

## ABSTRACT

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UNDERSTAND AMERICA? THE NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS'S  
SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICAN  
COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

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In 2003 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) created the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. The purpose of this initiative is to introduce participants to the plays of Shakespeare through live productions and educational workshops. Each year, selected theatre companies receive a matching grant through this program that enables them to create educational activities and performances that are then provided free or at low cost for communities that have traditionally been considered under-served by arts programs.

In an introduction to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative published on the NEA's website in 2007, former NEA Chairman Dana Gioia wrote, "In order to understand American culture or American theater, one must first understand Shakespeare." It is this provocative statement that provides the impetus for the primary research questions of this dissertation. What did the NEA under the chairmanship of Dana Gioia believe that Shakespeare could and should teach citizens about American culture? How did the NEA's marketing of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative serve to establish a

branded product that could improve the reputation of the NEA following the battering it had taken during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s?

Through interviews with key participants in the initiative, including Chairman Gioia, analysis of the NEA's promotional literature for the program, data compiled from the self-reports of participating theatre companies, and analysis of the media's response to this and other NEA projects, this study provides both a detailed history of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative as well as a consideration of its position and importance within the overall narrative of the history of the Endowment. This study also includes an analysis of Gioia's understanding and use of the term "culture" and the manner in which that understanding influenced the goals of the NEA under his leadership. This detailed analysis of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative provides not only an overview of a major Shakespeare performance-based educational program, but also an explanation of how the program was strategically branded and marketed to improve the reputation and status of the NEA at the turn of the twenty-first century.

UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE TO UNDERSTAND AMERICA?: THE  
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS'S SHAKESPEARE IN AMERICAN  
COMMUNITIES INITIATIVE

By

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
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## **Dedication**

To my boys: my husband, Jonathan, and my son, Sebastian.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my entire committee, Dr. Frank Hildy, Dr. Heather Nathans, Dr. Kristen Messer, Dr. Kent Cartwright, and Dr. Robyn Muncy, for their assistance with this project and for their advice and support throughout my graduate school career. I would also like to thank everyone who granted me interviews about the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, especially Susan Chandler and Dana Gioia. Without their assistance this dissertation would not have been possible. Special thanks also to Leslie Liberato, my initial contact at the NEA, for pointing me in the right direction.

This dissertation could not have been written without the help of my friends and family. I would especially like to thank my colleagues at the University of Maryland. AnnMarie Saunders, Matthew Shifflett, Ara Beal, and Rob Thompson provided valuable advice, helpful suggestions, and commiseration when the going got tough. Natalie Tenner and Erin Bone Steele were my weekly writing group pals. They kept me accountable and (mostly) on task.

Finally, thank you to my family. Thanks to my parents and grandparents for 30 years and counting of support, and encouragement to aim high and chase my dreams. Thanks above all to my husband, Jonathan, and my son, Sebastian. Sebastian, thank you for being an easy-going baby and an excellent sleeper. I could not have finished this project without your many three-hour naps. You were born at the tail end of this project, and your arrival was what inspired me to finally complete it so that we could move on to our next stage together. Jonathan, on the other hand, has been along for the entire ride. Jonathan, thank you for giving me the time, space, and support to

complete this project to the best of my ability. I am thankful that I found such a great partner for all of my endeavors. You make every day better.

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## Introduction

I first stumbled upon the website for the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative while doing research for a project exploring twenty-first century American original practices Shakespeare performances.<sup>1</sup> I was merely following an internet search engine's suggestion in an attempt to track down a quote from the director of a theatre company, when I found myself on the National Endowment for the Arts' website. I was intrigued by the description of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative and paused my research to read about the program. I learned that it was an initiative designed to provide matching grants to American professional theatre companies to tour the United States. The selected companies provided live, free or low-cost productions of Shakespeare's plays and accompanying educational activities to communities that were considered to be under-served by arts programs.

The introductory page, written by Dana Gioia, hooked me with the statement, "In order to understand American culture or American theater, one must first understand Shakespeare."<sup>2</sup> My first reaction was to scoff. "American culture" was such an amorphous term, and Shakespeare was an English playwright who lived and wrote centuries ago. How could anyone be so presumptuous as to simply and definitively state that you cannot understand America unless you understand

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<sup>1</sup> Original practices is a style of Shakespeare performance in which the performers attempt to some degree to replicate the qualities of production from the time period in which Shakespeare lived and wrote his plays.

<sup>2</sup> Dana Gioia, "Message from Dana Gioia, Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed May 18, 2009, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/gioia.shtml>.

Shakespeare? I was almost angry, as I read Gioia's words. "Why is it always Shakespeare?" I thought. "Why can't we ever introduce students to other playwrights? Why can't the NEA champion an American playwright instead of taking one from England and trying to pretend that he is our own? I agree that Shakespeare is great, but why not give some other playwright a chance to shine?" Thus, when I began my research into the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, it was not from a place of admiration, but rather from a place of annoyance and frustration. I needed to know why we Americans were so stuck on Shakespeare that our National Endowment for the Arts had created its largest program ever in order to tour his plays. I wanted to prove that the NEA was doing a disservice to Americans by choosing to create a Shakespeare initiative rather than one focused on an American playwright (or playwrights), and I wanted to demonstrate that we are stuck in a Shakespeare rut perpetuated by organizations like the NEA who persist in privileging his works over those of other playwrights.

I found, of course, that the real story is much more complex than I expected. I found kindred souls in the art community who agree with my assessment that this country may in fact be in a Shakespeare rut, but, as it turns out, the NEA's *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative is much more a symptom of this rut than the cause of it. I also discovered that, despite my initial dismissal of Gioia's statement that in order to understand American culture one must first understand Shakespeare, the Chairman of the NEA had a point. Shakespeare *was* a very American playwright, when viewed in a certain light. This was a point that Gioia was making as part of the overall marketing concept for the NEA, and it fascinated me.

Soon, my questions about the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative began to change. I was no longer on a mission to explain how the NEA's emphasis on perpetuating the teaching of Shakespeare's plays in the classroom was displacing the works of other playwrights who might have a greater appeal to American teenagers. I was no longer interested in critiquing the NEA's Shakespeare initiative from the perspective of a secondary school educator. Instead, I gradually developed a series of new questions that have come to shape my project. I began to look at the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative not as a stand-alone project, but as part of the overall narrative of the NEA. I became particularly interested in how Gioia and his leadership team at the Endowment created this initiative with the very specific intention of improving the reputation of the NEA, which, at the time Gioia began his chairmanship in 2003, was still recovering from the battering it had taken during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. My question no longer became, "Why does the NEA think we American citizens need more Shakespeare?" It became, "Why does the NEA believe that touring Shakespeare's work is the best means of improving its reputation?" I also found myself wondering whether the initiative had paid off for the NEA and succeeded in helping the agency to improve its status in Washington, D.C. I became interested in how the NEA used branding techniques to create its own specific, easily-marketable brand of Shakespeare, and how that branding of Shakespeare primarily involved strengthening his ties to the American past. My question changed from, "What does Shakespeare tell us about American culture?" to "What does the NEA *think* Shakespeare should tell us about American culture?," a key difference, and a perhaps more productive

question. On a related note, I began to ask myself what precisely the NEA meant when it used the word “culture” in its marketing materials about the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. Since “culture” can be such a broad and nebulous term, in what sense was the NEA using it, and what could that tell me about the NEA and its chairman? Finally, I became impressed with the sheer size and scope of the initiative and realized that it served as not only an important program in its own right, but also the blueprint for the organization of many other initiatives that the NEA created from 2003 until 2009, many of which continue at the time of this writing in 2013. I determined that such a major, unprecedented NEA initiative deserved a thorough record of its history and organization to potentially benefit others who someday might wish to emulate its reach. Thus, my project is now a study of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative that serves to illuminate the history of this major NEA program and examine the role it played in determining the public’s perception of the Endowment during the first decade of the 2000s and in defining the role that the NEA believed Shakespeare’s works should play in the United States during that same time period.

## ***Methods***

With this dissertation my goal is to describe the history of the NEA’s *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative and to analyze the NEA’s justification for creating and promoting the initiative. I also examine the impact this initiative had on the NEA both in financial terms and in terms of the Endowment’s

critical reception. Throughout this work I attempt to describe both the “how” and the “why.” For instance, how was the initiative developed and sustained, and why was it developed? How did it function in a practical sense? Why was it created in the manner in which it was created, and why was it promoted as it was? How was it received by its intended audience, and why was it marketed to reach that particular audience?

To answer the “how” questions, I relied primarily on in-person and telephone interviews that I conducted with creators and participants in the initiative. Former NEA Chairman Dana Gioia was my primary interview subject and discussed his involvement in the creation of the initiative in detail. My interview with Gioia also provided his answers to many of my “why” questions concerning the initiative. To further develop a portrait of Gioia and his mission for the NEA under his chairmanship, I compiled and analyzed information from additional interviews he had provided to the press, his annual testimonials at congressional appropriations hearings, and speeches he had given at various functions during his six years as Chairman of the NEA.

Non-profit regional arts organization Arts Midwest is a cooperator, or subcontractor, of the NEA and is responsible for most of the practical operations of the initiative and for compiling data about participants in the initiative. Personal interviews with David Fraher, the Director of Arts Midwest, and Susan Chandler, his assistant director, also provided extensive details on the development of the initiative. Fraher and Chandler provided much of the information on the history and scope of

the program.<sup>3</sup> Interviews with artistic director and education directors at theatre companies who had received grants through the initiative also provided practical information about how their companies carried out their participation in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* program.

In addition to interviews with leaders at the NEA and Arts Midwest and participants in the initiative, I also relied heavily on data compiled by Arts Midwest and by Leslie Liberato, the NEA's Project Manager for the initiative. This data is currently stored electronically in-house at the NEA building in Washington, D.C. and electronic copies of the data were kindly provided to me by Liberato. From Liberato's records I was able to determine the number of people who had participated in the initiative in some capacity, the theatre companies that had received grants, and the number of classroom teachers that had requested educational materials pertaining to the initiative. Each theatre company that receives an NEA grant is required to submit a self-report at the end of their project. Data from these self-reports, also provided by Liberato, was useful for my research as well. Some of this data can currently be found in the Program History section of the NEA's *Shakespeare in American Communities*

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on the cooperative agreement between Arts Midwest and the NEA, see chapter 1. Although Arts Midwest was primarily responsible for the day-to-day management of the initiative and the selection of grantees, especially in the program's later years, throughout this dissertation I discuss the initiative as belonging to the NEA. I do this because one of Arts Midwest's primary financial supporters is the NEA, and it operates the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative on behalf of the NEA. All activities that Arts Midwest approves under the purview of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative must first meet the approval of the NEA. Arts Midwest is, in this case, effectively a subsidiary of the NEA operating under its guidance.

website.<sup>4</sup> The complete final data set will ultimately be transferred to the National Archives, although as of this writing it is not yet available there.<sup>5</sup>

My primary interest in this project has been in analyzing how the NEA has promoted the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative to educators, to Congress, to the media, and, through the media, to the American public. Therefore, the promotional materials the NEA created to support the initiative were also critical to my research. These promotional materials included a website, brochures, and press releases, as well as a packet created for teachers that included materials such as DVDs, a CD, a teacher's guide, and lesson plans. These primary documents were the basis for my analysis of the NEA's branding of its initiative.

One of the major challenges of this project was determining how to analyze the response to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. Since one of the questions driving this project was whether or not the NEA was able to change its reputation through this initiative, I needed a method for determining how the public responded to the initiative. Ultimately, newspaper articles and editorials provided a practical—although unfortunately not fully nuanced and complete—means of

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<sup>4</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Program History: 2004-2005," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/program-history/2004-2005>.

<sup>5</sup> The electronic records of this initiative are maintained on an "indefinite basis" at the NEA offices at 1100 Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Washington, DC. Paper records of this initiative, as well as final reports, will be retired to the National Archives and Records Administration upon the completion of the program: "The Grants and Contracts Office maintains grants paper files, which are retired and destroyed after seven years. Discipline offices also maintain paper files about grants in their divisions. When the final descriptive and financial status reports are received and accepted, the discipline office files are retired first to the Federal Records Center, and then to the National Archives and Records Administration." Privacy Act of 1974: Republication of Notice of Systems of Records, 73 Fed. Reg. 60723-60724 (1998).



determining a sense of the discourse concerning the NEA during the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s and then comparing that to the media response to the NEA following the launch of *Shakespeare in American Communities*.

Articles from prominent American newspapers were also useful in my attempt to piece together a concise history of the NEA's battles in the culture wars. Mark Bauerlein, Director of the Office of Research and Analysis at the NEA from 2003 until 2005, and Ellen Grantham, a Program Analyst at the NEA, co-edited a book entitled *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008*. This book, which was published by the Endowment, also proved a valuable resource for understanding Gioia's chairmanship within the larger narrative of the NEA's self-reported history.

Finally, I looked to the work of other scholars to guide me in my analysis of this initiative. David Savran's article, "'Let Our Freak Flags Fly': Shrek the Musical and the Branding of Diversity," introduced me to the idea of "iconic brands" and informed the understanding of branding I used to analyze the *Shakespeare in American Communities* promotional materials. Rita Clifton's *Brands and Branding* and James B. Twitchell's *Branded Nation* also informed my analysis of the NEA's marketing of the initiative. To analyze Gioia's use of the term "culture" and attempt to determine the potential cultural influence of the NEA on the arts and education culture of the United States, I drew on Pierre Bourdieu's *The Field of Cultural Production* and his explanation of the field of large-scale production versus the field of restricted-production. Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of authoritative discourse and cultural theorist Alexei Yurchak's understanding of J.L. Austin's performative utterance also informed my analysis of culture for this project.

## ***Shakespeare: A Note on the Term***

“The name Shakespeare in Britain is rather like the names Ford, Disney and Rockefeller in the United States. He is less an individual than an institution, less an artist than an apparatus,”<sup>6</sup> wrote cultural theorist Terry Eagleton in a 2004 article. He continued, “Shakespeare’s familiar high-domed head, an image that is quite possibly not him at all, has adorned everything from TV beer commercials to the £20 note. He is the presiding genius of the national spirit, a kind of Churchill in a neck ruff. Without him, industries would crash and ideologies crumble. It is even rumored that he also wrote plays.”<sup>7</sup> Although Eagleton’s description is somewhat facetious, it nonetheless demonstrates a key feature of Shakespeare in the twenty-first century. Typically, when a playwright’s name is mentioned in a text, one thinks of the playwright him- or herself. However, as Eagleton’s flippant “It is even rumored that he also wrote plays” suggests, Shakespeare is nowadays much more than the name of a sixteenth century English playwright. He has become an institution and an apparatus. The name “Shakespeare” now encompasses an entire genre of plays. Consider, for example, the number of theatres or festivals that call themselves the “Shakespeare Theatre” or the “Shakespeare Festival” and use “Shakespeare” as shorthand for a repertoire that could better be described as “Elizabethan and Jacobean,” or even “Classical.” “Shakespeare” is a school subject and, above all, a brand.

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<sup>6</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Company Man," *The Nation*, March 1, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

When I have used the word “Shakespeare” in this dissertation, I have often used it not in the sense of Shakespeare as a “he,” but in the sense of Shakespeare as an “it.” I discuss Shakespeare rarely as a playwright, but more often as a brand, as a commodity, and as a subject of classroom study. Therefore, I have used the phrase “his works” or “his plays” when appropriate, but have typically defaulted to using simply “Shakespeare” as an all-encompassing term for this sense of a Shakespeare product that includes both the man and his body of work.

### ***Chapter Breakdown***

This dissertation is structured with a focus on former NEA Chairman Dana Gioia and the NEA’s development and promotion of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative in response to events in the NEA’s past. The first three chapters focus on the history of the initiative, while the final two chapters focus on the theory and mission that undergird the program.

Chapter one covers the development and basic history of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. It discusses the impetus for the program and names the key players in the development of the initiative. It also describes in detail the organization of the program and describes the facts of its operations: how grants were awarded and to whom, the application process, the financial aspects of the program, and the creation of the educational materials that were provided to all participants in the initiative. Chapter one also provides samples of programs created by theatre companies using *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants. It concludes with

statistics detailing the scope and scale of the initiative during its first decade of existence.

Chapter two, “‘Changing the Conversation’: *Shakespeare in American Communities* and the Reputation of the NEA” begins the exploration of why Dana Gioia felt compelled to enhance and promote the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative as his signature project. In it, I discuss in detail the NEA’s battle with Congress in the culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. I also explore the media’s response to the culture wars and use that media response to illuminate the national conversation concerning the NEA during that time period. I argue that the reputation that the NEA developed during the culture wars was the primary impulse for the creation of *Shakespeare in American Communities*, as well as other initiatives Gioia would begin during his chairmanship.

“‘A Worthy and Noble Ambition’: National Response to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* Initiative” is the third chapter. This chapter continues the story of the second chapter. Whereas chapter two discusses Gioia’s goals for his initiative in response to the NEA’s troubled past, chapter three examines the NEA’s efforts to achieve those goals. This chapter discusses the NEA’s unprecedented financial partnership with the Department of Defense and its other efforts to ingratiate itself with both its conservative detractors in Congress and the Bush Administration. It also discusses the financial impact of the initiative on the NEA’s budget, and other NEA programs that were developed in the same vein as the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. Finally, it discusses the national media response to the

initiative and analyzes whether the NEA was able to achieve its goals through the initiative.

Chapter four, “American Shakespeare: The Branding of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* Initiative” begins to explore the finer details of the rhetoric used to support the program. This chapter discusses the NEA’s attempt to pitch Shakespeare to its audience as a sort of American Founding Father and to endow Shakespeare with the American values that the NEA wished to promote through its project. I use marketing and branding theory to explore the manner in which the NEA consciously developed a brand story and pitch for their Shakespeare initiative. I also discuss the various potential brand stories that one could use to market Shakespeare that were ultimately ignored or underutilized as a result of the NEA’s choice to pursue a particular narrative in their promotional materials for the initiative.

Finally, the fifth chapter, “Populist Elitist: How Dana Gioia and the NEA Define ‘Culture,’” continues the analysis of the NEA’s rhetoric. While chapter four explores the manner in which the NEA defined “American” through its *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, chapter five explores its use of the term “culture.” This chapter describes two separate but interrelated understandings of culture. First, using Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the field of cultural production in combination with elements of Mikhail Bakhtin’s authoritative discourse and J.L. Austin’s definition of a performative utterance, I provide an analysis of what Gioia seems to mean when he talks about culture and how the arts culture in America should ideally be influenced by the NEA. Second, I explore the role the NEA plays, and hopes to play, as an advocate for the arts in the education culture of the United

States in the twenty-first century and how this ties into Gioia's understanding of culture.

The dissertation concludes with a look at the lasting impact the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative has had on the NEA since Dana Gioia's resignation as NEA Chair in 2009. It also provides a summary of recent discourse concerning the NEA during the Obama Administration and the chairmanship of Gioia's successor, Rocco Landesman, in order to demonstrate the manner in which Gioia's signature initiative continues to influence the reputation of the Endowment. It is my hope that this dissertation will provide both a detailed examination of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, but also an overview of how it has served the NEA and influenced the Endowment's position in the American consciousness at the turn of the millennium.

## Chapter 1: The Development and History of the *Shakespeare in American Communities Initiative*

In 2002 the National Endowment for the Arts embarked on an ambitious project. In an effort to introduce the works of William Shakespeare to new audiences, the NEA began funding the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. The basic goal of the initiative is simultaneously simple and yet staggering in its scope: to use federal grant money to bring professionally staged productions of Shakespeare's plays to communities in all fifty states in the United States, focusing primarily on young audiences and on communities that are underserved by professional performing arts organizations. With the encouragement of former NEA chairman Dana Gioia and through a partnership with regional arts organization Arts Midwest, which deals with the practical aspects of managing the initiative, *Shakespeare in American Communities* has become the largest United States' government-sponsored theatrical program since the Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter will examine the history of the initiative from its inception in 2002 through the program's 2009-2010 season. Based on information from interviews with people affiliated with the program and statistics listing the theatre companies and schools that participated in the grant program from 2003 through 2010, this chapter pieces together a complete overview of the *Shakespeare in*

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<sup>1</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Shakespeare in American Communities Brochure*, 2008, 1. This program is "the largest" both in terms of the amount of money that has been spent on the program and the number of people who have participated in the program as performers and educators or audiences.

