments

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17 February 2009

The combined impact of declining corporate sponsorship and drastic government budget cuts is producing a genuine calamity for arts organizations in the US.

Concerts, theatrical productions, art exhibitions and, in some cases, entire performance seasons are being canceled at an alarming rate. Public schools are losing arts programs; artists are losing grants; numerous theaters, opera houses, music venues and galleries face closure. Arts workers, too, are losing their jobs, with the current unemployment rate in the field estimated conservatively to be 12.5 percent.

The CEO of nonprofit Americans for the Arts, Bob Lynch, told the Associated Press that some 10,000 arts organizations nationwide have disappeared or are close to ending their operations. This represents about 10 percent of the total, and the economic crisis is only a few months old.

Arts organizations in the US are especially vulnerable because so many in recent years have come to rely on either corporate largesse or the contributions of wealthy individuals, or both. Aside from the inevitable ideological limitations this placed on arts groups, this corrupt relationship tied the latter to the fate of the stock market and the wider economy.

Groups that accept a model demanding profitability are cutting programs and often "popularizing" efforts in an attempt to attract viewers or spectators. Unfortunately, under present conditions, this often narrows the scope of artistic presentation and creativity. Overall, reviewing the dire news in the art world nationwide is much like reading the latest reports on mass layoffs and factory closures.

Symphonies

The Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra is attempting to solve a budget crisis by squeezing \$2.8 million in cuts from the pay of musicians, administrative staff and the music director. Musicians in the orchestra face an "unprecedented" 11 percent pay cut for two years, according to the *Cincinnati Enquirer*.

The Fort Collins (Colorado) Symphony is canceling a performance of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7 scheduled for March 28. The performance of the monumental piece, written during the German siege of Leningrad in World War II, was to be the season's most expensive and had to be cancelled for financial reasons. Executive Director Terese Kaptur told *Coloradoan.com* that "If we had produced this show, it would have been like digging a really deep hole that we weren't sure we would be able to dig ourselves out of."

In Indianapolis, Indiana, the city's symphony orchestra has seen its endowment fall from \$127 million in 2008 to below \$100 million at

present. In Norfolk, Virginia, the Virginia Symphony had to take a half-million-dollar loan in December to ensure the spring season went on as planned. The symphony is \$1.5 million in debt.

In southern California, numerous cultural organizations face crisis. Nearly half the staff at the "Orchestras of Pasadena" have been laid off. The Santa Clarita (California) Symphony has canceled its entire spring season. The orchestra's web site states bluntly: "Symphony Goes Dark: Santa Clarita Symphony Victim of Failing Economy—2009 Season Cancelled." While the organization cannot put on a full symphony performance in spring, it will still attempt to put on a "cafe" series of duos, quartets, and such—a far cry from the dozens of musicians employed by a full symphony.

Opera

Four decades of performances came to an end last November in Santa Ana, California, when Opera Pacific, Orange County's only major opera company, shut its doors, probably for good. Reportedly, the company's musicians were told they were losing their jobs during intermission on the last night of a production of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, and then carried on playing. The Los Angeles Opera is laying off 17 of its 100 staff members and also cutting salaries and performances.

In Baltimore, Maryland—a city of 637,000 in a metropolitan area of 2.6 million—the Baltimore Opera has been forced to declare Chapter 11 bankruptcy. The company is canceling spring performances of *The Barber of Seville* and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, and under terms of the bankruptcy ticket holders will not receive compensation.

The Connecticut Opera—the sixth-oldest continuously operating opera company in the US—announced only last week that it was going out of business, after 67 seasons. Its headquarters in Hartford, Connecticut, will close, the entire staff will be laid off and two spring productions have been cancelled. The 2,000 subscribers will not receive refunds; the financial position of the Connecticut Opera is so poor that it was deemed too expensive to file for bankruptcy.

Even the world-renowned Metropolitan Opera in New York—the largest classical music organization in America, putting on 220 performances a year and broadcast live nationwide on radio—is facing a drastic decline in funding. The Met's endowment of \$300 million has fallen by a third, donations have declined by \$10 million, ticket sales are significantly lower, four future performances have been cut and staff face 10 percent pay cuts. According to AP, "General manager Peter Gelb has warned that unless quick action is taken, the opera company could face a 'disaster

scenario' because of the tanking economy."

