

The Washington Times

Gay marriage plays funded by taxpayers regardless of political views

Kellan Howell

January 29, 2015

The National Endowment for the Arts awarded a \$10,000 taxpayer-funded grant to a theater company in San Francisco to produce and tour a collection of plays advocating same-sex marriage called "Standing on Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays."

Directed by Sara Staley and conceived by Brian Shnipper, the project is a "collection of plays by established playwrights created in response to the ongoing battle for marriage equality throughout the United States," a copy of the grant award states.

The project has been touted by Variety as "a celebration of gay marriage" and features a slew of famous TV, film and Broadway actors such as Craig Bierko of "Sex and the City" fame and Tony Award winner Harriet Sansom Harris.

But taxpayer advocates say the government shouldn't be using tax dollars to promote the arts, especially when the art in question has a political agenda that not all taxpayers support.

"This isn't a pro-gay-marriage or an anti-gay-marriage issue. It's an issue about how tax dollars are spent. It's inappropriate and irresponsible for the government to make taxpayers subsidize art in general, and doubly offensive for the taxpayers forced to pay to promote something they might oppose. It would be just as offensive if tax dollars went to fund a play that opposed gay marriage," said David Williams, president of Taxpayers Protection Alliance.

A spokeswoman for the NEA defended the grant, saying the panel of citizen professionals and one lay person recommended that the project be funded based on the grantee's display of artistic excellence and merit. The project was then approved by the National Council on the Arts, the NEA's advisory body, and then by the NEA chairman.

Mr. Williams argued that private citizens should be able to use their own money to support the art of their choosing.

"If art is valuable to society, society will fund it without government coercion. Private individuals should determine what art is worthy — not the government," Mr. Williams said.

For using tax dollars to fund a project that many Americans would find offensive, the NEA wins this week's Golden Hammer Award, a distinction given by The Washington Times to examples of questionable taxpayer spending.

"I think that it's an outrage that taxpayer money goes to things where there is such a strong divide in the general public, whether it's liberal or conservative or libertarian," said Chris Edwards, editor of DownsizingAmerica.org at the Cato Institute.

Mr. Edwards said there is a parallel between the arguments for separation of church and state and separation of church and art.

"Liberals are usually strong supporters of separation of church and state because you get a lot of dissension and discord in society if government subsidizes religion. Liberals get that, but there's a very similar argument for the separation of government and the arts, which is you would get more prosperity and diversity and less dissension if you got government out of the arts business and let it develop on its own," Mr. Edwards said.

Art advocates argue that small investments in the arts from the NEA are culturally and economically beneficial and make America stronger.

Bob Lynch, president and CEO of Americans for the Arts, the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts and arts education, said government funds account for only about 9 percent of the total money for nonprofit art organizations and most of that money is provided by state and local bodies. The rest of the money comes from private donors and earned income from ticket and merchandise sales.

According to Mr. Lynch, that small investment from the government has led to a huge growth in the industry, making art more accessible to Americans and more profitable for the economy.

He highlighted the acclaimed Sundance Film Festival, which wraps up in Utah this weekend, as an example of a small government investment turning into "something much larger that economically and culturally is a great benefit to our culture."

Romina Boccia, a fellow in federal budgetary affairs at The Heritage Foundation, said plenty of evidence shows that private philanthropists are willing and ready to support the arts.

"There's a strong tradition in America of individual private donors giving to the arts. With technology now that giving has actually increased, with websites like Kickstarter," Ms. Boccia said, referring to the popular crowdsourcing website. "In 2012, Kickstarter raised over \$300 million for the arts. The NEA spends about \$150 million, and that's \$150 million too much that the government doesn't need to spend on the arts."

In 1996, the Metropolitan Opera of New York received \$390,000 from the NEA, an amount that totals 0.29 percent of the opera's annual income of \$133 million and amounts to less than the ticket revenue for a single sold-out show, according to research from The Heritage Foundation.

Although it's a small amount of funding from the government, Ms. Boccia said, it's too much for taxpayers to be forced to pay to art that they don't support.

"Arts are first and foremost a form of speech and the government has no business funding speech," Ms. Boccia said.

But Mr. Lynch said that while Americans are certainly entitled to their opinion on federal funding, it is the government's job, through elected officials, to pick and choose where tax money goes.

"It's not a government of the single person; it's united," Mr. Lynch said. "I think that what we have and what needs to happen is that any system that we have, whether its military, education or arts leadership you set up the best systems that you can for fair decision-making. In this case, the NEA panel for the past century has looked for the best quality art to fund."

This isn't the first time that The Times has reported on questionable projects funded by the NEA. In August, The Times highlighted NEA granting \$845,000 for 39 film festivals screening movies like "Wawd Ahp," a short film in which a rapper decapitates himself, then has sex with his own severed head in a bathtub.

But Ms. Boccia said there isn't much that can be done to keep the NEA from funding projects that some might consider offensive because of a court decision that struck down a 1990 statutory requirement that the NEA consider "general standards of decency and respect" in awarding grants, ruling it unconstitutional.

"Without such a 'decency' standard, the NEA can subsidize whatever type of art it chooses. As a result, attorney Bruce Fein called the Court of Appeals decision a recipe for 'government subsidized depravity' that must (if not reversed by the Supreme Court) force Congress to "abolish the NEA, an ignoble experiment that, like Prohibition, has not improved with age," Ms. Boccia wrote in a post for The Heritage Foundation titled "Ten Good Reasons to Eliminate Funding for the National Endowment for the Arts."