*American Communities* initiative. This overview includes an explanation of the initiative's grant process and the guidelines by which participating theatre companies must abide when receiving NEA funding. This background on the initiative provides a useful reference point for the analysis of the initiative that will be conducted in the following chapters. Because the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative served as a blueprint for subsequent nationwide NEA initiatives, the information provided in this chapter can also be generalized to other NEA programs developed during the 2000s. Finally, this marks the first time that a detailed history of this initiative has been written.

### ***Early Development of the Initiative***

The idea for a Shakespeare tour had originated with Michael Hammond, Gioia's predecessor as chair of the NEA. Hammond, a conductor and former dean of the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, was appointed by George W. Bush to chair the NEA and was confirmed by the senate on December 20, 2001. He died just one week after taking over the chairmanship in January 2002, having held only one official staff meeting during his short tenure at the agency. At that meeting, he shared the story of the "incredible impact" that seeing a live production of Shakespeare had on him as a high school student. He believed that the experience of seeing his first Shakespeare play had a formative effect on his education, his decision to pursue the arts as a career, and his life overall. Hammond expressed a desire to see



the Endowment fund the sort of programming that could impact young people's lives through exposure to live artistic events, including Shakespeare.<sup>2</sup>

By the time President Bush nominated poet and former vice-president of General Foods Dana Gioia to head the NEA in October of 2002, NEA Senior Deputy Chairman Eileen Mason and Arts Midwest Director David Fraher had already begun to develop a plan to carry out Hammond's vision.<sup>3</sup> While awaiting his senate confirmation, Gioia began to attend meetings at the NEA to prepare to take over as chair of the organization. It was in one such transition meeting that he was told of this budding idea for a small Shakespeare tour. Initially, Gioia was presented with an idea for a relatively modest project: approximately a million dollars had been earmarked by the agency to fund a special chairman's initiative to generate a Shakespeare tour. The plan at that point was to work with one or two theatre companies to tour to each region of the United States.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> David Fraher, telephone interview by author, June 20, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Gioia earned a BA and MBA degree from Stanford University and an MA in comparative literature from Harvard University. During his time at General Foods he became vice-president in charge of marketing for the Jell-O and Kool-Aid accounts. He resigned from General Foods in 1992 to write poetry full time. He first received national attention in 1991 with the publication of an *Atlantic* article entitled "Can Poetry Matter?" The article was his persuasive argument that poetry is necessary for an educated society. He has written four books of poetry, and three books of criticism, and has served as an editor of more than a dozen anthologies of poetry, short fiction, and drama.

<sup>4</sup> Since 1973, the NEA has provided funds to six regional arts organizations in the United States: Arts Midwest, The New England Foundation for the Arts, the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, South Arts, Mid-America Arts Alliance, and the Western States Arts Federation. These regional organizations are private, non-profit entities serving regional areas that have been designed by the state arts agencies. Funds for the regional arts organizations come from the amount of the NEA's appropriation that Congress sets aside for the "states and their regional organizations." "RAO: About: History," US Regional Arts Organizations, accessed November 3, 2011, <http://www.usregionalarts.org/history.htm>.

Gioia immediately recognized the potential in the project. Upon taking over the chairmanship of the NEA, Gioia's goal was to "change the conversation that the country was having about arts and culture," and he believed that one of the ways he could achieve that was by creating, "a signature program for the National Endowment for the Arts which was of the highest quality, had the broadest access, and took a form which both impressed and surprised people."<sup>5</sup> Gioia believed that this regional Shakespeare tour could be exactly the type of signature program he was looking for to change the image of the NEA, so he began to push for the expansion of the program from a small, regional touring program to one that would reach all fifty states. The staff at the NEA and at Arts Midwest, the regional arts organization selected to serve as the NEA's cooperator on the initiative, began working together to plan the program Gioia envisioned:<sup>6</sup>

"I saw it as a way of helping theatres by allowing them to tour new productions that they would not be able to afford otherwise. I also saw it as a way of helping actors get meaningful work performing classic plays. I saw it as a means of helping presenters by giving them an economic incentive to book classic theatre that they might not otherwise feel that they could risk presenting. I also saw it as a way of helping teachers by giving them an opportunity to actually have their students see the plays that they were studying. And, finally, I saw it, perhaps most important, as a way of bringing a new generation of Americans into spoken theatre for the first time. The beauty of this program was that you could do *all* of those things at once, so the same

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<sup>5</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011. Gioia's reasons for focusing on a Shakespeare tour as his means to revamp the NEA's image and reputation are analyzed in detail in chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>6</sup> A cooperator is an agency that has received a cooperative agreement from the NEA. The difference between a cooperative agreement and a grant is that a cooperative agreement means that both agencies (in this case, Arts Midwest and the NEA) have some responsibility for the activities taking place through the agreement. Each agency is responsible for managing part of the project. Although the work on the project was initially split between the NEA and Arts Midwest, by the time of this writing in 2011 virtually all of the work was being done by Arts Midwest. The NEA continued to serve as the final authority in terms of approving the grants recipients, but the selection of the recipients as well as the administration and the management of the initiative were being conducted by Arts Midwest on behalf of the NEA.

dollar helped theatres, actors and directors, presenters, teachers, and students. And together, if you did this program well enough and broadly enough, you would help America.”<sup>7</sup>

Ideally, through this initiative live performances of Shakespeare’s works would reach not only every state, but regions of each state such as tribal lands, rural towns, or low socioeconomic areas in urban centers where live performance is not readily available.

### ***Phase One***

*Shakespeare in American Communities* can be divided into two distinct phases. The first year of the initiative, from 2003 until 2004, is now commonly referred to as “Phase One.” During Phase One, seven companies were selected to be the first participants in the national Shakespeare tour. The selected companies received “direct financial support ranging from \$25,000 to \$75,000 to assist with the costs of mounting a touring production and producing excellent educational materials.” Funds were also provided to participating arts presenters to offset the costs of mounting a Shakespeare production in their theatres. This support ranged from 15%-35% of the total fees. Participating companies also received assistance with identifying venues for their tour and they received national publicity for the tour.<sup>8</sup> In the inaugural season of the program, Gioia and the NEA’s primary goal was to tour a *Shakespeare in American Communities* production to all fifty states. The educational component that was later to become such a key element of the initiative was present, but not yet fully fleshed out and not the focus of the NEA or the six touring

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<sup>7</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> “Shakespeare in American Communities Request for Proposals—Theater Companies.” 2002. National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

companies. Instead, the focus was on branding the new initiative in a recognizable and positive way and garnering publicity for the Endowment. To that end, the companies selected to receive grants during Phase One attended an orientation at the NEA in which representatives from Arts Midwest educated the participating companies about the goals of the initiative and how the participants were to speak about the program in such a way as to insure that it was continuously linked back to the NEA in the minds of audiences and reporters.<sup>9</sup>

The initial emphasis on creating a nation-wide tour also determined the type of theatre companies chosen to participate in the first round of the initiative. To kick off Phase One, Arts Midwest distributed a request for grant proposals to touring companies around the country.<sup>10</sup> Arts Midwest then convened a panel of seven experts to select theatre companies to receive the first round of *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants. These panelists were executive directors from theatre companies, arts presenters, and a “Shakespeare expert.”<sup>11</sup> They selected the first seven grantees. Six of the original grant recipients toured productions to communities across the country. The Acting Company, based in New York City, produced *Richard II*; Aquila Theatre Company, also of New York, toured *Othello*, as did Minneapolis’s Guthrie Theatre. The Arkansas Repertory Theatre and the Chicago Shakespeare Theatre toured productions of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the Artists Repertory Theatre

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<sup>9</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011. The branding of the program is discussed in greater detail in chapters two and three.

<sup>10</sup> According to Susan Chandler, the deadline for companies to submit grant applications was in 2002, before Gioia had been appointed to chair the NEA. The program does precede Dana Gioia’s tenure but evolved to the form studied here under his leadership.

<sup>11</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011.

based in Portland, Oregon toured a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that was performed with actors from the Central Dramatic Company of Vietnam. These plays were performed at universities, community colleges, arts centers, performing arts festivals, and the occasional high school.

The first phase of the initiative required the touring companies to be capable of conducting a long, multi-city tour. As just one example of the scope of a typical tour conducted by a company during the 2003-2004 season, the Guthrie Theater toured to South Bend, Indiana; Amherst and Boston, Massachusetts; Ann Arbor, Michigan; Jamestown, North Dakota; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Sioux Falls, South Dakota; Logan, Utah; and Norfolk, Virginia. Companies such as the Aquila Theatre Company and The Acting Company toured even more extensively, traveling to 57 and 32 communities respectively.<sup>12</sup> The intense touring schedule meant that the ideal companies for Phase One had access to large touring budgets that could be supplemented, not supported, by the NEA grant. As a result, the first round of participating companies were all nationally-recognized companies with a proven record of conducting multi-city regional, if not national, tours.

In addition to producing Shakespeare plays in communities in all fifty states, another key component of Phase One was a tour of military bases. Determined to debut the *Shakespeare in American Communities* project in a manner that would have an attention-getting, national impact, Gioia next took an unusual step by aligning the fledgling program with the Department of Defense. Gioia himself met with an

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<sup>12</sup> "Shakespeare in American Communities Report: Phase One," 2004, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

Undersecretary of Defense and pitched the idea of bringing Shakespeare productions to military bases across the United States. Gioia pointed out that, “the US has the best-trained, best-educated and oldest set of troops in its history. The armed forces are full of people with college degrees, they’re married, they have families, and this is an incredibly talented group of people” and suggested, “I love movies, I love pop music, I’m all for USO shows, but why don’t you also bring them something that recognizes their education, their maturity, and their quality? Bring them Shakespeare.”<sup>13</sup> Gioia’s pitch made an impression on the Undersecretary, and he suggested that Gioia push to have money for a Shakespeare tour written into the next military appropriations bill. With the support of the Pentagon, Gioia then encouraged the senate to provide a million dollars to bring Shakespeare to military bases. Thus a million dollars from the Department of Defense went into the NEA budget to support the theatrical tour.<sup>14</sup> Much of that million dollars went to Alabama Shakespeare Festival, the final company brought on board for the first season. Alabama Shakespeare Festival was selected specifically to tour to military bases. Their production of *Macbeth* toured to 13 military bases.<sup>15</sup> An additional five bases were reached by other companies participating in the tour, leading to a total outreach to 18 military bases in 14 states.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Implications of this Department of Defense/NEA partnership will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> There may have been politics at work in the selection of the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to take on the military tour. Dana Gioia shared an anecdote of an interaction with Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions who was a vocal opponent of the NEA until his state’s festival received the appropriation to provide the military tour. This will also be discussed further in chapter 3 as part of Gioia’s efforts to improve the NEA’s reputation, particularly with conservative politicians.

<sup>16</sup> "Shakespeare in American Communities Report: Phase One," 2004, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

## *Phase Two*

During its second phase, which began with the 2004-2005 season and continues through the time of this writing in 2013, the scope of the initiative was simultaneously broadened and narrowed. Rather than focusing on bringing public performances of Shakespeare to communities and military bases across the nation, the NEA began to focus its resources specifically on bringing Shakespeare to young audiences. The goal of the initiative became “providing high-school and middle-school students in underserved schools and communities throughout the United States with high quality, professional productions of Shakespeare's plays.”<sup>17</sup> The thrust of the program changed from bringing Shakespeare to the American public in general (and to the American military specifically) to bringing Shakespeare to students. Susan Chandler, Assistant Director of Arts Midwest, explained that the reason behind the shift was Chairman Gioia’s vision: students across the country, who all have to read Shakespeare in the course of their curriculum, should be given the opportunity to see it performed live. According to Chandler, Gioia recognized that reading Shakespeare can be difficult and believes the material only really comes alive for students when they can see it in performance, ideally live performance. Gioia encouraged broadening the initiative’s focus so that it had a greater emphasis on students’ education. At the same time, although the NEA and Arts Midwest had achieved their goal of touring live Shakespeare productions to underserved

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<sup>17</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “Program History: 2004-2005,” National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/program-history/2004-2005>.

communities in every state in the United States, there seemed to be a tacit agreement among those running the program that such large-scale touring would not be feasible or, indeed, necessary each season. The initial push to reach fifty states had been to some extent merely a publicity stunt intended to garner national press coverage and improve the NEA's image with American citizens. Having gained the considerable positive national press coverage Gioia and the NEA were seeking, it was decided that the program could continue to focus on touring to underserved student populations across the country without the additional burden of having to reach all fifty states in each season.<sup>18</sup> While an effort continued to be made to select companies that could serve as many states in the country as possible, throughout Phase Two *Shakespeare in American Communities*-funded productions typically toured on a smaller scale and reached fewer states in a single season.<sup>19</sup>

Phase Two of the program, although still a part of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, was re-branded as *Shakespeare for a New Generation*. Ultimately, the first season of Phase Two set the standard for the manner in which the initiative would continue for the next nine years. Twenty-one companies were selected to receive grants for the 2004-2005 *Shakespeare for a New Generation* tour. The selection of the companies was based on different criteria during Phase Two than it had been during the first season of the initiative. Because the NEA was no

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on the national publicity received by *Shakespeare in American Communities*, see chapter 3.

<sup>19</sup> During the 2004-2005 season, 28 states were reached by the program. The greatest number of states reached during Phase Two was the 46 states reached during the 2007-2008 season. National Endowment for the Arts, "Shakespeare in American Communities 2004-2005 Report," 2005, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC; National Endowment for the Arts, "Shakespeare in American Communities 2007-2008 Report," 2008, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.



longer focused on reaching as many states as possible through a single company's tour but rather on allowing companies across the United States to perform for and educate students in their local and regional communities, it was no longer imperative that a company have a large touring budget or a history of conducting multi-city tours. Instead, Arts Midwest and the NEA created a request for proposals that emphasized the goals of the *Shakespeare for a New Generation* initiative. The request for proposals was disseminated widely each year of the initiative, originally through mailing lists used to communicate with theatre companies and then through e-mail listservs and a link on the *Shakespeare in American Communities* webpage.<sup>20</sup>

The request for proposals lists the criteria a company must meet in order to be eligible to receive a grant. Companies must be a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, must be a professional US-based theatre company, and must have a minimum of three years' experience working with schools to provide performances of Shakespeare or "classically-based" repertoire for middle or high school students.<sup>21</sup> Grant applicants must provide a description of the Shakespeare show they wish to produce using the grant money, including the director, approximate run time, the venue in which the play will be performed, the actors who will perform the play, the director or company's concept for the play, and how the play has been abridged if that is the case. The company must also describe their planned educational activities. This includes providing a detailed list of the educational activities the company will undertake and the approximate number of students that will be reached at each grade

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> "Shakespeare in American Communities: Shakespeare for a New Generation 2011-2012 Request for Proposals," 2010, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

level, how the content of the activities relates directly to the play the company intends to produce, the credentials of the teaching artists who will lead the educational activities, and how study guides are developed if the company creates its own educational materials. Further, applicants must describe their theatre company's achievements and qualifications that demonstrate the capacity to conduct *Shakespeare for a New Generation* activities, as well as provide biographies of key artistic staff. Applicants must provide a description of their strategy for reaching out to schools, including types of schools and student audiences that will be reached by the production. Each company must explain how it will make a specific effort to include "underserved schools with students who lack access to the arts due to geography, economic conditions, ethnic background, or disability."<sup>22</sup> Finally, grant applicants must provide a variety of statistical and practical information: a representative sample of the company's Shakespeare performances for middle and high school students for the past two seasons, an organizational budget for the current and previous fiscal year, a program budget for expenses related to the proposed *Shakespeare for a New Generation* project, a statement from the company's artistic director discussing the company's mission and goals in relation to the NEA initiative, a statement from the company's education director discussing the company's educational program, two letters of support from school officials referencing their participation in Shakespeare education programs provided by the theatre company, a sample of an educational study guide created by the company, three production photos, and a DVD sample of the company's work.

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<sup>22</sup> "Shakespeare in American Communities: Shakespeare for a New Generation 2011-2012 Request for Proposals," 2010, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

The nature of these guidelines limits the theatre companies that are eligible to participate in the initiative. Ideally, the guidelines limit companies by quality and reputation, as companies must demonstrate a commitment to producing classical work and demonstrate past success in providing educational outreach programs to students. Although companies do not have to have a specific operating budget to be considered, nor a history of touring, companies do have to have produced a season of classical work for at least the past three years and must have an artistic director as well as an education director on staff. These guidelines mean that the grant process favors more established companies with a robust educational program who will likely use the NEA grant as a supplement to their education and production budgets rather than as the primary source of funding.

As was the case in Phase One of the initiative, a panel convened by Arts Midwest selects the participating companies. The number of participating companies varies annually based on the allotment of the NEA budget available for *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants and has ranged from 21 during the 2004-2005 season to 40 during the 2008-2009 and 2010-2011 seasons.<sup>23</sup> Companies are selected based on their production work: performance quality, the experience of the artistic staff, and “evidence of sound artistic decisions.” Companies are also judged on their educational experience (the quality of the educational activities and study guides and the experience of the teaching artists), their strategy for reaching students, particularly

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<sup>23</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Program History: 2004-2005," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/program-history/2004-2005>; National Endowment for the Arts, "Program History: 2008-2009," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed November 5, 2011, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/program-history/2008-2009>.

underserved schools, and their perceived ability to follow through with the proposed activities based on their budget and the capacity of the theatre staff.<sup>24</sup>

During Phase Two, companies selected to participate in the initiative received a grant of \$25,000 that was to be matched on a 1-to-1 basis with nonfederal funds. Once selected, companies agreed to conduct all performance and educational activities during the season for which they were awarded the grant, which typically lasted from June to the following May. Participants also agreed to credit the NEA by displaying *Shakespeare in American Communities* banners and using the logo and credit line in all marketing and website materials, and to comply with federal self-reporting regulations. Most importantly, companies agreed to work with at least 10 middle or high schools through their outreach activities, at least some of which must meet the NEA's definition of underserved schools. The company agreed to provide educational activities to these students, including activities such as workshops or discussions. These activities had to accompany a text-based production of one of Shakespeare's works, which the NEA and Arts Midwest defined as a production that may be somewhat abridged but that "should offer students the opportunity to hear Shakespeare's text and to experience, to the extent possible, a full performance of the play."<sup>25</sup> Productions "loosely based" on Shakespeare's text did not qualify for support. Companies receiving a grant do, however, have the option to cut scenes and even rearrange them, and the play can be staged using any production concept the theatre company chooses as long as the language is Shakespeare's. Although selected

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<sup>24</sup> "Shakespeare in American Communities: Shakespeare for a New Generation 2011-2012 Request for Proposals," 2010, National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

companies must comply with the confines of the grant requirements, they remain relatively autonomous. They choose which play or plays to present, they create the concept(s) for the production(s) and hire all cast, crew, designers, and artistic staff, and they are responsible for reaching out to schools to either arrange a tour to the school or arrange for students to be bussed to their theatre space to participate in the *Shakespeare for a New Generation* activities.