Theatre and dance

Cancelled shows and layoffs abound in theater and dance. In Boise, Idaho, Sonja Linden's "I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady From Rwanda" was not planned to end the season of the Boise Contemporary Theater, but owing to low ticket sales and donations, it now will.

In St. Paul, Minnesota, the Penumbra Theatre Company is putting off a production of "Radio Golf" by August Wilson from May to October, as well as cutting its budget by nearly one fourth. In part because of economic conditions, the Ensemble Theatre in Cleveland has cancelled an upcoming production of Nilo Cruz's "Beauty of the Father." In Utah, three employees and \$700,000 in spending have been cut from the 2009 budget of the Utah Shakespeare Festival. The Milwaukee Shakespeare Theater Company closed down operations in October.

As for dance, the Dance Theatre of Harlem is cutting salaries by 10 percent for all staff to prevent layoffs and programming cuts; just five years ago, in 2004, it suffered severe financial troubles. According to the Associated Press, "Ballet companies in Cincinnati, Miami and Madison, Wisconsin, have also had to cancel shows or make other cutbacks in recent weeks," including eight dancers laid off at the Miami City Ballet.

Museums

Museums nationwide are cutting back and drawing more on their own collections as the basis for exhibitions to save money.

The Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art has created "a new foundation for the museum's long-term financial stability" by eliminating 32 jobs in an effort to obtain \$4.4 million in annual savings. The Seattle Art Museum has cut 5 percent of its staff and confronts a \$3.8 million yearly shortfall if it's not able to find a new tenant for the space bankrupt Washington Mutual bank had been leasing.

New York's remarkable museums face increasingly difficult circumstances. Significant contributions from Wall Street firms have largely vanished, along with much of the money from the city government. While trillions of dollars go toward bailing out banks and financial institutions, funding for the arts is considered a waste.

The American Museum of Natural History has lost revenue from numerous sources, including damaged or bankrupt companies that no longer hold corporate parties. In response, the museum is cutting its budget by 10 percent and eliminating 10 percent of the workforce.

The Queens Museum of Art faces a similar situation. The director of the museum, Tom Finkelppearl, told *Crain's New York Business*, "I went into a board meeting with my finance committee and a trustee said, 'You're not being pessimistic enough.' Now, all the funding for next year's exhibitions is drying up. [People] will see a big difference."

Crain's notes that "every one of the city's 60 museums is being squeezed. Even the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the largest museum in the country, recently implemented a hiring freeze. Museums have weathered other recessions. But this time, funding cutbacks, the collapsing financial markets' impact on endowments and sponsorships, and an expected slump in tourism have raised the threat to unprecedented levels."

Arnold Lehman, director of the Brooklyn Museum, told the publication, "We're all scrambling to come to terms with how to deal with the

weakening financial situation in a way that inflicts the least short- and long-term damage to our institutions.... There really are no bright spots I can see at this time."

Public education

Nearly every US state faces a budget deficit, which is everywhere leading to cuts in public education. The arts portion of a school's curriculum is the first to be slashed. In elementary schools, music and art classes are often disappearing, delaying students' introduction to the subjects until teenage years. At all levels, resources are dwindling. In universities, courses are being cut and combined, full-time teachers replaced with low-paid, part-time adjunct professors and ever-greater tuition fees imposed on students and their families.

In Bedford County, Virginia, located between Roanoke and Lynchburg, the school district proposes cutting 10 elementary art and music teachers in 2009-2010. WSLC Channel 10 Ten News reported that about 100 parents and teachers "turned out in force" to protest the cuts. "Drawing a collective, audible gasp from the audience, Cheryl Sprouse, president of the Bedford County Education Association, asked why the current draft of the budget includes a \$37,000 salary raise for the system's new superintendent." Echoing Wall Street, the district argued it needed the bonus to attract "talent."

The arts and industrial decline

Nowhere is the collapse of arts funding more drastic than in America's "Rust Belt," the areas of industrial decline in the Northeast and Midwest. In Michigan, Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm announced her administration was cutting all operational funding for the arts in the state's 2010 funding. Currently, yearly funding is a miserable \$7.9 million—next year, it will be zero.

