



Thanks for the grant - but not the restrictions

Sunday, August 06, 2006

State funding for the arts - perennially in doubt, due to tight government finances - actually got an increase for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1.

It's not that much: \$315,900, bringing the total to \$10.1 million. Yet it's a remarkable development in light of the political and financial climate in Michigan, and it's a welcome piece of good news for the many organizations that depend on grant money to survive. (There are 26 groups in Washtenaw County that got funding for the current fiscal year, from the University Musical Society to the Ann Arbor Summer Festival to the Kerrytown Concert House.)

Good news, to be sure. But a pessimist could argue that the grant program could be a lot stronger than it is.

Dollar amounts aside, this year provides a good chance to question the restrictions that accompany the acceptance of any state arts grant. These restrictions hadn't received a lot of attention, but that changed this year when a state legislator accused the Ann Arbor Film Festival of violating them. The festival responded by deciding not to seek further funding, leading to a financial crunch of its own (and some fund-raising efforts last week).

Under the legalese, the state grants can't go "to fund a project or activity that includes a display of human waste on religious symbols, a display of a sex act, or a depiction of flag desecration."

It's pretty easy to see where these came from, prohibiting "your tax dollars" from funding many of the flash points in the culture wars. But even a little exploration makes them just seem so ... silly.

No human waste on a religious symbol? So, presumably, if you use animal waste instead, you're OK? Who's going to determine just what kind of wastes are being used? And what qualifies as a "religious symbol"?

And that's just the first clause. "Display of a sex act"? What does that mean? Presumably, we know it when we see it, but it's entirely possible for different people to have different ideas about what that covers. And we can't even depict flag desecration? Not even having a picture of a flag burner with a big black "prohibited" circle superimposed on it? And what constitutes desecration, anyway? And which flags are covered - what about a Nazi flag?

I'm being ridiculous, but that's the type of system the rules set up: a ridiculous one. When you start trying to legislate content, you immediately enter a quagmire that's not worth the trouble. (And more specific rules aren't the answer, either; somebody will always manage to come up with something to offend someone that the rules can't anticipate.)

Taking it a bit further, the broader concern isn't so funny: Does taking the state's money mean you can't violate the nebulous guidelines in anything you do? If the grant makes up 2 percent of an organization's budget, how can it be fair for the rules to apply to everything that organization does? In this light, the film festival's decision to forgo the grants altogether is absolutely the right call, but it's not going to be possible for everyone.

We're lucky Michigan hasn't eliminated arts funding altogether; with the state budget and economy the way they are, that says something. Yet the constant uncertainty over the money, and the foolishness of the content restrictions, show we as a state haven't completely come to terms with the concept.

Reach arts and entertainment editor Bob Needham at 734-994-6825 or bneedham@annarbornews.com

©2006 Ann Arbor News

© 2006 Michigan Live. All Rights Reserved.