Following their grant activities, each company must return a self-report to Arts Midwest describing how they used the \$25,000 grant. Arts Midwest collects data about how many productions were funded with the grant money and how many students and adults attended each production. They also require answers to a set of narrative questions that requests details about the perceived success of their performance and educational activities as well as the lessons the company learned from participating in the initiative and what they would change in the future or suggest to other companies planning to participate in the initiative. Participating theatre companies also receive two surveys created by Arts Midwest that are to be distributed to their audience members to collect feedback. One is a teacher survey and the other is a student survey. The teacher survey asks about the preparation the students received before seeing the play (including whether or not they had previously read the play for class) and whether the teacher utilized the NEA-created study guide and website and/or the theatre company's educational materials. The survey also asks the teacher to rate the effectiveness of the educational materials, the performance he or she attended, and the workshop or educational activities the students participated in as either "very effective, moderately effective, not effective,

or not applicable.”<sup>26</sup> The survey also asks how many professional theatre productions the teacher’s students will attend through school-sponsored activities over the course of the school year. There are also blank spaces to answer the narrative question, “How did this experience change your students’ attitude toward Shakespeare’s work?” and to address the statements, “Please share a story that highlights your students’ participation in *Shakespeare for a New Generation*,” and “Explain how your students may lack access to the performing arts.”<sup>27</sup> The student survey includes similar questions, such as “How many professional Shakespeare plays (not movies) have you seen?”, “Did you study or read the Shakespeare play before seeing it performed?”, and “Did you participate in a workshop or other educational activity with the theatre company?”<sup>28</sup> Students can also provide a series of narrative statements addressing the prompts, “How was the play different from what you expected?”, “What new thing did you learn about Shakespeare?”, “How did the play, educational activity, or meeting the actors change your ideas about Shakespeare or theater in general?”<sup>29</sup> Students who fill out the survey must also answer the question, “Are you interested in seeing more Shakespeare plays?” with “Not at all,” “Somewhat interested,” or “Very interested.”<sup>30</sup> This statistical and anecdotal information is compiled by the companies and submitted to Arts Midwest, where it is

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<sup>26</sup>"Shakespeare for a New Generation Teacher Feedback Form," National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> "Shakespeare for a New Generation Student Feedback Form," National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

used to create annual reports that detail the scope and activities of each season of the initiative.<sup>31</sup>

The request for proposals emphasizes the educational component of the tour that became so critical to Phase Two of the production. Although participating companies are welcome to create their own educational materials--and most do create and provide study guides to complement their individual productions--the NEA also created a series of generic educational materials, called the *Shakespeare in American Communities* Toolkit, that companies can use to supplement their own educational material and that teachers across the country can request for their classrooms through the initiative's website. According to Gioia, when he spoke to artistic directors he learned that "creating even mediocre educational materials took a significant portion of their NEA grant money," so he came up with the idea of developing educational materials through the Endowment that could be distributed for free to theatre companies and teachers across the country.<sup>32</sup> This then enabled participating theatre companies to focus on what Gioia hoped they would focus on, which was to "put on great plays and tour them," rather than having to use a large portion of their grant money to create their own educational materials.<sup>33</sup> The Toolkit consists of a teacher's guide that provides a basic biography of Shakespeare, a brief cultural and historical overview of Shakespeare's England, and a brief history of the role of Shakespeare's work in the United States. The teacher's guide also includes suggestions for lesson

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<sup>31</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011

<sup>32</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

plans. For instance, one lesson plan, called “Modernizing Monologues,” suggests that the teacher should play three Shakespeare monologues from the Shakespeare CD included in the Toolkit, discuss the situation, intentions, and emotions of the character speaking the monologue, and then rewrite the monologue in modern verse. Another lesson plan encourages teachers to play sonnets for the students and then allow them to rewrite a sonnet into a love letter following a discussion of the images, themes, and language used in the sonnet.<sup>34</sup> The Toolkit also includes the above-mentioned CD of well-known actors performing monologues from some of Shakespeare’s plays. Actors and theatre professionals who contributed material to the CD include Jane Alexander, Mel Gibson, James Earl Jones, Michael York, and Zooey Deschanel. The Toolkit also includes two DVDs. The first, called *Why Shakespeare?*, is about the transformative experience participating in and watching live theatre can have on a young person. Much like the CD, it features performances from well-known actors, including Tom Hanks, Bill Pullman, William Shatner, and Michael Sheen. The second DVD, *Shakespeare in Our Time*, is a 25-minute video that briefly explains Shakespeare’s importance in 21<sup>st</sup> century America and then discusses his biography and theatre in Shakespeare’s day. The DVD also explains the plots of a few of Shakespeare’s plays and provides generalizations about his characters and language. The DVD can be viewed as a basic introduction to Shakespeare to begin a curriculum unit or can be viewed in individual segments to emphasize a teacher’s discussion of, for example, iambic pentameter or character development in a particular Shakespeare play. The Toolkit also includes a *Shakespeare in American Communities* poster, a

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<sup>34</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011)



timeline showing major milestones in Shakespeare’s life compared to important events in western history, science, and culture, and a guide to a Shakespeare recitation contest sponsored annually by the NEA. The final component of the Toolkit is a pamphlet called “Fun With Shakespeare” that contains a crossword puzzle, a list of well-known quotes from Shakespeare plays, and a list of words and phrases attributed to Shakespeare that are still in common use today. These educational toolkits are available for free to any teacher in the country, even if he or she does not teach at a school currently being served by the initiative. According to Gioia, the NEA created the materials to be, “academically respectable, intellectually substantial, but accessible to students and entertaining, something that captured their imagination as well as their minds.”<sup>35</sup> There is no doubt that the materials have been widely requested. In the first year of the program alone, 11,500 of these educational toolkits were distributed to teachers across the country. To date 89,500 toolkits have been requested through the initiative’s website. Gioia suggests that these materials may be “the most widely used educational material in the humanities in the history of American high schools.”<sup>36</sup>

### ***Sample Programs Funded in Part by Shakespeare in American Communities: Shakespeare for a New Generation Grants***

As a result of the variety of means by which a company can fulfill the requirements of a *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant, each theatre

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<sup>35</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

company's Shakespeare education program ultimately ends up uniquely suited to their communities' needs and their own capabilities. During the 2009-2010 season of the initiative, I interviewed the artistic and/or educational directors of four theatre companies in the mid-Atlantic region that had received a grant for the season. These companies were The Acting Company, Theatre for a New Audience (both based in New York City), the Baltimore Shakespeare Festival, and Greenbrier Valley Theatre in Lewisberg, West Virginia. I also attended grant-funded productions at Baltimore Shakespeare Festival, Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, DC, People's Light and Theatre Company in Malvern, Pennsylvania, and Lantern Theatre in Philadelphia. Through my observations and interviews, I was able to experience firsthand a variety of different production styles and educational opportunities that all fit under the purview of this NEA grant. Although my discussions with these program directors and my observations of their productions by no means provide a comprehensive overview of the dozens of companies that have participated in the initiative over the years, a description of the grant-funded work of three of the companies I observed can provide an example of the manner in which theatre companies utilize their NEA grant money.

As mentioned previously, the *Shakespeare for a New Generation* initiative provides grants to companies of various sizes, some small and local, others large regional touring organizations. The size of the company receiving the grant has an effect on how that grant money is used. For some large and renowned companies a \$25,000 grant, although certainly worth applying for and much appreciated when it is received, is a relative drop in the bucket of their overall endowments, donations, and

other grant funding. For other companies, the \$25,000 grant makes up a sizable portion of their production or education funding for the season. Theatre for a New Audience is an example of the former. The company was founded in 1979 as “a New York-based classical theater whose mission is to vitalize the performance and study of Shakespeare and classic drama, including modern classics.”<sup>37</sup> It began primarily as a Shakespeare touring company and has gradually developed a reputation as a leading off-Broadway theatre. The theatre company has received Tony, Drama Desk, and Obie Awards for their productions and in 2001 became the first American theatre company to be invited to perform Shakespeare at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Theatre for a New Audience received *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants during the 2006-2007, 2007-2008, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons. According to Joe Giardina, Education Director at Theatre for a New Audience, the grant money was used to supplement the funding for an ongoing education program called the World Theatre Project.<sup>38</sup> This is a 12-week in-school residency that introduces middle school students to Shakespeare and is the company’s largest educational program.<sup>39</sup>

The educational program is always created to support one of the Shakespeare productions that Theatre for a New Audience has scheduled for their season. In the year in which I researched their program, that play was *Measure for Measure*. The program begins with professional development workshops for six salaried “teaching

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<sup>37</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “Shakespeare in American Communities 2007-2008 Report,” 2008, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

<sup>38</sup> Joe Giardina, telephone interview by author, July 1, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “Shakespeare in American Communities 2007-2008 Report,” 2008, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

artists” that are hired each year to lead the educational activities. These teaching artists work with the education department at the theatre to create a curriculum guide that is specific to that season’s Shakespeare production. The complete curriculum guide contains twenty lessons, ten of which will be taught by Theatre for a New Audience’s teaching artists and ten of which will be taught by the classroom teachers participating in the program. All of the lessons in the guide address specific New York state standards for teaching and writing in theatre. In preparation for teaching students and their teachers about the play, the teaching artists attend sessions with Shakespeare scholars and practitioners to improve their own understanding of the work. The next step of the process is teacher education. Each year approximately 10 schools participate in this 12-week residency program with a total of 30 to 50 teachers using the program in their classrooms. The participating teachers attend five hours of professional development with the teaching artists to become familiar with the play, the curriculum guide as a whole, and the 10 lessons that they are going to teach as part of the residency. Once the teachers and teaching artists have been trained, students begin their participation in the program. The students attend three lessons to prepare them to see the play. At the first lesson, the teaching artists present the story of the play in their own words in an active, hands-on manner intended to immediately engage students with the production they are going to see. Students then choose a character from the play synopsis and create tableaus featuring their character’s activities from the beginning, middle, and end of the story. This encourages the students to relate to a particular character and to begin to understand the play’s plot. At the second lesson students discuss the themes of the play that Theatre for a New

Audience has opted to emphasize in their particular production. The third lesson immerses the students in Shakespeare's language by introducing them to iambic pentameter and text interpretation. At that point in the residency students will visit Theatre for a New Audience's space to watch the play they have been studying. Immediately after the production they attend a talkback in which they can discuss the play with the actors that performed it. The remainder of the residency allows students to develop their own interpretations of the play. The finale of the program is a performance at which the students present their own versions of different scenes from the play using a combination of Shakespeare's text and their own language.<sup>40</sup>

This 12-week residency is made available to students in the five boroughs of Manhattan. Although the residency is not free for participating schools, grants such as the Shakespeare in American Communities grant enable Theatre for a New Audience to offer the residency at an affordable price.<sup>41</sup> During the 2009-2010 season, Theatre for a New Audience "conducted seven performances with 332 educational activities (talkbacks and residencies) throughout 67 days that benefitted more than 2,100 middle- and high-school students from 10 schools located in New York."<sup>42</sup>

This multi-week residency represents one of the more elaborate educational programs I saw funded partially through a *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant. The complexity of Theatre for a New Audience's program is due in part to the fact that this theatre company receives grants and funding from multiple sources and

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<sup>40</sup> Joe Giardina, telephone interview by author, July 1, 2010.

<sup>41</sup> Joe Giardina, telephone interview by author, July 1, 2010. When I asked Giardina why an education program cannot be offered free to schools, he replied that the company believes that, "it's important for schools to pay something because if you get something for free you tend not to value it."

<sup>42</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Shakespeare in American Communities 2009-2010 Report," 2010, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

uses its *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant to supplement the money the company receives from additional donors. For other companies, however, the NEA grant makes up a more substantial proportion of their annual production and education funding and, therefore, the educational programming is less extensive.

The Baltimore Shakespeare Festival describes itself as “a non-profit professional theater dedicated to producing quality affordable classical theater in Baltimore and introducing Maryland schoolchildren to Shakespeare through innovative educational programs both in and out of the classroom.”<sup>43</sup> Baltimore Shakespeare Festival presents a stark contrast to a nationally recognized, relatively well-funded theatre company like Theatre for a New Audience. The company was founded in 1994 and performed shows in found spaces until finding a permanent home at Baltimore’s St. Mary’s Outreach Center in 2003. In the former St. Mary’s Episcopal Church, Baltimore Shakespeare Festival created a performance space vaguely reminiscent of Blackfriar’s Playhouse, where they presented two or three productions per year. During some seasons they also put on a summer production at an outdoor theatre space. With a small professional theatre contract with Actors’ Equity, the company was one of just three resident professional theaters in Baltimore until it permanently closed its doors in April of 2011, citing unspecified financial problems.<sup>44</sup> The company received *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants for the 2007-2008, 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 seasons. During the 2009-2010 season,

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<sup>43</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “Shakespeare in American Communities 2007-2008 Report,” 2008, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

<sup>44</sup> Danny Jacobs, "A Baltimore Shakespeare Festival Supporter Remembers," *Daily Record* (Baltimore, Maryland), April 7, 2011, accessed November 9, 2011, LexisNexis Academic .

Baltimore Shakespeare Festival’s Education Coordinator—indeed, their entire education department—was Carmela Lanza-Weil. When asked why Baltimore Shakespeare Festival applied for a *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant, Lanza-Weil simply replied, “Money!”<sup>45</sup> Despite its tight budget, Baltimore Shakespeare Festival conducted a variety of student outreach programs each year, including a summer camp for middle school students and a winter teen performance program in which the students rehearsed and presented Shakespeare plays. The NEA grant was used to fund their student matinee program. During the 2009-2010 season, the student matinee production was *Hamlet*. Lanza-Weil or a member of the *Hamlet* production team visited classrooms to provide a pre-performance workshop that covered a synopsis of the play and taught basic theatre etiquette. Students were then bussed to the theatre to see the two-hour performance of *Hamlet*. Following the production, students were given the opportunity for an in-class talkback with several actors from the production. In addition to these pre- and post-show activities, Baltimore Shakespeare Festival created a *Hamlet* study guide, provided copies of the script to each student participating in the program, and developed a companion website for teachers. Students were also encouraged to write critiques of the show to post on the website.<sup>46</sup> During the 2009-2010 season Baltimore Shakespeare Festival, “conducted six performances with 18 educational<sup>47</sup> activities (pre- and post-

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<sup>45</sup> Carmela Lanza-Weil, interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, July 14, 2010.

<sup>46</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, “Shakespeare in American Communities 2009-2010 Report,” 2009, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

performance workshops) throughout 13 days that benefitted more than 1,100 middle- and high-school students from 20 schools located in Maryland.”

Despite budget constraints the Baltimore Shakespeare Festival was able to create a program that fulfilled the grant requirements set by the NEA and Arts Midwest. Although the program was not as extensive as Theatre for a New Audience’s residency program and perhaps did not teach the play to students with the same level and depth of the 12-week residency, more than a thousand Baltimore students were able to experience a live Shakespeare production and spend classroom time studying the performance, an outcome that promotes the NEA’s goals.

If the robust educational programs provided by Theatre for a New Audience constitute one end of a spectrum and the financially-struggling Baltimore Shakespeare Festival’s basic interpretation of the grant requirements constitutes the other end, West Virginia’s Greenbrier Valley Theatre used its grant to help to fund a program that falls somewhere between these two extremes. Greenbrier Valley Theatre began its work in 1976 in a tent beside the Greenbrier River. Since the theatre’s founding, the company’s mission has been to present, “quality live theatre centered around a core of professional actors and directors with opportunities for members of the community to learn stagecraft.”<sup>48</sup> In 2000 after years of performing partial seasons in a temporary space, the company was able to move into a permanent purpose-built theatre that includes classroom and rehearsal studio space. The company is supported by a loyal local fan base, and in 2006 Greenbrier Valley

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<sup>48</sup> "Greenbrier Valley Theatre: A Brief History," Greenbrier Valley Theatre: The State Professional Theatre of West Virginia, accessed November 13, 2011, [http://www.gvtheatre.org/#!\\_\\_about-us](http://www.gvtheatre.org/#!__about-us).



Theatre became “West Virginia’s Official Year-Round Professional Theatre.”<sup>49</sup> The company received a *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant for the 2009-2010 season.

According to Greenbrier Valley Theatre’s Education Director, Meredith Donnelly, the company applies for NEA grants every year but the \$25,000 grant, “was more than double what we usually get,”<sup>50</sup> a boon for a theatre company funded primarily, as many are, through grants and donations. Donnelly explained that the theatre has an operating budget of approximately \$900,000 per year, only \$213,000 of which was earned through ticket sales during the 2009-2010 season and added that, “the reason that’s so high is because we can’t charge what we really need to for ticket prices because no one would come. Not because of the quality, it’s just because they can’t afford it.” The rest of Greenbrier Valley Theatre’s budget comes from generous donations from a “small cap” of people in the region who can afford to donate to theatre, while the rest comes from a series of grants the company applies for each year.<sup>51</sup>

The bulk of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant money went directly to underwriting a production of *Macbeth* for a student matinee program that the company has been running each year since 2004. Because of the grant funding, Greenbrier Valley Theatre was able to bring Tony-nominated actress Kimberly Scott to Lewisberg to play Lady Macbeth and charge students just seven dollars to see the

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Meredith Donnelly, telephone interview by author, August 11, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

production. Student tickets for productions at the theatre usually cost twice that much.<sup>52</sup> The student matinee program also includes a talkback for the students after each production and study guides that include information about the production as well as activities such as word puzzles that students can do to prepare to see the show. During the 2009-2010 season, Greenbrier Valley Theatre was just beginning to develop in-class workshops. The education director and two actors traveled to Gilbert, West Virginia and did a workshop on interpreting and performing Shakespeare for the students there. This grant-funded activity was the first of its kind for the company and one they hope to continue in years to come.<sup>53</sup> With their *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant Greenbrier Valley Theatre conducted 14 performances and 14 educational activities over the course of 14 days and benefited more than 1500 middle and high school students from 23 schools in Virginia and West Virginia.<sup>54</sup>

The above examples demonstrate the autonomy of grantees in creating educational programs that suit their company's budget and staff size while simultaneously fulfilling the requirements of the grant. They also illustrate the range of theatre companies that are eligible for a *Shakespeare in American Communities: Shakespeare for a New Generation* grant. Ultimately, while criteria such as size, national reputation, operating budget, and production and educational program quality are determining factors in Arts Midwest and the NEA's decision to award a

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<sup>52</sup> Greenbrier Valley Theatre: The State Professional Theatre of West Virginia, accessed November 10, 2011, [http://www.gvtheatre.org/#!\\_\\_tickets](http://www.gvtheatre.org/#!__tickets)

<sup>53</sup> Meredith Donnelly, telephone interview by author, August 11, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Shakespeare in American Communities 2009-2010 Report," 2010, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC.

grant, factors such as a theatre company's location in the country and its ability to perform outreach programs for students that would not otherwise be exposed to live theatrical productions play a large role as well. As Arts Midwest Assistant Director Susan Chandler explains, "If you look at the list of theatre companies participating, there are many smaller companies and they are reaching into smaller, more rural areas...they simply don't have the same capacity as a major theatre company like Guthrie or Arena Stage would have." Smaller or more rural companies like Baltimore Shakespeare Festival or Greenbrier Valley Theatre fulfill a different side of the Shakespeare in American Communities initiative in that while the NEA would like students to see a *professional* production of Shakespeare's work, the ultimate point is for students to experience a live production. Chandler describes an ongoing debate in arts funding as "quality versus access" and notes that it is a constant balancing act to insure that artistic quality is not being sacrificed for access.<sup>55</sup> Although one cannot successfully argue that a small local company like Baltimore Shakespeare Festival is presenting shows and educational material of the same caliber as Theatre for a New Audience, all of the companies selected to receive a grant through this initiative ideally create live productions and activities that allow students to experience Shakespeare's work in a manner that they would not have access to otherwise.

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011.

## *Shakespeare in American Communities's Scope and Scale*

In the decade of its existence *Shakespeare in American Communities'* reach across the country has been staggering in its scale. Estimating the program's size as it began to wind down during the 2010-2011 season, Dana Gioia guessed that the program had been implemented in some form (through either full access to a live production and associated educational activities or through the *Shakespeare in American Communities Toolkit*) in 80% of American high schools. The initiative, "brought something like two million kids into live performance, and for 25 million kids we brought exciting stuff into their classroom. That is significant."<sup>56</sup>

The formally compiled statistics on the initiative, collected through the 2009-2010 season, show that the initiative has reached between 172 and 1,270 communities each season.<sup>57</sup> Between 2003 and 2010, 5,565 individual performances were presented for student audiences and students participated in 14,177 educational activities at least partially funded by *Shakespeare in American Communities* money.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>57</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "Shakespeare in American Communities 2003-2004 Report," 2004, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC. National Endowment for the Arts, "Shakespeare in American Communities 2006-2007 Report," 2007, The National Endowment for the Arts, Washington, DC. At the time of this writing in 2012, the 2009-2010 statistics are the most recent to have been formally compiled and released. The 2012-2013 season is currently in progress, and the NEA is accepting applications for the 2013-2014 season.