"No governor has ever done more damage to arts and culture and our creative future in Michigan," Mike Latvis, director of public policy for ArtServe Michigan, told the *Detroit Free Press*.

The Michigan Opera Theatre, Detroit's opera company, stands to lose \$238,000. The MOT already has a deficit of \$600,000 and has been forced to lay off employees, reduce the hours of others and cancel a production. Funding from the Big Three automakers has collapsed, like the companies themselves.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to the MOT's communications coordinator, Rebekah R. Johnson, about the cuts. She explained that "the theatre depends quite a bit on support from the big three auto companies in Detroit—General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford. At one point, about a quarter of our contributed income came from the big three auto companies. Now it's down to about 8 percent of our contributed income."

She also noted that the opera company is a significant source of cultural education for youth and students in the region, which is being devastated by cutbacks. As the WSWS recently noted, Pontiac, Michigan, just north of Detroit, is planning to close half its schools. (See "Pontiac, Michigan: Half of district's 20 schools to be closed")

Asked about the situation of the arts confronting the economic crisis, Johnson replied, "I think now more than ever we need the arts. I think more than ever it's important for people to not only support the arts by attending performances, but also by giving and even in small ways—volunteering, or whatever they can do. Because it's so important,

especially with the economic conditions, to keep spirits up and keep people's spirits alive, with hope."

The stimulus plan and the arts

Given the dire position of many arts organizations, some in the field naively looked to Barack Obama's stimulus plan to provide relief. At one point in the debate, Sen. Tom Coburn, Republican from Oklahoma, introduced an amendment preventing arts groups from receiving economic recovery funds. The amendment stated the stimulus funds could not be used for "for any casino or other gambling establishment, aquarium, zoo, golf course, swimming pool, stadium, community park, museum, theater, art center, and highway beautification project."

As the Voice of Dance web site noted, the measure "passed in the Senate by a healthy margin (73-24) and included support from leading Democrats such as Chuck Schumer of New York, Dianne Feinstein of California, Barbara Mikulski of Maryland and Russ Feingold of Wisconsin."

In the final jockeying over the bill, however, the funding was reinstated—a seeming victory for the arts. Yet this funding—the subject of such vehement opposition from many Republicans and Democrats—consists of just \$50 million for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Fifty million dollars is 0.0063 percent of the total \$787 billion stimulus package.

The money comes in addition to the annual budget of the NEA, which is a miserly \$145 million. (The NEA budget in 1978 was \$123,850,000; that would be almost 400 million in current dollars.)

All told, less than \$200 million in federal funding will go to the arts.

The sum is less than the budget for a *single* Hollywood blockbuster.

It is a fraction of the amount spent on a new sports stadium.

It is less than the amount spent in Iraq each day for US military operations.

The situation of the arts in America in general speaks to the philistinism, ignorance and avarice of the ruling elite. Anything that doesn't "make a buck" is considered a waste of time. More than that, the people at the top of American society have no interest in seeing themselves reflected honestly in art. The picture would not be a pretty one.

American capitalism leaves art and artists at the tender mercies of the market. With their wealth threatened, large corporations and wealthy individuals have less and less interest in contributing to cultural life.

What way forward is there for artists and the arts community? On February 13, the *New York Times* offered its crass solution: "Tough Times Call for Shrewd Artists." Briefly claiming to review the history of American art in periods of economic crisis, the *Times* finds that artists became "more entrepreneurial" and "pragmatic" and comments favorably on an artist "racking up profits by subordinating his style to market tastes." In fact, the most devastating slump in American history, the Depression of the 1930s, radicalized artists against capitalism and also brought about some of the most remarkable collective efforts.

Instead of prostration and accommodation, there has to be opposition to the current state of affairs. The arts cannot survive under such conditions, much less blossom. Artists and the arts community must refuse to see culture obliterated by a wealthy elite defending its position through trillions in public bailouts. A rational organization of the global economy, on a socialist basis, would secure the resources needed for the arts on a scale impossible within the current economic and political framework.



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