<sup>58</sup> Numbers in this paragraph have been determined by adding together the statistics reported each season from 2003 through 2010. These statistics list the states and individual communities reached, the number of performances, the number of educational activities conducted, the total audience reached, the total children reached, the theater companies engaged, the schools reached, and the number of educational toolkits distributed.

Since there is no way to determine from the statistics how many new schools were visited each year versus how many had been visited in previous seasons and also no way to determine how many new students were reached each year as opposed to how many were repeat patrons of the program, it is difficult to do more than speculate on the number of students that participated in the initiative. However, with an average of 222,719 students participating each year over the course of seven seasons, an estimate of one million students is not far-fetched. When one includes the students who participated in the program through classroom exposure to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* Toolkit, Gioia's assertion that 25 million students participated in the program seems, if slightly exaggerated, at least feasible.

In addition to serving students and teachers, these grants have also provided work to hundreds of theatre artists. The program has awarded 175 grants that have supported the work of more than 75 theatre companies. By the NEA's estimation, companies receiving these grants have provided employment to more than 1500 actors, directors, stage crew, and other theatre professionals.<sup>59</sup>

The *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative is notable first and foremost because of this size and scope. A major government-sponsored theatre project of this scale deserves critical attention because of the impact it has had on the culture of Shakespeare education in America at the turn of the twenty-first century. Any program that reaches millions of students and in some manner influences the programming decisions of dozens of American theatre companies should not be

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<sup>59</sup> "About the Program," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed November 10, 2011, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about>.

ignored by scholars and theatre practitioners. This program was also the template for several other initiatives now being implemented at the NEA, so it has had a profound impact on the Endowment.<sup>60</sup>

It is my hope that this history of the program will serve as a useful secondary source for anyone researching this initiative or the NEA in the future. In the chapters that follow, I will analyze various facets of the initiative in greater detail, providing the “why” and the “how” that have merely been glossed over here.

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<sup>60</sup> According to Arts Midwest Director David Fraher and Assistant Director Susan Chandler, the program is not scheduled to continue after 2013. Other initiatives influenced by *Shakespeare in American Communities* will be discussed in chapter 2.



## Chapter 2: Changing the Conversation: *Shakespeare in American Communities* and the Reputation of the NEA

Chairman Dana Gioia and his staff at the National Endowment for the Arts created the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative to bring live Shakespeare performance to thousands of Americans in communities underserved by the arts. The stated goal of the program, repeated often in its promotional material, was to encourage a new generation of young people—primarily students, but also young military families—to appreciate and support live theatre, and to enthusiastically embrace the language and stories of William Shakespeare, the playwright selected to serve as the emblem of great, enduring theatre and literature.

The other, perhaps equally important, goal of the program was to improve the national reputation of the Endowment and to secure adequate congressional appropriations at a time when the NEA was viewed by many Americans with apathy at best and animosity at worst. While the NEA had always had its vocal champions in Congress and in the arts community, events of the previous decade had put increasing pressure on the NEA from its detractors. As Gioia put it, when he began his tenure at the NEA it was an “embattled institution whose benefit was not, shall I say, universally understood by the American people.”<sup>1</sup> During his time at the NEA, Gioia wished to “change the conversation” that Americans were having about the

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.



Endowment, and he worked to improve the manner in which the organization was viewed by the public and its elected representatives in Congress.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I will examine the goals and outcomes of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative in the context of the broader history of the National Endowment for the Arts, its funding, and its programming. Using NEA press releases, articles in popular periodicals, interviews with program participants, and congressional records, I will situate the initiative in the historical narrative of the NEA and in the context of the George W. Bush Administration. I will discuss the financial and socio-political impact that the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative had on the NEA and the manner in which it served Gioia's overall goals for the Endowment under his chairmanship.

### ***Shakespeare in American Communities and the Culture Wars***

The National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities were established on September 29, 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson signed the Arts and Humanities Act. The Act declared that the “world leadership” of the United States should not “rest solely upon superior power, wealth, and technology, but must be founded upon worldwide respect and admiration for the nation's high qualities as a leader in the realm of ideas of the spirit.”<sup>3</sup> With this ideal

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<sup>2</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 18.

in mind, the NEA began its first fiscal year on October 31, 1965 with a budget of \$2.5 million and fewer than a dozen employees.

Arts education was a priority for the Endowment from its inception, and several NEA programs set a precedent for the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. In 1967, the first fiscal year in which the NEA awarded a complete series of grants, the Endowment proved its dedication to education in the arts by awarding a substantial grant of \$681,000 for a Laboratory Theatre Project to assist in training high school students in classical theatre. The project provided funding for “professional theater companies” in three cities to provide “free performances for secondary school students on weekday afternoons and for adults on weekends.” The objective of the program was to improve the quality of arts education by “making high-quality theater presentations integral to high school curricula.”<sup>4</sup> Through this grant, performances of Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, George Bernard Shaw’s *Saint Joan*, Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*, and Richard Sheridan’s *The Rivals* were performed for students in Providence, Rhode Island; Los Angeles; and New Orleans. Although the scale of this early project by no means rivals that of *Shakespeare in American Communities*, the spirit of this early grant is evident in the mission of the latter program. Under the chairmanship of Nancy Hanks in the 1970s, the NEA began the Artists-in-Schools program. Funded in part with \$900,000 from the Department of Education, the program sent more than 300 performing and visual artists into

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 23.

elementary and secondary schools in 31 states to perform for and educate students.<sup>5</sup> The goal of the Artists-in-Schools program was to ensure that the Endowment reached young people with few opportunities to experience the arts. The precedent for focusing on education is also evident in one of the Endowment's major accomplishments of the 1990s, the creation of the Arts Education Partnership. This program, which brings together the Department of Education, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the NEA, is also indicative of the NEA's willingness to partner with other government agencies, as it would when it partnered with the Department of Defense on the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. The Arts Education partnership provides a common ground for researchers to study how best to promote and sustain the arts in the school curriculum, and its ambitious research agenda that encompasses the arts and academia, the arts and social development, and training for arts educators, demonstrates the NEA's commitment to defining and improving the role of the arts in all levels of American education.<sup>6</sup>

The populist ideology of Gioia's Shakespeare initiative is also part of a trend that can be traced throughout the history of the NEA. President Clinton stated during his presidency that the mission of the NEA should be "to enliven creative expression and to make the arts more accessible to Americans of all walks of life,"<sup>7</sup> and he was

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 122.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

certainly not the first to suggest that the primary goal of the NEA should be arts accessibility. The best example of the invigorating effect of embracing a populist approach for the NEA can be seen in the chairmanship of Nancy Hanks in the 1970s. The NEA under Hanks promoted an “art-for-all-Americans” approach that brought “more federal money for the arts to more communities in the United States than ever before.”<sup>8</sup> The popularity of this vision for the NEA was reflected in the Endowment’s funding, which increased a remarkable 1,400 percent during Hanks’s eight years as NEA chair.<sup>9</sup> Although Hanks’s goals as chairman seem to be the strongest inspiration for Gioia’s goals in their focus on bringing the arts to the broadest possible audience, programs specifically intended to bring art to those who otherwise would rarely experience it have always been funded by the NEA. For instance, the NEA’s Expansion Arts Program, founded as one of the NEA’s earliest initiatives, focused on bringing the arts to underserved communities, particularly minority communities and those in inner cities. Twenty years later, the Rural Arts initiative was begun in 1989 to help to develop rural arts organizations through grants to state art agencies.<sup>10</sup> These same rural, minority, and inner city communities would continue to be chronically underserved by the arts and would become the same types of communities specifically targeted by *Shakespeare in American Communities* a little over a decade later.

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 51.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

The above examples are just some of the many that demonstrate the NEA's early commitment to encouraging theatre education activities, and to funding programs with populist appeal intended to ideally reach as broad a swath of American citizens as possible. It is these types of programs and their success that in part inspired the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. Gioia and his team of Endowment employees had some clear examples of populist programs from the past that had worked to bring greater funding and positive press to the NEA. Yet Gioia's initiative was not created to maintain a populist status quo. In fact, the opposite is true. The *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative was created in 2002 primarily because the type of populist educational programming enumerated above had not been consistently promoted and disseminated often enough to be seen as typical NEA fare. To the contrary, the NEA had garnered a reputation as an elitist organization, serving only a small subset of the American population and not benefiting the citizens of the country as a whole. This dichotomy between "elite" and "populist" (or perhaps "popular") has always been part of the dialogue concerning the NEA.

The two terms are loaded, and both are bandied about by politicians, the media, and the NEA leadership itself. Chairman Gioia's explanation of his understanding of the elite class provides a useful definition for how the word is often applied in discussions concerning the Endowment, and it is this understanding of "elite" that I utilize in the following pages. According to Gioia, elites are an interdependent group. People perceived as elites can be found in "the major cultural centers of the United States," particularly New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco,

Chicago, and Boston and are both the esoteric artists and those who patronize their work. Elite artists are those at “institutions which basically are seen to be on, if not the cutting edge, at least the fashionable edge of the arts.” The clientele of these fashionable institutions are the “sophisticated moneyed class” and are also viewed as elites.<sup>11</sup> Populist, then, is the polar opposite of elite. If elites are found in major cultural centers of the United States, then those who desire art to be viewed as populist seek out their everyman audiences everywhere else, in the small rural towns and neglected urban centers of the country. Populist artists do not work to appeal to a wealthy clientele, but rather to the “average Joe” with a middle- or working-class income. The art itself is not expected to be fashionable or cutting edge, but rather traditional, familiar, and accessible (both in terms of its subject matter and its availability in all communities for a low cost). This is a simplistic definition of two terms that are in fact complex, but regardless of the exact nuances of the terminology—which change in emphasis from one debate and discussion to the next—one thing is clear: “elite” and “populist” are competing ideas. It has always been the NEA’s responsibility to grapple with questions of elitism and populism while often simultaneously pretending that there is no divide between the two.<sup>12</sup>

The NEA was established “to nurture American creativity, to elevate the nation's culture, and to sustain and preserve the country's many artistic traditions.

The Arts Endowment's mission was clear--to spread this artistic prosperity

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<sup>11</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> For further discussion of these competing and often conflicting ideas of elite and popular, see chapter 5.

throughout the land, from the dense neighborhoods of our largest cities to the vast rural spaces, so that every citizen might enjoy America's great cultural legacy.”<sup>13</sup> This mission suggests that while “artistic prosperity” should be attainable for all citizens through the NEA, the NEA’s simultaneous goal was to “elevate the nation’s culture.” That goal can fairly be called an elitist pursuit, at least in one sense of the word. Livingston Biddle, chair of the NEA from 1977 to 1981, believed that the terms elitism and populism were regrettably used to indicate a false polarization of the arts. Biddle suggested that elitism can mean “quality” and populism can mean “access,” and that the two terms need not be mutually exclusive but must rather be brought together with “access to the best” as a guiding principle for the NEA. <sup>14</sup> In practice, however, the NEA has always struggled to strike this balance between elite and populist. The *Shakespeare in American Communities* program is indicative of the NEA at its most populist and was in many regards Chairman Gioia’s response to all those who believed that in previous years it had skewed too elite in a sense of the word that did not simply mean “quality.”

Although the above paragraphs elucidate some key populist precedents for *Shakespeare in American Communities*, and Nancy Hanks’s tenure in particular demonstrates that Gioia’s populist approach to the NEA in the 2000s was not entirely new to the agency, many early NEA initiatives did not fit into this access-for-all model and are indicative of an artist-centric NEA that would come to be accused of serving the elites rather than a broad swath of the American population. One need

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

only examine the first series of NEA grants awarded in 1967 to see how much the Endowment has shifted away from its initial priorities. Early on, the NEA was not afraid to support cutting-edge artists, trail blazers in their fields who were virtually unknown or underappreciated, or, if growing in popularity, still relatively unproven because of a lack of longevity. In its first year, the NEA awarded 23 theatre grants totaling \$1,007,500, including awards for resident professional theaters such as the Actors Theatre of Louisville, the Seattle Repertory Theatre, and the Tyrone Guthrie Theater. Grants to these theatres, founded in 1963, 1964, and 1964, respectively, demonstrate that the early NEA desired to provide funding to promising fledgling companies and was a strong advocate of the regional theatre movement. That same year the Experimental Playwrights' Theater received a total of \$125,000 to produce plays by Robert Lowell at Yale University and by Studs Terkel at the University of Michigan. In the field of visual art, the NEA provided early support for pop art and neo-surrealism. In short, the Arts Endowment actively “encouraged young and fresh talents previously overlooked or growing in acceptance.” Visual arts grantees of 1967 “included Leon Polk Smith, Mark di Suvero, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Manuel Neri, Tony Smith, and H.C. Westermann. None of these artists were traditionalists.”<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the late 1960s was a time in which the “elite” and the “popular” were in some respects less clearly distinct than they are in the 2000s. Regional theatres such as the Tyrone Guthrie were new and experimental, but also relatively popular with the general public. Chairman Gioia, reflecting on the 1950s and 1960s, suggests

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<sup>15</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 22.



that the lines between what would now generally be considered elite (poets, classical musicians) and what would be considered popular (late night television talk shows) were often blurred in a manner that we no longer see in the twenty-first century. In his public appearances Gioia often shares recollections of watching variety television programs like the *Ed Sullivan Show* or the *Perry Como Music Hall* and seeing classical musicians like Jascha Heifetz and opera singers such as Anna Moffo and Robert Merrill featured as guests along with the types of comedians, popular singers, and movie stars who make up the vast majority of guests on today's late night shows.<sup>16</sup> Gioia believes that today “no working-class or immigrant kid would encounter that range of arts and ideas in the popular culture.”<sup>17</sup> The chasm between popular entertainment and art perceived as being reserved for society's elites has grown. Although when one looks at the list of 1967 grantees it seems that the NEA was focused on non-traditional artists and the funding of artistic endeavors out of the mainstream of most Americans' experiences, I concede that in the period in which the NEA was founded, “popular” and “elite” were more easily enmeshed in the manner in which, ten years later, Chairman Biddle would suggest to be ideal.

However, from almost the start of the NEA's existence, politicians showed concern regarding whom and what the NEA was funding. In 1968, the NEA encountered the first Congressional review of its programming, and particular scrutiny was paid to fellowships for individual artists. Some legislators worried that in awarding these fellowships to artists the NEA would “bypass the cultural norms of

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<sup>16</sup> Dana Gioia (Commencement Speech, Stanford University, June 17, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

the American majority.”<sup>18</sup> Others believed that the NEA was unduly focused on funding new styles of art at the expense of traditional styles, favoring the avant-garde and effectively acting as censors of traditional art forms.

It is clear that by 1977, at least some in the NEA were blatantly operating from a perspective that favored the needs of elite artists (and those elite critics who had the opportunity to experience, understand, and appreciate them) over the needs of the general public seeking accessible popular entertainment. In that year Visual Arts Program director James Melchert wrote, “We are not success-oriented, in the conventional sense. Our ideas of success are different from the usual ones. A fellowship...might mean only that the artist spent his time testing new ideas, learning which led up blind alleys and which were artistically valid. We do not require our artists to be...popular, either, which is sometimes quite different from having artistic merit.”<sup>19</sup> Melchert was an employee under Chairman Biddle. Biddle considered it the Endowment’s responsibility to promote experimentation in art but also believed that the Endowment had an equal duty to keep art from becoming so experimental that it ceased to be an integral shared element of American society. The Endowment did not fear controversy. Writing near the end of his term in 1980, Chairman Biddle declared, “The Endowment has had some controversial moments; and yet controversy is the yeast that makes the creative loaf rise.”<sup>20</sup> But the NEA ultimately faced more

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<sup>18</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 27.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

controversy than it had bargained for when it became embroiled in the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The trouble began with a visual arts grant awarded in 1987. That year, the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, received a grant of \$75,000 from the NEA to support the seventh annual Awards in the Visual Arts program. This grant, which was matched by an additional \$75,000 in private funds, was used to enable a jury to meet and select ten artists to display their works in a traveling exhibition. One of the featured artists selected by the jury was Andres Serrano, a photographer whose featured works included a hazy image of a crucifix in a jar of urine, a piece entitled *Piss Christ*. The following year, the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art received an NEA grant of \$30,000 for a retrospective of works by photographer Robert Mapplethorpe that included graphic homoerotic and violent images.<sup>21</sup> Both exhibits were initially presented without inciting widespread public controversy. However, shortly after the close of the Awards in the Visual Arts tour in 1989, Reverend Donald E. Wildmon, executive director of the American Family Association in Tupelo, Mississippi, saw the catalogue containing Serrano's *Piss Christ*. Wildmon condemned the work and encouraged a public campaign against the show and against the NEA for helping to fund it, calling for the dismissal of "the person at the National Endowment for the Arts responsible for approving federal tax dollars."<sup>22</sup> Thousands of citizens wrote to their representatives in Congress echoing Wildmon's call. In an attempt to quell the

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<sup>21</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 90.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

rising tide of disapproval, Hugh Southern, then the acting chairman of the NEA, wrote a statement in April of 1989 stating, “The Endowment is expressly forbidden in its authorizing legislation from interfering with the artistic choices made by its grantees. The National Endowment for the Arts supports the right of grantee organizations to select, on artistic criteria, their artist-recipients and present their work, even though sometimes the work may be deemed controversial and offensive to some individuals. We at the Endowment do, nonetheless, deeply regret any offense to any individual.”<sup>23</sup> Yet this statement did not have the desired effect, as the contingent of NEA detractors continued to grow in number and power. Republican Senators Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Alfonse D’Amato of New York led the criticism of the Endowment in Congress, denouncing Serrano’s work and demanding a review of the NEA’s grant procedures. The legislators, along with 22 other senators, also demanded a guarantee from the NEA that it would not support projects including works that could be considered offensive to the taste of the general public.

Meanwhile, the Mapplethorpe exhibit had simultaneously begun to generate controversy. In June of 1989 the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, canceled a planned transfer of the Institute of Contemporary Art’s Mapplethorpe exhibit to its space, fearing that to open the exhibit would trigger a “political storm” on Capitol Hill due to the potentially controversial content of the show.<sup>24</sup> Then-chairman of the board of the Corcoran, David Lloyd Kreeger, stated that the decision to pull the Mapplethorpe exhibit was made because the board feared that going ahead

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Gamarekian, "Corcoran, to Foil Dispute, Drops Mapplethorpe Show," *New York Times*, June 14, 1989, Final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

with the NEA-funded exhibit while the Endowment was already dealing with the Serrano controversy could “hurt NEA appropriations” at a “very critical period in the appropriation process.”<sup>25</sup> Former NEA chair Livingston Biddle agreed, saying, “In this current climate of confusion, exaggeration, and hyperbole, it would be very difficult for an artist like Mapplethorpe, who is very controversial, to have a good viewing of his work in Washington.”<sup>26</sup> The decision to cancel the Mapplethorpe retrospective had the opposite of the intended outcome, however. Rather than avoiding controversy, the Corcoran’s decision furthered it on two fronts: the perceived censorship by the Corcoran caused an uproar in the arts community, and the attention drawn to the exhibit by its cancelation served only to bring it to the attention of the NEA’s opponents, further fueling the controversy in Congress.

In the summer of 1989 Congress began debating the appropriations bill for the Interior Department and Related Agencies, which was to provide funding to the NEA for fiscal year 1990. Congressmen in the House of Representatives suggested three amendments intended to punish the NEA for its transgressions in providing funding for the controversial works of art. One called for the elimination of the Endowment’s entire appropriation for fiscal year 1990. Another called for a 10 percent cut to its grants and administrative appropriations, and a third called for a five percent cut to its overall budget. While none of these amendments passed in the House, a fourth did: a reduction of the NEA’s budget by \$45,000, representing the \$30,000 that had been granted to fund the Mapplethorpe exhibit and \$15,000, which was the portion of the

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<sup>25</sup> Barbara Gamarekian, "Corcoran, to Foil Dispute, Drops Mapplethorpe Show," *New York Times*, June 14, 1989, Final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

\$75,000 grant to the Southeastern Center of Contemporary Art that had been used to fund Serrano's work.<sup>27</sup> When the bill came before the Senate, Senator Jesse Helms added the now-infamous vague language prohibiting the NEA from using its appropriated funds to pay for materials deemed, "obscene or indecent." This included anything that denigrated any person based on race, religion, sex, handicap, or national origin. "Obscene" and "indecent" works were defined by Helms as those that featured "sodomasochistic homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."<sup>28</sup> The Senate further suggested other amendments to ban all direct grants to the companies that had produced the controversial exhibits and to shift \$400,000 from the Agency's Visual Arts Program to other Endowment programs focused on folk arts and community arts.<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, these amendments did not pass. Remarkably, the final version of the bill did not reduce the NEA's budget. In fact, the Senate provided an additional \$250,000 for the Endowment's appropriations to create an independent commission to review the NEA's grant process.<sup>30</sup> But while the NEA had emerged from the Mapplethorpe and Serrano controversies financially unscathed, many Republicans in Congress and vocal

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<sup>27</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 93.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

<sup>29</sup> Technically, the Mapplethorpe grant had come from the NEA's Museum Arts Program and not its Visual Arts Program. It is important to note that community arts were viewed as a non-controversial counterpoint to the visual arts, as the Shakespeare in American Communities program is primarily a community theatre-based program.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 94.

conservatives in public life were now suspicious of the Arts Endowment and watched the agency closely for any sign of moral corruption. The arts community, too, was keeping a close eye on the Endowment to gauge its reaction to its critics. In July of 1989, George H.W. Bush appointed John E. Frohnmayer to head the Endowment. To comply with Congressional mandates, Frohnmayer placed Senator Helms's obscenity clause into the official terms and conditions governing all NEA grants. The arts community was incensed and accused Frohnmayer and the NEA of failing to defend artistic freedom of expression and buckling to government censorship. Frohnmayer later claimed that he deliberately inserted this language into the NEA's terms and conditions because he believed that it would provoke a lawsuit, which he hoped would lead to findings that the language was unconstitutional. As a response to the obscenity clause, many artists and arts administrators resigned from positions on NEA grant panels and otherwise severed ties with the Endowment.<sup>31</sup>

Thus the NEA was already in a vulnerable position when another major public controversy began to take shape in 1990. That May, performance artist Karen Finley came to national attention when two Washington journalists, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, wrote about one of her performances in their widely syndicated column. Finley's performances, which deal with issues such as the degradation of women, sexual violence, and homophobia, are notable for their profanity, nudity, and graphic depictions of sexuality. In the performance referenced in Evans and Novak's column, Finley poured chocolate on her naked body, leading Evans and Novak to caricature her as "the chocolate-smearing woman." They also quoted an unnamed

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<sup>31</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 97.

Bush administration insider who had supposedly seen Finley's performance and found it "outrageous."<sup>32</sup> Finley defended her performance in a letter to the *Washington Post*, defining herself as a "serious artist" whose work had been depicted by Evans and Novak in an "inaccurate and maliciously misleading way." She described herself as, "the latest victim of the attacks of the extremist right on freedom of expression," and wrote, "I see this attack as part of a larger trend of suppressing artists -- especially those whose work deals with difficult social issues -- by playing on society's fears, prejudices and problems."<sup>33</sup> The damage had already been done, however. In the same month that Evans and Novak's and Finley's articles were published, the National Council on the Arts decided to defer 18 grants for Finley and other performance artists that had been recommended by the NEA's Theater panel. Of those 18 grants, 14 were eventually recommended after further consideration and were awarded to the individual artists by NEA Chairman Frohnmayer. Four grants—to Karen Finley and performance artists Holly Hughes, John Fleck, and Tim Miller—were not approved. In response, the four denied artists sued the NEA for illegally denying their grant applications. Dubbed "The NEA 4," they received support from the arts community and set in motion a legal battle that would continue to plague the NEA and would not be resolved for nearly a decade.<sup>34</sup> The NEA 4 controversy provided fuel to the fire for liberals and conservatives alike.

Meanwhile, in 1990 the Independent Commission mandated by Congress to

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<sup>32</sup> Karen Finley, "'Chocolate-Smeared Young Woman,'" *Washington Post*, May 19, 1990, Final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 99.



study the NEA began its review of the agency. The mission of the Independent Commission was to review the Endowment's grant-making procedures and to consider whether there should be specific standards of decency for publicly funded art. This mission was intended to redress the two major criticisms leveled against the Endowment by its detractors in Congress: first, that its grant-making process was subject to cronyism, and, second, that the NEA was funding works that were "too far from the mainstream of public taste," and therefore did not deserve to be funded with public tax dollars.<sup>35</sup> The Commission found reason to praise the NEA, stating in its final report that the NEA had helped to change the cultural landscape of the United States. During the two-and-a-half decades of the NEA's existence, the number of symphony orchestras in the United States had doubled and the number of opera companies had increased from 27 to 120. The number of professional dance companies had increased from 37 to 250, and the number of museums from 375 to over 700. The number of people in the United States claiming their profession as "artist" had tripled. According to the Commission, "a relatively small investment of federal funds has yielded a substantial financial return and made a significant contribution to the quality of American life." As for the question of whether or not there should be specific standards for publicly-funded art, the Commission stated that the standards for selecting publicly funded art must go beyond considerations of artistic worth and also consider conditions that have traditionally governed the use of public money. The Commission believed that in selecting grantees the NEA must consider not only their artistic merit but also their ability to achieve wide distribution

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<sup>35</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 104.

of their works and reflect the cultures of minority, inner-city, and tribal communities.<sup>36</sup> While the Commission agreed that freedom of expression is essential to artistic production, it pointed out that obscenity is not protected as free speech and that the NEA was and continued to be, “prohibited from funding the production of works which are obscene or otherwise illegal.” However, the Commission called the NEA an “inappropriate tribunal for the legal determination of obscenity, for purposes of either criminal or civil liability,” and recommended that the NEA chairman remove the obscenity clause from the Endowment’s grants.<sup>37</sup> The Commission ultimately determined that there had been deficiencies in the operation of the Endowment and that mistakes had been made, but believed that through a combination of Congressional oversight and reforms in grant-making procedures the NEA could be trusted to be accountable for dispensing public funds.

By the time the primary campaigns for the 1992 presidential election had begun in late 1990, the NEA had become so controversial that it became a campaign issue for the first time in its history. Republican presidential hopeful Patrick Buchanan ran on a “culture war” platform that accused the sitting Administration of investing tax dollars in, “pornographic and blasphemous art too shocking to show.”<sup>38</sup> He promised to close down the NEA if elected. Meanwhile, the denial of grants to the NEA 4 was not enough to placate Senator Helms. He continued to spearhead a campaign in the Senate to severely curtail the granting activities of the NEA. During

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<sup>36</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 107.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

debates on the NEA's appropriations bill for 1992, Helms advocated an amendment to prohibit the NEA from using any of its funding to provide grants to any individuals or works that, "depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual or excretory activities or organs."<sup>39</sup> He also accused the Endowment of adhering to elitist policies that failed to adequately serve states without major arts centers, while providing disproportionate funding to cultural centers like New York City. However, Helms was unable to muster the support to pass an amendment to transfer NEA funding from prominent New York organizations like Lincoln Center and the Metropolitan Opera to arts councils throughout the country. The "Helms language" concerning the ban of funding for "patently offensive" art was also ultimately dropped from the appropriations bill, although the previous ban on "obscene" art remained.<sup>40</sup> The ongoing Congressional debates over the fate of the NEA meant that the Endowment was receiving large amounts of publicity, almost all of it negative. By 1992 the NEA had lost the majority of its support in Congress, the White House, the media, and the public. In February of 1992, Chairman Frohnmayer, who had come to be viewed by most Americans as an ineffective leader of a floundering agency, submitted his resignation, becoming the first and thus far only NEA Chair to resign under political pressure.<sup>41</sup>

In 1993, actress Jane Alexander was appointed by President Bill Clinton to

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<sup>39</sup> Eric Pianin, "Helms Wins Senate Vote to Restrict NEA Funds; Action Targets 'Offensive' Materials," *Washington Post*, September 20, 1991, Final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>40</sup> Kim Masters, "'Corn for Porn' Victory; NEA Funds Okayed Without Helms Proposal," *Washington Post*, October 25, 1991, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>41</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 108.

serve as the next chairman of the NEA. At the point at which Alexander took the helm of the NEA, the negative attention to the agency had not yet translated into budget cuts. In fact, during fiscal year 1992 the NEA's budget was at an all-time high of \$176 million.<sup>42</sup> However, the agency's status was still precarious, as it continued to serve as a scapegoat for conservative politicians. Alexander worked doggedly to improve the Endowment's reputation with the general public. During her tenure as chairman, she traveled to all fifty states and Puerto Rico in order to improve her understanding of the role the NEA was serving in communities across the United States. She used her public position as chair of the Endowment and well-known actress to speak out about the positive work of the NEA and convince Americans that the vast majority of the projects financed by the agency were non-controversial. In her written statement at her Senate confirmation hearing in 1993, Alexander said, "I believe strongly that the sound and fury of the past few years over [a] handful of controversial grants must end...I can, however, assure Congress that I will follow the statutory guidelines on funding to the very best of my ability to ensure that grants are given for the highest degree of artistic merit and excellence...My goal for the arts is that the best reaches the most."<sup>43</sup> This goal would be repeated almost verbatim by Dana Gioia when he began his tenure as chair almost a decade later, but in the early 1990s this statement from Alexander could not placate politicians on Capitol Hill.

During the 1994 presidential campaign and elections, the NEA once again became a topic of conversation in the election discourse. Many Republicans, under

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<sup>42</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 111.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

the leadership of then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich, were successfully elected by espousing a political platform called the “Contract With America,” which included a call for the elimination of the NEA. Conservatives labeled the NEA--along with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting--a pork barrel scheme, insisting that the proliferation of state humanities councils since the inception of the NEA and NEH was a waste of taxpayer money and an example of government breeding more government without regard for its necessity or desirability to the general public.<sup>44</sup> In an op-ed in the *Washington Post*, columnist George Will expressed the views of many conservatives when he wrote, “If Republicans merely trim rather than terminate these three agencies, they will affirm that all three perform appropriate federal functions and will prove that the Republican ‘revolution’ is not even serious reform.”<sup>45</sup>

Although the NEA had miraculously avoided budget cuts despite over half a decade of loud public outcry against it, by 1996 the negative publicity finally caught up to the Endowment. In fiscal year 1994, the NEA’s budget had been trimmed from \$174 million to \$170 million. The budget was cut again in 1995, to \$162 million. These budget cuts were minor compared to the major battering the Endowment’s appropriations took in fiscal year 1996, however, when its detractors in Congress succeeded in slashing the budget by nearly forty percent.<sup>46</sup> The new budget of \$99 million required major restructuring of the agency. Nearly half of the NEA’s staff was

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 117.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

laid off, and those employees that remained found themselves at a vastly different organization. During the period from 1994 through 1996, Chairman Alexander oversaw several major changes to the functioning of the Endowment. Where there were once 17 discipline-based grant programs, there were now only four funding divisions. These four divisions consisted of the categories Heritage and Preservation, Education and Access, Creation and Presentation, and Planning and Stabilization. Alexander also established Leadership Initiatives. By authorizing Leadership Initiatives, Alexander gave the NEA the ability to create programs that did not necessarily revolve around grant-based funding.<sup>47</sup> The most notable change to the agency as a result of its restructuring under Chairman Alexander was the change in the process of providing grants to individuals. In 1994, the NEA eliminated its budget for local nonprofit agencies to provide federal grants to individual artists. This process, known as “regranting,” had allowed the NEA to channel funding to local nonprofit arts agencies throughout the United States. These agencies would then provide grants to individual artists in their communities. Such artists would otherwise be unlikely to receive federal money, as they would typically be unable to match the grantsmanship of large arts organizations applying directly to the NEA for funding. Although the Endowment claimed that this was “a strictly budgetary response to a shrinking fiscal pie,” nonprofit arts agencies contended that the Endowment was in fact responding to the political fallout it had faced from funding “unconventional”

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<sup>47</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 121.

and controversial artists such as Finley, Hughes, Fleck, and Miller.<sup>48</sup> Although for a time following this decision individual artists could in theory still receive grants by applying directly to the Endowment in Washington, in practice this budget cut severely restricted the amount of individual grants provided by the NEA. This became an ongoing point of controversy in the artistic community.

In addition to the major changes instituted by Alexander, Congress mandated its own NEA reforms in fiscal years 1996, 1997, and 1998 that further drastically changed the manner in which the NEA operated and disbursed federal funding. Most of Congress's reforms to the Endowment were backward-looking rather than progressive. It seems clear from the list of reforms that Congress implemented them in an effort to eliminate the NEA's ability to provide funding to the types of individual artists and exhibits that had caused the culture war controversies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For instance, Congress determined that Alexander's elimination of the regranting process did not adequately prevent the potential of another NEA 4 controversy, and so Congress completely eliminated the NEA's ability to give grants to individual artists.<sup>49</sup> Congress also eliminated grants to organizations for the purpose of sub-granting to other organizations or artists.<sup>50</sup> General or seasonal operating support grants to organizations were eliminated,

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<sup>48</sup> Diana Jean Schemo, "Endowment Ends Program Helping Individual Artist," *New York Times*, November 3, 1994, final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>49</sup> There are two exceptions to this rule. Individuals can still receive grants in the field of literature, and honorific fellowships are still given to jazz musicians, and "folk and traditional artists." Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 121.

<sup>50</sup> Regional, state, and local arts agencies are still allowed to sub-grant, which is why in the Shakespeare in American Communities initiative Arts Midwest handles the granting process as a partner of the NEA.

presumably because a controversial work could be performed without the NEA's knowledge within a season funded by federal money. In response to criticism that the NEA poured too much of its money into urban cultural centers such as New York City or Chicago at the expense of other parts of the United States, Congress instituted several reforms concerning the distribution of NEA funds to the states. Program funds allocated to state arts agencies were raised from 35 percent to 40 percent of the NEA's overall budget, and agency funding to any one particular state was capped at 15%, excluding funds from multi-state projects. The Congressional reforms also strengthened the language of the 1990 NEA authorization stating that funding priority go to underserved populations, and required the NEA to create a separate grant category for projects of a national scope.<sup>51</sup>

Yet even in the midst of these reforms made by Chairman Alexander and mandated by Congress, there continued to be representatives and senators on Capitol Hill speaking for their constituencies, calling for the abolishment of the NEA. In 1997, the NEA came perilously close to being completely defunded. That year Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich advocated the idea of a privately-funded trust rather than a publicly-funded National Endowment, and he once again rallied House Republicans to zero out the NEA's funding in the annual appropriations bill.<sup>52</sup> The proposed House appropriations bill for fiscal year 1998 contained no funding for the Endowment. A Republican-proposed amendment to provide block grants totaling \$80

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<sup>51</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 120. The national scope of programs like *Shakespeare in American Communities* was almost certainly directly influenced by these mandates.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.



million to state arts agencies and school boards to subsidize arts education was also defeated, leaving the arts with no federal government funding in the House bill. As the appropriations bill moved to the Senate, then-President Clinton promised to veto any bill that did not contain at least \$99.5 million for the NEA. The argument over funding for the agency continued in the Senate chambers, however. Senator Helms continued to call for the complete abolition of the agency, and he was joined by Republican Senator John Ashcroft in attacks that continued to primarily focus on the sexual content in a handful of NEA-funded artistic works. Republican Senator Spencer Abraham suggested a plan to privatize the NEA and the National Endowment for the Humanities, declaring that both agencies were “out of touch with the public.” Other NEA detractors continued to object to a perceived inequitable distribution of funding to a handful of cities to the exclusion of the rest of the United States. Yet the NEA also had its champions, and it was Republican Senator Slade Gorton who ultimately kept a pledge to defend the Endowment and restored \$100 million to the NEA in the Senate appropriations bill. The bill passed the Senate vote, and in conference Interior Appropriations Chairmen Senator Gorton and Representative Ralph Regula brokered a compromise that ultimately resulted in \$98 million of funding for the NEA in fiscal year 1998.

In addition to narrowly escaping abolition, in 1998 the NEA claimed another victory when the Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of the NEA 4 case. The lawsuit had gradually been progressing through the court system since the beginning of the decade. The initial complaints by Hughes, Fleck, Miller, and Finley were that their grant applications had been rejected for political reasons and that the contents of

their applications had been released to the public in a violation of the Privacy Act. When the “standard of decency” provision was added to the NEA’s legislation in 1990, however, the NEA 4 found cause to add a First Amendment count to their case. A district court found in favor of the four in 1992, and the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the lower court ruling. In 1993 the Endowment reached a settlement with the NEA 4 artists, who claimed that Chairman Frohnmayer had failed to follow legal procedures in their case. However, this settlement pertained only to the four individual applications and settled only the issues that the grants had been rejected for political reasons and not kept private. The NEA 4 pressed on with their lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the “decency provision.” Their suit was joined by the National Association of Artists’ Organizations. In 1993 the Clinton Administration appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. On June 25, 1998 the Supreme Court affirmed by a vote of 8 to 1 the constitutionality of the provision requiring the NEA to consider, “standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public” when reviewing grant applications.<sup>53</sup> Writing for the majority, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor explained that Congress had the right to be vague in setting criteria for spending money, and that the decency clause was not inherently discriminatory on the basis of viewpoint.<sup>54</sup>

Although the NEA was now operating with a budget only 40% of its peak, it had overcome the major funding obstacles that threatened its existence. And with the NEA 4 controversy finally behind it, the Endowment seemed to be in a relatively

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<sup>53</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 128.

stable position throughout the chairmanship of Bill Ivey, who served as chairman from 1998 until 2001. Ivey's pedigree as Director of the Country Music Foundation in Nashville and former president of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences served to placate Congressional critics who believed that the NEA catered only to cultural elites. Grants during Ivey's tenure emphasized diversity, and he was responsible for the launch of the ArtsREACH and Challenge America programs, which funded arts projects in states identified as under-represented and fulfilled Congressional demands that the NEA focus more of its funds on underserved regions. During Ivey's three-year tenure, the Endowment did not face any major controversies, and under his leadership the NEA received a budget increase in 2000, its first increase after almost a decade of budget cuts. Yet as Michael Hammond prepared to become Chairman of the NEA in 2000 the "image of the Arts Endowment continued to be dictated largely by its critics."<sup>55</sup>

### ***The Conversation About the National Endowment for the Arts***

When Dana Gioia was appointed chairman of the NEA following Chairman Michael Hammond's death in 2002, he took the reins of an agency that, while temporarily stable, had still not recovered from the barrage of negative publicity it had received in the previous decade. A sampling of some of the rhetoric regarding the NEA during the culture wars of the 1990s demonstrates the passionate language with which conservative politicians and pundits criticized the NEA. William J. Bennett, a

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<sup>55</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 135.

former chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities who had served as Education Secretary under President Reagan told Congress in 1995 that the NEA and the NEH had become “intellectually and morally corrupt” because they supported artists and scholars who undermined “mainstream American values.”<sup>56</sup> Lynne Cheney, another former chair of the NEH who became an assertive participant in the culture wars, wrote in a *New York Times* editorial, “So long as the humanities and arts communities are what they are, the endowments will be spending taxpayers’ money on academics and artists whose purpose is to mock the idea of ‘the best that is known and thought in the world,’” and argued, “there is no longer sufficient rationale for Federal support for the endowments.”<sup>57</sup> Senator John Ashcroft, one of the NEA’s most outspoken detractors during the mid-1990s, stated that it was “unacceptable” to use American taxpayer’s money to, “subsidize an assault on their values, religion, or politics,” which he believed was the case with some of the NEA grants.<sup>58</sup> Former House Majority Leader Dick Armey similarly referred to the NEA as an, “affront to the American taxpayer.”<sup>59</sup> Conservative columnist and political commentator Jeff Jacoby provides several prime examples in his columns of the conservative outcry against the NEA during the 1990s. In a 1995 editorial he notably referred to the NEA as “Washington’s most fetid cultural

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<sup>56</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 99..

<sup>57</sup> Lynne Cheney, "Mocking America at U.S. Expense," *New York Times*, March 10, 1995, final edition.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Pear, "Alexander Makes Case for the Arts Endowment," *New York Times*, January 27, 1995, final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>59</sup> Melinda Henneberger, "Republicans Battle Party on Arts Funds," *New York Times*, June 8, 1995, final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

swamp,”<sup>60</sup> stating that the NEA’s “most notable contributions to American art have been cynicism, insufferability, banality, and tastelessness.”<sup>61</sup> In his syndicated op-ed columns Jacoby also described the NEA as, “elitist and insufferable,” and a “travesty.”<sup>62</sup> He accused the NEA of funding works that were, “sophomoric shock art and crude antiestablishment slop.”<sup>63</sup> These, then, were the impressions of the Endowment being published in newspapers and stated on news and talk programs whenever arts funding in America was a topic for discussion.

Even when this type of vitriolic criticism was not dominating publications and interviews about the Endowment, the agency’s press was still typically far from favorable. Throughout the 1990s the NEA was criticized for “squander[ing] millions on art programs serving big-city snobs,”<sup>64</sup> and “spending Federal money on subsidies for wealthy people to go to the opera or the ballet” rather than funding art for those who would not be able to experience it without the assistance of the Endowment.<sup>65</sup> There was a sense that perhaps the NEA could not be trusted to “manage Federal funds in a responsible manner.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Jeff Jacoby, "How the NEA Pollutes American Culture," *Boston Globe*, January 24, 1995, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Jeff Jacoby, "Insufferable Art," *Boston Globe*, July 7, 1994, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>63</sup> Jeff Jacoby, "The Flag in the Toilet," *Boston Globe*, May 21, 1996, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>64</sup> "NEA Dodges a Bullet," *USA Today*, March 26, 1997, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>65</sup> Robert Pear, "Alexander Makes Case for the Arts Endowment," *New York Times*, January 27, 1995, final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Throughout its difficulties the NEA always had defenders, and could not have remained a funded agency without its share of supporters in Congress and among the American public. Yet those who should have been the NEA's most vocal proponents during its struggles—those artists who could potentially benefit from NEA funding—were often just as critical of the NEA as its conservative detractors, although for quite different reasons. Because of the anti-obscenity pledge instituted in the 1990s, artists began to view the NEA with a “slightly more suspicious eye.”<sup>67</sup> Some artists resigned from NEA grant-making panels when they no longer felt comfortable with the organization's criteria for screening applications, and prominent artists, including New York Shakespeare Festival producer Joseph Papp, even went so far as to return grant money to the Endowment as a protest against perceived censorship. The increasingly specific guidelines for selecting grantee organizations were described by artists to the press as “restrictive” and “a little threatening.”<sup>68</sup> There was a sense in the American arts community that the NEA had buckled under Congressional pressure to censor artistic expression. This was discouraging to artists who believed that a primary mission of the NEA was to serve as an advocate for freedom of expression in the arts. Much of the press concerning the NEA in the 1990s was also focused on how the artistic community could be expected to divide and share funds from an ever-smaller Endowment budget. Organizations who had previously relied on the NEA for funding saw their grants shrink or disappear altogether. For example, a 1991 article focused on the schism this decreasing pool of federal funds caused within the arts

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<sup>67</sup> Russell Stamets, "NEA Drops Pledge, But Artists Still Wary," *St. Petersburg Times* (St. Petersburg, Florida), March 1, 1991, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

community. Avant-garde artists suggested that the purpose of the NEA should be to fund art that is “not commercially viable,” and had little hope of being funded through private donations, while large arts institutions that benefited from generous private donations still expressed a need for federal assistance in order to subsidize ticket and exhibit costs and “present the best there is to some people who would ordinarily not have the chance to see it.” Still other artists believed that “preserving culture,” specifically folk-art programs, should be the primary purpose of the NEA.<sup>69</sup> Artists themselves were unable to agree on the purpose of the NEA, leaving the agency without a much-needed source of united support.

With vocal opponents of the Endowment regularly berating the organization in the press, and artists often depicted in the media as angry at the Endowment management at worst and ambivalent at best, it is no wonder that Dana Gioia believed that his primary mission at the NEA as its new chairperson was to change the tone of the conversation about the Endowment. Clearly, the drastic changes to the structure of the NEA and its granting abilities had not been enough to change the image of the agency. Despite more than 100,000 grants awarded in every state and territory in the United States, the NEA remained best-known for its handful of controversial grants. In spite of, “growing support from a bipartisan coalition in Congress,” at the turn of the millennium, the impact of the culture wars continued to haunt the NEA as Gioia began his term as chairman.<sup>70</sup> Gioia realized that there was a fundamental problem in the portrayal of the NEA to the American public: while thousands of meritorious

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<sup>69</sup> Melinda Henneberger, "Republicans Battle Party on Arts Funds," *New York Times*, June 8, 1995, final edition, LexisNexis Academic.

<sup>70</sup> Mark Bauerlein and Ellen Grantham, eds. *National Endowment for the Arts: A History 1965-2008* (Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2009), 148.

grants had been awarded throughout the Endowment's history, the effects of these grants were seen only at the local level. In fact, anecdotes abound of senators and congressmen returning to their home districts, only to find that in defunding the NEA they had unwittingly caused the demise of a local arts program that they claimed to have no idea was partially funded through the Endowment. The NEA only received national publicity when a grant became contentious. The NEA's positive influence on communities across the nation was largely overlooked, except perhaps by the occasional local publication, while its occasional misstep was trumpeted in headlines across America.

Gioia believed that the NEA's piecemeal approach of providing relatively small grants for individual projects and organizations with no relation to one another would never garner the Endowment the acclaim it needed to ensure its continued existence. Such grants for individual projects, scattered throughout communities across the nation, would never create a news story that would receive national attention. To receive national attention, the NEA needed a project that was national in scope. Gioia and his colleagues realized that the NEA could benefit from an entirely new type of funding model that linked smaller, local organizations together to provide fruitful partnerships. Beyond providing a nationwide network of support for local arts organizations that could help them to better advocate for sustainability, funding, and media coverage, this linking of pieces of the arts community into a single, greater whole could create a project big enough to reach the attention of the national media. Thus, the idea for large NEA initiatives was born. The first of these initiatives was *Shakespeare in American Communities*.



In planning this ambitious initiative, Gioia believed that the NEA “could bring art of the highest excellence and make it broadly available in a democratic manner,” and that by doing so, “any conversation about whether something was controversial or not would rightly be seen as a secondary conversation to the main mission of the Endowment.”<sup>71</sup> Gioia recognized that the culture wars had caused the public—the average citizens, as well as lawmakers and artists—to lose confidence in the mission, purpose, and abilities of the NEA. Through *Shakespeare in American Communities*, Gioia hoped that the NEA would be “restored to its rightful place as one of the premier public agencies in the United States.”<sup>72</sup> Gioia viewed the NEA’s role as one of advocacy: with its power properly harnessed and utilized, the agency could lead the way toward a “new public consensus for government support of arts and arts education.”<sup>73</sup> Whereas the NEA of the past had been viewed as “confrontational, partisan, polarizing, and elitist,” Gioia wanted the NEA under his leadership to be seen as “positive, inclusive, democratic, and non-divisive.”<sup>74</sup> These goals could be embodied in a program such as *Shakespeare in American Communities* with national visibility, enormous public reach and “indisputable artistic merit.”<sup>75</sup> Gioia also recognized that it was time for the Endowment to go on the offensive. In a 2003

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<sup>71</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?" (Speech, National Press Club, Washington, DC, June 30, 2003), National Endowment for the Arts, accessed May 3, 2011, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news03/PressClubSpeech.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?" (Speech, National Press Club, Washington, DC, June 30, 2003), National Endowment for the Arts, accessed May 3, 2011, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news03/PressClubSpeech.html>.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

speech to the National Press Club, Gioia said, “Passivity, elitism, and timidity will not build an institution capable of meeting the challenges currently besetting the arts and arts education fields.”<sup>76</sup> The NEA, Gioia stated, needed to take an “active and unapologetic” role in reaching all Americans.<sup>77</sup> By announcing the implementation of the largest program in NEA history just months into his tenure as chair, Gioia hoped to surprise Americans with an NEA that was not merely reacting defensively to its critics, but rather taking an active role by creating a visionary and powerful cultural program. When Gioia took the helm of the NEA, he understood the primary question about government funding of the arts in the United States to be, “Should we support public institutions that promote controversial or offensive works?” By launching *Shakespeare in American Communities*, Gioia hoped to shift the conversation to more important questions about culture in America. “Do we want to live in a nation where arts education has been eliminated from all levels of schooling? Do we want to live in communities that do not have, do not provide meaningful access to artistic excellence? Should the country, which is supporting so many enterprises, simply write off all the cultural and artistic ones?”<sup>78</sup> These are the types of issues Gioia believed could be addressed, if only the NEA could change its public image. By creating a signature program for the NEA that was of “the highest quality, had the broadest access, and took a form which both impressed and surprised people,”

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<sup>76</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?" (Speech, National Press Club, Washington, DC, June 30, 2003), National Endowment for the Arts, accessed May 3, 2011, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news03/PressClubSpeech.html>.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

that is exactly what Gioia planned to do with the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

## Chapter 3: “A Worthy and Noble Ambition”: National Response to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* Initiative

When Dana Gioia officially stepped into his role as Chairman of the NEA in 2003, he was advised to keep a low profile. Washington insiders who knew the agency’s history suggested that the best Gioia could hope to do was to not rock the boat with new controversies. “You can’t change the situation,” advisors warned him. Insiders told him that “the institution was impossibly mired in the past,” and that he should not attempt to undertake flashy programs that would draw attention to the agency for fear that such publicity could backfire and draw negative attention.<sup>1</sup> But Gioia did not take that well-meaning but, in his opinion, misguided, advice. At a 2003 reception to launch the high-profile *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, Chairman Dana Gioia referred to the Shakespeare tour as the NEA’s “Hail Mary pass.”<sup>2</sup> The NEA was about to embark on the single biggest initiative in its history, attempting to fund at least one Shakespeare performance and educational activity in every state in the United States over the course of a school year. Almost 200 communities and 13 military bases would be reached by 7 theatre companies. In the first year alone, approximately 190,000 people would see a *Shakespeare in American Communities*-funded performance and participate in a related educational activity. The NEA had sent press releases far and wide and brought the leadership of the

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<sup>1</sup> Nannette Byrnes, "The Man Who Saved the NEA," *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, November 13, 2006, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2006-11-13/the-man-who-saved-the-neabusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Kennicott, "'Othello' and the NEA, Navigating a New World," *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2003, final edition.

participating theatre companies to a meeting in Washington, DC specifically to learn how to speak positively to reporters about the program. If an initiative on the scale of *Shakespeare in American Communities* proved to be a flop, it would be a flop so disastrous that the NEA's reputation could risk an even greater trampling than the one it took during the culture wars of the 1990s. If the initiative was a success, however, it would greatly improve the reputation of the NEA following the denigration it had faced in the previous decade.

To use the *Shakespeare in American Communities* program to improve the Endowment's reputation, Gioia and his staff had to focus their attention on two fronts. First, the NEA needed to increase its financial stability by gaining more advocates in the Senate and House of Representatives. Second, and relatedly, the NEA needed positive attention from the media, ideally from national media sources with large audiences. If these two goals could be accomplished, Gioia realized, the NEA could achieve the ever-important mission of increasing its funding and securing its position as a necessary federal agency. While the previous chapter focused on Gioia's hopes for the NEA's signature initiative, this chapter focuses on Gioia and his team's work to fulfill those hopes. In this chapter I will discuss Gioia's appeals to the nation's representatives on Capitol Hill, particularly the right-wing politicians who had been such vocal detractors of the Endowment prior to Gioia's appointment. I will also discuss the media portrayal of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* program, the response from participants in the program, and the initiative's financial and structural impact on the NEA.

## ***Reaching Out for Support from Conservatives and the Bush Administration***

In 2002 when Dana Gioia and his team at the NEA began developing the plan for a large national Shakespeare initiative, the agency's position was no longer as precarious as it had been in the mid- to late-1990s. While the NEA still had its critics, they were less outspoken than they had been in the previous decade. However, it was still critically important that the NEA demonstrate that it had the support of the George W. Bush administration and to garner additional support from senators and representatives, particularly those that had previously been critical of the Endowment. As the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative was developed, the creators of the initiative took three specific steps that seem to have been a deliberate means of encouraging this support.

The first of these steps was appointing First Lady Laura Bush Honorary Chair of the program. Laura Bush, a former schoolteacher and librarian, must have seemed a natural fit for the education-based initiative. A 2003 press release from the NEA quotes Laura Bush as sharing Chairman Gioia's enthusiasm for the project and expressing particular interest in the educational aspect of the program. "Thanks to the Arts Endowment, thousands of children and their families across America will be introduced to the literary and artistic world of Shakespeare," Bush stated in the press release.<sup>3</sup> Bush shared her honorary chairmanship with Jack Valenti, then-president and CEO of the Motion Picture Association of America. While Valenti served as a representative of the arts and business communities, Bush's name brought a certain

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<sup>3</sup>"National Endowment for the Arts Launches Largest Tour of Shakespeare in American History," NEA News Room, accessed August 6, 2012, last modified April 23, 2003, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news03/ShakespeareAnnounce.html>.

sense of educational clout to the project. The *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative fit neatly into Laura Bush's portfolio of projects as First Lady, which was generally focused on education. She was a key advocate of President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act, founded the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C., and launched "Ready to Read, Ready to Learn," an education initiative focused on best practices for early childhood education and teacher training. By naming Laura Bush the honorary chair of the initiative, the initiative's creators not only demonstrated their commitment to education, her acceptance of the role also garnered them a clear stamp of approval from the Administration. Of course, it is common for First Ladies to serve as figureheads for initiatives, and Laura Bush's involvement in the NEA's program was much more symbolic than practical.

Gioia also took practical steps to encourage right-wing support, however. In 2004 the NEA entered into a partnership with the Department of Defense to produce Shakespeare plays on military bases as part of the initiative. This partnership was the brainchild of Gioia, who was "trying to think big," as the program got underway.<sup>4</sup> Gioia, as he put it, "had no business" communicating with the Department of Defense, but he was able to pull in favors to get an appointment with one of the many undersecretaries in the Department. Seven years later, he described this meeting:

I said, "I bet you've never had a visit from the Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts before," and [the Undersecretary of Defense] said, "You're right, I've never had the NEA Chair before," and I said, "That's a first," and he said, "Yeah, that's a first." So I said, "I'll give you another first. I think I'm the first Chairman in NEA history who has a kid sister who is just being called up to fight in the war in Afghanistan." Normally, military people and arts people think of themselves as

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<sup>4</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

totally different animals. He says, “You got a sister in the service?” I said, “Yeah, she was in Navy Reserve and she’s been called up, she’s in an Army billet, and she’s being sent off to Afghanistan.” And I said, “I think that’s a first, too.” That gave me some credibility with him, he said, “Yeah, that’s a first.” I said, “That’s two firsts. Let’s do a third. Let’s bring Shakespeare to military bases,” and he didn’t know what to say.<sup>5</sup>

Gioia had an eloquent explanation for why he wanted to bring Shakespeare to military bases. His mantra, oft-repeated as he chaired the NEA, was “to bring the best of arts and arts education to all Americans.”<sup>6</sup> He viewed the American military and military families as a demographic group that had long been wrongfully ignored by the Endowment. The arts community often views the military as not relatable and far-removed from the arts world, and vice versa, but Gioia saw the potential in reaching out to the military as part of the “all Americans” that he intended to reach. Gioia pitched his idea to the representative of the Department of Defense by reminding him that the United States currently has the “best-trained, best-educated, and oldest” troops in its history, and that such troops deserve quality entertainment. Gioia pointed to the military’s history of providing troops with movies, pop music, and “girlie shows,” and suggested that it was time to instead bring them something that “recognize[d] their education, their maturity, and their quality. That “something” Gioia suggested was Shakespeare.<sup>7</sup> The Undersecretary was enthusiastic about the idea. According to Gioia, the two men spent well over an hour at their meeting discussing how a series of Shakespeare performances specifically for the military would “symbolize the armed forces’ belief in its own people” and acknowledge that

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<sup>5</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



the military was a heterogeneous group with curiosity and a high level of education: in other words, people that deserved to see live Shakespeare but had previously been denied the opportunity.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, the Department of Defense sent Gioia to petition the committee on Department of Defense appropriations in Congress. If Gioia could get funding for his project written into the military appropriations bill, they assured him that the Pentagon would not oppose the funding request. Gioia was successful in his dealings with the military appropriations committee, and thus one million dollars were transferred from the Department of Defense budget to the National Endowment for the Arts budget to support a national tour of Shakespeare's plays to military bases in 2004.

The *Shakespeare in American Communities* Military Base Tour took performances of Alabama Shakespeare Festival's *Macbeth* to 13 military bases. The tour took six weeks to complete and included performances at three Army, three Navy, two Marine, and five Air Force bases in 11 states.<sup>9</sup> This program was described in newspaper articles as an "unprecedented effort,"<sup>10</sup> and a "unique partnership."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

This is one example of many in which Gioia's description of his program contradicts itself. On the one hand, he was able to convince the military to provide appropriations for the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative by explaining that such a well-educated, cultured, mature military as we have in the United States would appreciate the effort. On the other hand, Gioia was able to convince the media and Congress that this partnership was useful because it was providing a unique opportunity to members of the armed forces who otherwise would not be exposed to Shakespeare's work. It seems somewhat contradictory to describe the group as both well-educated and yet also sorely lacking in the educational experience of seeing Shakespeare's plays, and yet this is how Gioia was able to pitch his plan.

<sup>9</sup> "National Endowment for the Arts Brings Shakespeare to Military Bases," NEA News Room, accessed January 13, 2013, last modified August 30, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> "Unprecedented Partnership Between the Department of Defense and National Endowment for the Arts Sends Shakespeare to American Military Bases," NEA News Room, accessed January 13, 2013, last modified October 2, 2003, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news03/DoD.html>.

This was not entirely true. There had been many partnerships between performing arts organizations and national defense organizations in the past. For example, the CIA has a history of financing cultural diplomacy programs that send representatives from arts organizations abroad as cultural ambassadors of the United States.<sup>12</sup> There is also the United Services Organization, a private non-profit organization that as part of its overall mission to lift the spirits of America's troops and their families has engaged dance, music, and theatrical performers for their USO shows since 1941.<sup>13</sup> There was also the Army Music and Theatre Program, founded by Margaret "Skippy" Lynn in 1962 to support and coordinate theatrical and musical performances featuring military personnel at U.S. Army bases worldwide.<sup>14</sup> The U.S. Army Entertainment Program persisted into the 1980s and provided more than 25,000 performances annually. Today there is also Armed Forces Entertainment, a program that connects up-and-coming performance artists with performance venues on military bases. In short, there has been no lack of cooperation between arts organizations and the U.S. military. In the past, however, the organization or development of performing arts shows for U.S. troops has always been generated from within the Department of Defense itself (as is the case with Armed Forces Entertainment) or by private organizations (as is the case with the USO). What was unprecedented in the case of *Shakespeare in American Communities*, however, was a financial partnership

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<sup>11</sup> "National Endowment for the Arts Brings Shakespeare to Military Bases," NEA News Room, accessed January 13, 2013, last modified August 30, 2004.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this, see Frances Stonor Saunders's *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> "The Organization," USO, accessed January 13, 2013, last modified 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Graeme Zielinski, "Army Theatrical Official Margaret Lynn, 81, Dies," *Washington Post*, June 18, 2002.

between the Department of Defense and the National Endowment for the Arts. Since its establishment in 1965, the NEA had never entered into a cooperative agreement with the DOD, much less taken a portion of its annual operating budget from it. In fact, Gioia went so far as to quip, "I think it is safe to say that the National Endowment for the Arts and the Department of Defense have never before been mentioned in the same sentence. We're delighted to make cultural history."<sup>15</sup> Gioia viewed Alabama Shakespeare Festival's tour of military bases as the first step in a "successful partnership," and announced to the press in 2004 that there would be "more good news to come" as the NEA was working with the DOD on "additional artistic pursuits to benefit our military men and women."<sup>16</sup> This partnership between agencies, which was created at the height of the Iraq War as well as during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, was an altruistic outreach program to demonstrate appreciation to those in military service for the United States. Although cynical, it is also impossible not to consider that the NEA's leadership was thinking of benefitting itself when approaching the Department of Defense for funding at a time when its coffers were full and it was experiencing high levels of emotional support from American citizens. The NEA had been long accused of being elitist and excessively liberal. By entering into a financial partnership with the conservative stronghold DOD and creating a headline-grabbing program to support the troops, the NEA was able to gain a million dollars as well as a shift in its reputation.

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<sup>15</sup> "Unprecedented Partnership Between the Department of Defense and National Endowment for the Arts Sends Shakespeare to American Military Bases," National Endowment for the Arts News Room, accessed January 13, 2013, last modified October 2, 2003, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news03/DoD.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

The Department of Defense/National Endowment for the Arts partnership was surprising, and a rare win-win situation for the Endowment. Those on the right who had always been quick to point to the NEA as unnecessary at best and inflammatory at worst could now take note of this unique partnership and consider that since the NEA was providing entertainment and cultural edification for the American military through performances of Shakespeare's works, perhaps the organization was not all bad. As for the "people on the left," while there may have been some skepticism about the partnership, there were also many who were "delighted to have Department of Defense money spent for the arts."<sup>17</sup> The subversion of the normal order was appealing.

As part of his agenda to improve the NEA's reputation, Gioia also had to ensure that the NEA would have supporters in Congress on both sides of the aisle. While the NEA had always had enough supporters to keep its budget from being struck from the ledgers, its primarily conservative opponents had proven better at organization and staying on message, and at getting that message out to the media. As has been demonstrated in the previous chapter, throughout the culture wars, the arts community was so amorphous that it had difficulty relaying clear and compelling reasons for why there should be federal support for the arts. The NEA managed to remain in existence, so clearly it had the support of the majority on Capitol Hill, albeit a slim majority at times. However, that majority was largely quiet. Ultimately, throughout the culture wars the NEA's critics had, "done the better job of creating the

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<sup>17</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

impression that voter support [was] on the line.”<sup>18</sup> Members of Congress seemed to find that, when angling for re-election, if one was to speak of the NEA at all, the incentive to speak out against the Endowment was greater than the payoff of speaking in favor of it. Although by the beginning of Gioia’s tenure as chair the furor over the NEA’s controversial grants had largely subsided, the Endowment was still far too quickly thrown onto the metaphorical chopping block by Republicans whenever budget discussions were underway.

To change this, Gioia knew he had to win stronger support from Congress. To do so, he actively engaged with senators and congressmen to promote the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. Each year of the initiative, the NEA produced a glossy brochure featuring pictures from the plays performed by the participating theatre companies and a list of the towns and cities in each state that were visited by one of the touring productions. Gioia spent the first year of his chairmanship, “trundling back and forth to Capitol Hill, selling the agency to senators and congressmen one at a time,” using these brochures as his conversation-starter.<sup>19</sup> He described visiting senators and congressmen and showing them the brochures to demonstrate how the NEA was making a difference in their districts. According to Gioia, his typical entrée into a conversation about the NEA’s projects was to ask the congressman or senator’s aid where he or she had gone to high school and then list the high schools and teachers in that community who had requested a *Shakespeare in*

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<sup>18</sup> Kim Masters, "The NEA's Delicate Balancing Act; Calming Its Critics While Guarding Artistic Freedoms," *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1991, final edition.

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Weber, "Endowment Chair Coaxes Funds for the Arts," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2004, final edition.

*American Communities Toolkit*.<sup>20</sup> Intrigued, “the senator would grab the [brochure] and he’d start looking through it and he’d go, ‘You were in this city? That town’s a little thing.’”<sup>21</sup> Gioia would explain that, yes, the NEA-funded classroom materials or performances had reached that particular community, and “suddenly the conversation would change because they knew that not only were we giving something to Texas, to North Carolina, and Ohio, but we were everywhere in their state.”<sup>22</sup> When Gioia and his staff first began to visit politicians to promote the NEA and its Shakespeare initiative, many senators wouldn’t even meet with them “because they hated the NEA, they wanted to abolish the NEA.”<sup>23</sup> But as they met with members of Congress on an individual basis and talked to them about the goals of the program and how it could ideally benefit students and teachers in their constituencies, Gioia’s initiative began to win over even those who had once been adamantly against funding the NEA. Although Gioia suggests that he, “finally got them to understand the power of bringing great art to ordinary people,”<sup>24</sup> he also admits that it was the educational aspect rather than the performance aspect of the program that was appealing to many of the people to whom he spoke. The representatives and senators that Gioia spoke to would often recount stories of influential teachers in their lives. Often, these were teachers whom had taught Shakespeare. In thinking about their own formative

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<sup>20</sup> The teacher’s guide and classroom study materials for the initiative, which was provided free of charge to any educator who requested one through the NEA’s website. See chapter 1 for more information on the Toolkit materials.

<sup>21</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

educational experiences and acknowledging that a performing arts experience such as seeing a Shakespeare performance was not simply frivolous entertainment, senators and representatives realized that failure to provide funding for the NEA was failure to provide students with an educational opportunity that could be provided by *Shakespeare in American Communities*. The program's focus emphasis on Shakespeare as a classroom tool rather than merely an entertaining theatrical event gave the NEA a new bargaining chip. Suddenly the Endowment was actively pitching itself primarily as a source for the education of America's youth, rather than a source for entertainment that could be viewed as frivolous and potentially inflammatory. This brought new allies to the side of the NEA. Gioia could approach representatives in Congress not with a request for funding for an arts project, but with a request for funding for educational materials. He could go to Congress and say, "'Please, give me more money,' because I had teachers waiting for [the Shakespeare Toolkit]." According to Gioia, "That was powerful. 'Teachers in your state are waiting for them.' They'll throw another half million dollars into the budget for that."<sup>25</sup>

In addition to rallying his already-supportive base of primarily Democratic senators and congressmen, Gioia focused particular energy on those who had been known to denounce the NEA in the past. At the turn of the millennium, one of the NEA's most vocal opponents in Congress was Senator Jeff Sessions, the Republican junior senator from Alabama. Gioia's interaction with Senator Sessions is a prime example of the Chairman's ability to use *Shakespeare in American Communities* to challenge the viewpoint of his opponents.

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<sup>25</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

Senator Sessions, who has served in the Senate since 1996, has a conservative voting record and has been a longtime opponent of the NEA. Sessions has at times worked closely with the Endowment and in fact in the 1990s he was appointed by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott to serve on the National Council for the Arts, which oversees the NEA. Yet he consistently votes “No” on funding for the NEA, has “spoken out regularly”<sup>26</sup> against the Endowment, and once sponsored a bill to replace the NEA with block grants.<sup>27</sup> When Gioia was initially making the rounds on Capitol Hill to promote *Shakespeare in American Communities* in 2003, Sessions was “very much against” the plan and “violently against [Gioia] in everything.”<sup>28</sup> It is not a coincidence that when the time came to award a grant to a company to tour one of Shakespeare’s plays to military bases, that grant went to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Alabama Shakespeare Festival, located in the state capitol of Montgomery, is a professional regional theatre that operates year-round and produces approximately ten productions each season. As Gioia explains it, Alabama Shakespeare Festival was “having immense financial problems because one of their major backers had dropped out,” but thanks to Gioia’s intervention he was able to “save the company and send them on tour.”<sup>29</sup> While it may be hyperbole for Gioia to suggest that the NEA’s contribution was solely responsible for saving the company, it is true that Gioia used a large portion of the appropriations from the Department of

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<sup>26</sup> *Washington Times*, "Jefferson 'Jeff' Beauregard Sessions, III," Candidate Profiles, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/campaign-2012/candidates/jeff-beauregard-sessions-1167/>.

<sup>27</sup> *National Journal*, "Sen. Jeff Sessions (R)," Almanac, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.nationaljournal.com/pubs/almanac/2000/people/al/als2.htm>.

<sup>28</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



Defense to provide much-needed financial help to Alabama Shakespeare Festival, effectively buying the support of Senator Sessions in the process. Gioia's shrewd move was effective. Shortly after it was announced that Alabama Shakespeare Festival had received a grant from the NEA to tour its production of *Macbeth*, Senator Sessions spoke out in a press release praising the program:

“This grant will provide essential funding to the Alabama Shakespeare Festival to help further the arts education of Alabama's youth,” Sessions said. ‘It's important that young people have the opportunity to learn from masters, such as William Shakespeare, who have had such an impact on theater and the English language. The Shakespeare Festival is a fabulous part of Alabama's culture and is known throughout the country for its artistic excellence and professional productions. I am always proud to support the fine men and women at the Festival who make such a wonderful contribution to our state.’”<sup>30</sup>

Although Sessions' statement did not receive widespread national attention, it still marks a major shift in the opinion of a senator who had previously made public comments regarding the NEA only when speaking out against its programs. Sessions continued to speak favorably of the Endowment in interviews in the years following Alabama Shakespeare Festival's participation in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. For instance, in a 2007 interview he said that Gioia had “done a good job” directing the Endowment. Sessions also noted that in his role as a member of the National Council on the Arts he had suggested that the NEA “reduce

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<sup>30</sup> WFSA.com, "Alabama Shakespeare Festival to Get Federal Grant," Senator Sessions News Release, last modified April 14, 2008, <http://www.wsfa.com/story/8166338/alabama-shakespeare-festival-to-get-federal-grant>.

the amount of money going to the very largest museums and [get more of it] out to states like Alabama - the Shakespeare Festival and other things - and that [the NEA] increase support for traditional arts, particularly among young people.” Sessions said that in fact “that’s been the trend in recent years,” and therefore the controversy that had once existed over NEA funding was, to his mind, a thing of the past.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, throughout the 2000s the NEA provided multiple *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants to the Idaho Shakespeare Festival. Idaho, represented by conservative Republican senators Michael Crapo and James Risch, had previously fallen into the “underserved” category in terms of federal arts funding.<sup>32</sup> Once NEA grant money was regularly benefitting Idaho’s cultural institutions and students, the effect was seen in the Senate chambers. Senator Crapo had voted “No” on Arts Endowment funding in the past and had never been an advocate for the agency prior to the beginning of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. In 2011, however, Senator Crapo encouraged his fellow senators to increase the NEA’s appropriations above the levels laid out in President Obama’s fiscal year 2012 budget. According to Gioia, this was because Crapo was “one of the guys we cultivated,” who now understood, “the power of this [program.]”<sup>33</sup>

Gioia believed that a major part of his role as NEA chair was to actively promote the Endowment, especially his signature *Shakespeare in American*

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<sup>31</sup> Jeff Sessions, "Political Stagecraft," interview by David Hollander, *Current*, June 12, 2007, page #s, [http://blog.al.com/current/2007/06/political\\_stagecraft.html](http://blog.al.com/current/2007/06/political_stagecraft.html).

<sup>32</sup> The Idaho Shakespeare Festival in Boise has received a *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant every year since 2004. Few other companies have been funded so consistently.

<sup>33</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

*Communities* initiative, on Capitol Hill. By convincing America's elected representatives that the NEA had something useful, important (and noncontroversial) to offer to their constituents, he hoped to guide the NEA into a position in which it would no longer be considered dispensable in budget negotiations. He encouraged his team to create the initiative in the biggest, most broadly-reaching manner possible because he knew that by doing so he could gain the support of senators and representatives who would clearly see that their states were directly benefiting from an NEA initiative. Rather than focusing on artists, an emphasis that had been controversial for the NEA in the past, Gioia's promotion of his initiative was focused on a key buzzword: access.<sup>34</sup> Time and time again, he explained to legislators that his goal was to bring access to the arts to people who had never been exposed to live theatrical performances. By focusing on audiences made up of everyday American people as the beneficiaries of the NEA's taxpayer money, Gioia was able to gain the support of many conservatives who were the opponents of the agency when its primary focus seemed to be supporting (controversial) artists. Rather than taking time to defend the role of artists in society or the value of subversive art, a tactic that had hampered rather than helped his predecessors, Gioia decided to stop attempting to change his opponents' minds about artists. Instead, he placed the emphasis on the audiences and set about convincing senators and representatives that the NEA could benefit all of their constituents through everyone's ability to be audiences, not just the relative few who could benefit from NEA grants as artists.

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce Weber, "Endowment Chair Coaxes Funds for the Arts," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2004, final edition.

Gioia's enormous initiative, and the clever public relations campaign he created to support it by cultivating the symbolic support of the Administration, engaging a relatively small but symbolically important amount of financial support from the military, and channeling funding into underserved states in order to curry the favor of their representatives in Congress, achieved his goal of improving the reputation of the NEA in a measurable way. By the time Gioia retired from his chairmanship in January of 2009, he estimated that classroom materials produced by the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative were being used in 80% of American high schools.<sup>35</sup> Gioia believes that impact resulted directly in increased appropriations for the NEA. By pitching *Shakespeare in American Communities* as a populist initiative, Gioia and the Endowment could explain to the American public that their goal was to serve every citizen in the nation by providing accessible theatre. "If you actually do serve all Americans, significant numbers of those Americans become your supporters," Gioia explained.<sup>36</sup> As it turns out, even if you do not, in fact, serve all Americans, the mere effort to reach a broader range of participants with a program that is described as having patriotic, cultural, and educational merit is appealing to the American public and, thus, to its elected representatives. When Dana Gioia stepped down as NEA chair in 2009, he said, "We now have bipartisan consensus in the U.S. Congress."<sup>37</sup> That bipartisanship could clearly be seen in the NEA's congressional appropriations over the course of Gioia's chairmanship. When

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<sup>35</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Cohen, "Chairman of the N.E.A. to Step Down in January," *The New York Times*, September 12, 2008, final edition.

Gioia was appointed chair of the Endowment in 2002, the NEA's budget was \$115,220,000. During the six years that Gioia served as chairman, the budget increased more than 29 million dollars. In 2008, Gioia's last full year as chairman, the NEA's appropriations were \$144,706,800. The following year, the budget increased again, to \$155,000,000.

While Gioia gives the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative much of the credit for bringing increased funding to the NEA, the program is also notable financially because the NEA did not have to spend big money to see a major return on its investment in the program. Yes, the *Shakespeare in American Communities* program cost a significant amount of money to implement from 2003 until 2013. With the exception of the Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s, more money has been spent on this initiative than on any other government-sponsored theatre project in American history. Yet Chairman Gioia also likes to point to the fact that because of the NEA's use of "economies of scale" in implementing the program, the amount of money that the NEA spent to provide this program was "shockingly low."<sup>38</sup> Gioia estimates that the NEA was able to implement *Shakespeare in American Communities* for "ten percent what another organization would have paid for it," because he was able to build partnerships with organizations like Arts Midwest and

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<sup>38</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011. The exact amount of money spent on the initiative varies from year to year based on how many companies are rewarded grants and how many of the educational toolkits are created and distributed. Each participating company receives a grant of \$25,000, and in most years 30 to 40 companies received grants. The NEA therefore spends approximately \$1,000,000 annually on grants for this initiative. It is more difficult to determine the cost the NEA spends to staff the initiative with program managers and to pay for the contributions of Arts Midwest, as program managers and Arts Midwest are responsible for more than just this initiative.

draw on the resources of theatre companies that were already producing Shakespeare's work.<sup>39</sup>

This method of providing grants to theatre companies to do their own autonomous work while simultaneously describing them as participants in a cohesive national tour proved so successful that it became the blueprint for other large programs spearheaded by Gioia during his tenure. For instance, *The Big Read* initiative, another project begun during Gioia's chairmanship, has many parallels to *Shakespeare in American Communities*. *The Big Read* encourages citizens to read and discuss a specific book as a community. Grants for this program defray the cost of providing "innovative reading programs in selected cities and towns, comprehensive resources for discussing classic literature and an extensive Web site providing comprehensive information on authors and their works."<sup>40</sup> Each community *Big Read* event features a kick-off party to launch the program locally, "ideally attended by the mayor and other local luminaries," panel discussions and author readings related to the book, and events such as film screenings or theatrical events that "use the book as a point of departure."<sup>41</sup> The NEA launched *The Big Read* in 2006 with a pilot program of ten communities. As of 2012, more than 1,000 *Big Read* grants have been provided to communities throughout the United States. *Poetry Out Loud* is another NEA initiative that began under Gioia's tenure and that is closely related to

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<sup>39</sup> Gioia referred to these partnerships as taking advantage of a "Shakespeare infrastructure" that exists in the United States, and he points to this as one of the reasons for why this initiative had to be about Shakespeare and not about another playwright. For more information on this idea, see chapter 5.

<sup>40</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "About the Program," *The Big Read*, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.nea.gov/national/bigread/about.html>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

*Shakespeare in American Communities*. The *Poetry Out Loud* initiative began in 2005. It is described on its website as a “national arts education program that encourages the study of great poetry by offering educational materials and a dynamic recitation competition to high schools across the country.”<sup>42</sup> Through the program students, “master public speaking skills, build self-confidence, and learn about their literary heritage.”<sup>43</sup> Teachers who request to participate in the program receive free, “standards-based” materials, including a teacher’s guide, access to an online anthology of poems, and a CD and DVD on the art of recitation. Teachers implement a two- to three-week curriculum in their classroom that culminates in a class recitation competition. Classroom winners have the option to advance to school-wide, regional, and state competitions and, ultimately to a national competition. Winners are eligible for cash prizes provided by the Endowment, and the winners’ schools are eligible for stipends for the libraries. *American Masterpieces: Three Centuries of Artistic Genius*, is another initiative begun by Chairman Gioia that has a similar profile to *Shakespeare in American Communities*. *American Masterpieces* was “designed to acquaint Americans with the best of their cultural and artistic legacy.”<sup>44</sup> Through the initiative, the NEA sponsors performances, exhibitions, tours, and educational programs of a variety of art forms. These activities reach communities in all fifty states and include chamber music, choral music, dance, musical theatre, and visual arts tours. There is also the *NEA Jazz Masters Tour* and *NEA Jazz in the*

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<sup>42</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "About the Program," Poetry Out Loud: National Recitation Contest, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.nea.gov/national/poetry/about.html>.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Initiatives," American Masterpieces, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.nea.gov/national/masterpieces/about.html>.

*Schools*. Launched in 2004, the tour, which is also co-sponsored by Arts Midwest, sends winners of the NEA Jazz Masters Fellowships on tour to non-profit organizations across the United States. The *Jazz in the Schools* program is a free web-based curriculum with a teacher's guide, CDs, and DVDs that are designed for high school teachers of social studies, history, and music.<sup>45</sup>

*Shakespeare in American Communities* is clearly not only the predecessor, but also the primary model for *American Masterpieces*, *Poetry Out Loud*, *NEA Jazz in the Schools* and the *Big Read*. All four of these later initiatives focus on reaching a nationwide audience by partnering with other arts or educational organizations that are already doing work in the targeted communities. All of the initiatives place a special focus on reaching underserved communities, either small towns in rural areas, or low income urban centers. All of the initiatives are focused primarily on youth and have an educational component that is heavily emphasized in the program's promotional literature, and all of them purport to be introducing, or perhaps reacquainting, Americans with their cultural legacy. Each program, although innovative in its scope and inclusiveness, focuses its materials on America's artistic past rather than an unknown future. Clearly, the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative's success led to the structuring of these additional programs in a similar manner. This structure enabled the NEA to save money by sharing the cost burden of the initiatives with the participating companies and towns while simultaneously earning the NEA the national popularity necessary to receive larger congressional appropriations.

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<sup>45</sup> Nat Hentoff, "The Gioia of Jazz," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2005.



To take advantage of the Department of Defense partnership initially established through the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, the NEA also created a series of additional initiatives focused on American active-duty soldiers and veterans. *Great American Voices*, for instance, was an initiative that provided grants to 24 opera companies to tour performances to military bases across the country from 2005 until 2007. Performances provided through this initiative were provided free of cost to the military bases and were free for all audience members. In addition to the musical performance, participating artists provided school visits and pre-show discussions to familiarize student and adult audience members with opera and musical theatre.<sup>46</sup> The NEA also provided a free downloadable teacher's guide and audience resource packet for this program. *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience* was another initiative that took advantage of the DOD partnership established by the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. This program, which was established in 2004, conducts writing workshops for troops and veterans at military bases and military medical centers. The program is co-sponsored by the Boeing Company and the Department of Defense and was created to encourage troops and their families to write about their wartime experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as on the home front. As is the case with all of the initiatives created partially in the mold of *Shakespeare in American Communities*, *Operation Homecoming* provides an assortment of free educational materials in conjunction with the program, including a Guide for Writers, a CD, and an online resource with samples of wartime writing to help to develop the writing skills of military personnel

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<sup>46</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Initiatives," Great American Voices Military Base Tour, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.nea.gov/national/gav/index.html>.

and their families.<sup>47</sup> During the first year of the initiative, selected stories from participants were collected into an anthology, *Operation Homecoming: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Home Front in the Words of U.S. Troops and Their Families*, which was published by Random House. Although *Shakespeare in American Communities* eventually shifted its focus away from serving military families and became an educational initiative, its experimental funding partnership with the Department of Defense and its tour to military bases set a precedent that was carried on throughout Gioia's chairmanship by *Operation Homecoming* and *Great American Voices*.

### ***Media Response to the Initiative***

*Shakespeare in American Communities* was the inspiration for an array of programs at the NEA during the first decade of the millennium because the formula of the initiative worked. These initiatives used the NEA's limited funds in combination with funding from other organizations to create primarily autonomous opportunities that were linked together into nation-wide programs. These national initiatives had the desired effect of creating a more noticeable impact than the NEA's previous method of primarily providing grants piecemeal to companies and individuals. *Shakespeare in American Communities* achieved Gioia's goal of garnering positive media attention and popular support for the agency. Articles in national newspapers and magazines showered praise on the Shakespeare initiative,

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<sup>47</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Initiatives," About Operation Homecoming, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.nea.gov/national/homecoming/about.html>.

and on Gioia and the NEA for embarking on the project. *Shakespeare in American Communities* was described in the press as “a worthy and noble ambition,” which “promises to help foster a more lively and informed interest in Shakespeare.”<sup>48</sup> A 2004 New York Times column stated, “that controversy is over,” referring to the culture wars, and added, “The N.E.A. has raised a banner of education and accessibility to which liberal and conservative can repair.”<sup>49</sup> “In that guilt-free and nonpartisan spirit, let us consider a happy turn of events: the recent decision of our government to get more serious about stimulating an appreciation in localities everywhere of America's exciting cultural heritage,” wrote political columnist William Safire in his article entitled “A Gioia to Behold.”<sup>50</sup> Gioia was described as, “the talkative poet and shrewd administrator who resuscitated congressional support for the National Endowment for the Arts,”<sup>51</sup> and was touted in an article as “The Man Who Saved the NEA.”<sup>52</sup> He was given credit for transforming the NEA, a “moribund institution” into “a vibrant force for the preservation and transmission of artistic culture.”<sup>53</sup> Gioia was also lauded for “refocusing the country's cultural conversation,”

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<sup>48</sup> “Reviving the Bard,” *The New Criterion*, December 2003, page 1.

<sup>49</sup> William Safire, “A Gioia to Behold,” *The New York Times*, March 8, 2004, late edition.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Patricia Cohen, “Chairman of the N.E.A. to Step Down in January,” *The New York Times*, September 12, 2008, final edition.

<sup>52</sup> Nannette Byrnes, “The Man Who Saved the NEA,” *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, November 13, 2006, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2006-11-13/the-man-who-saved-the-neabusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>.

<sup>53</sup> Roger Kimball, “Farewell Mapplethorpe, Hello Shakespeare,” *Nationalreview.com*, accessed September 8, 2012, last modified January 29, 2004, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/209336/farewell-mapplethorpe-hello-shakespeare/roger-kimball>.

by transitioning the media's focus from controversial grants for individual artists to "an artist who has no enemies: Shakespeare."<sup>54</sup> Gioia was praised for his new approach to leading the NEA and frugally funding his pet initiative: "By spreading relatively small amounts of money all around the country, to help companies...that would tour anyway, he has leveraged a lot of goodwill for a small investment," wrote Philip Kennicott, culture critic for the *Washington Post*.<sup>55</sup> "Other NEA heads have understood the necessity of building support among politicians and voters in hopes of getting money to fund new art; Gioia seems to be reinventing the agency, in part, as a public relations and service organization."<sup>56</sup> *Shakespeare in American Communities* was lauded for its emphasis on arts education by political commentators such as Safire, who wrote, "building new audiences, opening eyes to what makes American expression unique -- that's where a little public investment goes a long way toward strengthening our national ties."<sup>57</sup> Even the *National Review*, a newsmagazine with a conservative bias, lavished praise on Gioia and his Shakespeare initiative. "After a couple of decades of cultural schizophrenia, the NEA has become a clear-sighted, robust institution intent on bringing important art to the American people," wrote art critic Roger Kimball in his article gleefully entitled "Farewell Mapplethorpe, Hello Shakespeare."<sup>58</sup> Kimball's article described what he viewed as the NEA's transition

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<sup>54</sup> Regina Hackett, "Gioia Is Upbeat on the Arts," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 14, 2007.

<sup>55</sup> Philip Kennicott, "'Othello' and the NEA, Navigating a New World," *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2003, final edition.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> William Safire, "A Gioia to Behold," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2004, late edition.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Kimball, "Farewell Mapplethorpe, Hello Shakespeare," *Nationalreview.com*, accessed September 8, 2012, last modified January 29, 2004,

from “supporting repellent ‘transgressive’ freaks” to bringing Shakespeare to communities across America.<sup>59</sup> “And by Shakespeare I mean Shakespeare,” Kimball wrote, “not some PoMo rendition that portrays Hamlet in drag or sets A Midsummer Night’s Dream in a concentration camp.”<sup>60</sup> “Conservatives—by which term I mean people who are interested in conserving what is best from the past—should applaud his efforts. After years in the wilderness, the NEA has finally come home,” Kimball concluded.

The surge of publicity for Gioia and the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative was not all positive, and this time criticism of the agency came primarily from those in the arts community. However, the tone of the criticism of the NEA had changed substantially from the relentless criticism it faced during the culture wars. In the mid-2000s, criticism of the NEA was typically not the primary focus of featured articles or editorials. When criticism did occur, it was publically quelled by Gioia before it could gain traction. The most critical reaction to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative came from *Dallas Morning News* theatre critic Tom Sime, who wrote a 2003 editorial panning the NEA for making a “too-safe” choice in creating its Shakespeare tour.<sup>61</sup> Sime quipped that through the initiative the NEA “further entrenches its unwavering commitment to security - its

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<http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/209336/farewell-mapplethorpe-hello-shakespeare/roger-kimball> .

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Tom Sime, "Bringing the Bard to the Hamlets: Funding-Conscious NEA Makes Too-Safe Choice: Shakespeare," *The Dallas Morning News*, September 28, 2003.

own - with this plan to bring William Shakespeare's plays to 100 "small to mid-size" cities and 1,000 schools across our pentameter-deprived country."<sup>62</sup> He wrote that theatre-goers "may choke on the resulting cloud of toxic boredom," that Motion Picture Association of America's Jack Valenti had signed on to be an honorary chair of the initiative because it "could help doom a pesky rival of the movie business once and for all," and he suggested, in a nod to the Bush Administration's Iraq War strategy, that "No one will dispute shock-and-awe Shakespeare. They'll be too busy not caring."<sup>63</sup> He suggested that that lack of attention was exactly what the agency wanted. Sime argued that in choosing Shakespeare's works for its large national program, the NEA was choosing plays "presumed to be as safe as sofa cushions,"<sup>64</sup> and that because the illicit and immoral activities in Shakespeare's plays are, "all camouflaged in respectable incomprehensibility," the NEA was choosing to fund a Shakespeare program primarily for no deeper purpose than avoiding controversy. Who will complain, when most people do not understand what is being said in the first place?

Sime's response to the program was atypical, however. Other commentators on the program opted to only briefly mention critiques of the NEA in articles that were otherwise admiring of the new direction at the Endowment. In an otherwise positive article in the *New York Times*, reporter Bruce Weber asked, "couldn't this project be viewed as a safe, unobjectionable choice? And couldn't it be argued that

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<sup>62</sup> Tom Sime, "Bringing the Bard to the Hamlets: Funding-Conscious NEA Makes Too-Safe Choice: Shakespeare," *The Dallas Morning News*, September 28, 2003.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

the National Endowment ought to focus on American playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill, not to mention writers who are still alive?"<sup>65</sup> Weber also suggested that because the NEA had been a "political football" in recent years, the Endowment must be promoting its *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative because it represents the agency's "renewed emphasis on education programs and projects of widespread artistic sanction that are unlikely to be assailed by citizens groups and government officials representing the viewpoint of conservatives."<sup>66</sup>

Gioia had a quick rebuttal to these critiques that the NEA was playing it "too safe." Sime, in fact, had already stated in his editorial that Shakespeare is not innocuous in terms of his subject matter, and Gioia agreed. "If I would describe Shakespeare, I would come up with a hundred other adjectives before the word "safe" came in," he said.<sup>67</sup> However, Gioia did agree that Shakespeare's works, and indeed anything that can be considered "culture," present "dangerous, anarchistic, primal urges of humanity" but present them in a controlled way.<sup>68</sup> In the case of Shakespeare, that control comes from the complex language of the text. Because the language in Shakespeare plays is elevated (Sime would argue "incomprehensible" for the average American), Shakespeare's work becomes acceptable. The fact that Shakespeare is considered "culture" makes it appropriate for schoolchildren, in the

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<sup>65</sup> Bruce Weber, "Stratford-Upon-Main-Street: Shakespeare to Tour Thanks to N.E.A." *The New York Times*, April 23, 2003, late edition.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. For more details on Gioia's particular understanding of culture, see chapter 5.

same way that “people don’t want high school students to look at pictures of naked women and naked men but they let Michelangelo in.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, Gioia agreed that Shakespeare was socially acceptable, but refused to concede that this was equivalent to safe, particularly when “safe” was being used as a criticism of the program. Gioia also acknowledged the oddity of the United States’ endowment for the arts seemingly ignoring a multitude of great American playwrights in favor of promoting an English one. He told the *New York Times* that *Shakespeare in American Communities* was “just the first of what I hope will be a series of large theatrical tours that will eventually move into American drama.”<sup>70</sup> But he defended his decision to begin by focusing on Shakespeare, however, stating his belief that “the right place to begin is where American drama begins, which is with Shakespeare.”<sup>71</sup> While Gioia never directly responded in the press to the suggestion that he was pandering to his conservative critics, his position regarding this issue seems clear. Gioia did create *Shakespeare in American Communities* with a mind to silencing his critics, of which Republicans representing conservative constituencies in Congress were the most vocal. To change Congress’s impression of the NEA and definitively pull it away from the brink of controversy, Gioia had to concern himself more with impressing his conservative critics than with attempting to please liberal critics and artists who may push for changes in the management of the Endowment but were highly unlikely to push for its complete abandonment. So although Gioia never publicly admitted it, it is

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<sup>69</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Bruce Weber, "Stratford-Upon-Main-Street: Shakespeare to Tour Thanks to N.E.A." *The New York Times*, April 23, 2003, late edition.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



obvious that his strategy to win over his conservative critics through programs such as *Shakespeare in American Communities* was calculated and deliberate, and, for a time at least, it worked.

Other criticism of *Shakespeare in American Communities* came in the form of suggestions that the program was not as innovative as Gioia wanted to believe, but rather a means of maintaining what had already been done before in American theatre. Sime, for instance, suggested that the NEA was not doing something new or unique in reviving a tradition of Shakespeare touring, but instead “simply doing what everyone does: putting on Shakespeare's plays to attract funding, for safety and prestige as well as artistic merit. Of course, these plays have ample artistic merit and anchor the canon of theater literature for good reason. But theater companies were already risking overkill, even before the NEA's big push. We don't need more federally funded Shakespeare now, any more than we need federally funded national tours of shopworn Broadway musicals. That audience is already well taken care of.” Sime pointed out that if professional theatre companies did not travel to small and mid-sized towns, amateurs in those towns would not necessarily be deprived of theatre, but could choose to perform it themselves, if there was an appetite for it. “If there's no Shakespeare in Kutztown, Pa.,” Sime wrote, “maybe they just don't want it.”<sup>72</sup> Echoing Sime's complaints, other critics described The NEA's Shakespeare initiative as “overly mainstream.” A.O. Scott, *New York Times* film critic, wrote,

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<sup>72</sup> Tom Sime, "Bringing the Bard to the Hamlets: Funding-Conscious NEA Makes Too-Safe Choice: Shakespeare," *The Dallas Morning News*, September 28, 2003.

“‘once embattled,’ the NEA under Gioia is ‘now emasculated.’”<sup>73</sup> In other words, the NEA had become too boring, too safe.

Gioia’s response to this criticism was twofold. First, he argued that theatre or film critics such as Sime and Scott have a warped impression of what constitutes the status quo when it comes to live theatre in American communities. Because it is their job to see plays, they come to believe that because they can see plenty of them, so could anyone else who chooses to do so. “Theatre professionals have to remember how odd their life experience is compared to the average American,” Gioia said, joking of critics, “You don’t need the theatre, you’re going to the theatre too much, you should take a day off, go to the ballgame.”<sup>74</sup> Second, Gioia firmly believes that he is benefitting students by providing *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants to bring performances to their hometowns. Unlike Sime, who believes that small and mid-sized communities could support theatre if they had a desire to do so, Gioia knows better. He knows that in many communities, the desire to do so may be there, but the population and the funding to support regular live theatre is not. He spoke of a conversation he had with a presenter in a small town who said of his theatre building, “I can sell out this place every night with country music, old rock bands, we do revivals on Sunday, we do wedding shows maybe in the summer, we do Suze Orman financial seminars. I would never book Shakespeare. This is the first time I ever did it.” But, the presenter added, “I would really, really like to if I could do it.”<sup>75</sup> In the

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<sup>73</sup> Nannette Byrnes, "The Man Who Saved the NEA," *Bloomberg BusinessWeek*, November 13, 2006, <http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2006-11-13/the-man-who-saved-the-neabusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>.

<sup>74</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

interview I conducted with Gioia in May 2011, he passionately defended his initiative against the criticism that it was only maintaining the status quo. “No, tell me how the status quo is a couple million kids going to a live theatrical performance in small and midsized towns,” he said. “That ain’t the status quo! You’d be surprised at how many people who were our presenters had never presented spoken drama before... It’s not the status quo. We completely changed the status quo. If we were doing something that had already been done, it wouldn’t be that valuable, would it? I learned in editing my anthologies that the average high school student has never seen a play, any play, any spoken play. So we are completely changing the status quo.”<sup>76</sup>

A final criticism of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative came from artists who believed that the primary purpose of the NEA should be as a grant-giving organization to artists to do new creative work. The national initiatives such as *Shakespeare in American Communities* worried some arts administrators, who believed that the NEA’s creation of its own programs and its solicitation of corporate sponsors were placing the Endowment in competition with the organizations it was intended to support.<sup>77</sup> Many artists also criticized Gioia because they felt that he was not interested in attempting to restore the NEA’s former emphasis on supporting artists and new art. “I think the agency has to be Mapplethorpe and Shakespeare. And I worry there isn’t enough energy being put into the people who make art, as opposed

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<sup>76</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

Gioia has edited or co-edited thirteen anthologies of short stories and poems. Here he refers to *Literature: An Introduction To Fiction, Poetry, and Drama*, *An Introduction to Fiction*, and *An Introduction to Poetry*, all coedited with X.J. Kennedy

<sup>77</sup> Bruce Weber, "Endowment Chair Coaxes Funds for the Arts," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2004, final edition. Although *Shakespeare in American Communities* was not supported by corporate funding, other initiatives, particularly *Operation Homecoming*, had corporate sponsors.

to into projects,” said Gordon Davidson, artistic director of the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, in 2004. His criticism summarized that of many artists.

Early in his first term as chairman of the NEA, Gioia had the opportunity to address this criticism at a Theatre Communications Group (TCG) conference. At the conference, Gioia led a question-and-answer session about his plans for the Endowment. During the session, a participant said, “The trouble with your Shakespeare program is that Shakespeare doesn’t get royalties. Your program doesn’t support artists.” Gioia responded with his vision for the Endowment, a vision that came to fruition and was able to please not only the conservative critics, but TCG artists as well:

“I think that actors are artists. I think directors are artists, I think designers are artists, I think crews are arts professionals. This *Shakespeare in American Communities* program will support thousands of artists. We have to get out of this mentality (and I say this as a poet who is a solitary creative artist), we have to get out of this mentality that equates the artist with the solitary creator. There are many types of artists, and a healthy culture needs them all. We’re still giving individual writing grants, we’re still promoting hundreds of new plays every year. We also need to create a program that builds a new generation of theatre-goers, otherwise I can give you artist grants until the cows come home, but the art will die. I believe that. I think that the purpose of the NEA should not be primarily as a grant-giving organization for the creation of new art. What does the federal government know about the creation of new art? There’s not a worse place in the country to do it than in a federal bureaucracy in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the NEA should be to bring the best of arts and arts education to all Americans, to all American communities. Part of that mission would be to help facilitate the work of new artists, but the best way of doing it is not for me to give a grant to Joe Blow to write a play. It’s for me to give a grant to Woolly Mammoth to commission the play that they want.<sup>78</sup> The federal government should not be choosing the artists, should not be choosing the works. The individual arts organizations, the artists themselves should be doing this. And nobody can really argue with this because they know I’m right... What I was trying to do with

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<sup>78</sup> Woolly Mammoth is a Washington, D.C. theatre company that is a national leader in the development of new plays. Its mission is to produce work that is considered edgy or challenging.

this program was in a sense to help, ironically, revitalize new American theatre by presenting the works of a dead Englishman.”<sup>79</sup>

When he kicked off his chairmanship with the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, Gioia took a gamble when privileging the desires of his critics over the desires of his supporters. But, as Gioia predicted, artists did not stop supporting the NEA, despite the fact that under his leadership it took what many of them viewed as an exceedingly conservative position. The arts community may criticize the NEA, but in the end it will not call for the defunding of the valuable resource it has in the Endowment. Fundamentally, artists, “though they would like to see it more strongly behind the pure artistic impulse, are gratified that the endowment now seems on its surest financial and political footing in a decade.”<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately, the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, and the other national initiatives that were modeled after it throughout Chairman Gioia’s tenure, did improve the reputation of the NEA. Thanks to these programs and Gioia’s careful cultivation of Congressional support, the agency achieved bipartisan backing and steady increases in its appropriations throughout Gioia’s tenure. Gioia poured most of his time and energy as NEA Chair into “trying to rebuild the N.E.A.’s prestige and credibility with Congress,” and he succeeded in winning new supporters to his side.<sup>81</sup> As Dana Gioia’s successor, Rocco Landesman, prepared to take on the position of NEA Chairman in 2009, the *New York Times* reported that “cultural

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<sup>79</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>80</sup> Bruce Weber, "Endowment Chair Coaxes Funds for the Arts," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2004, final edition.

<sup>81</sup> Robin Pogrebin and Jo Craven McGinty, "For New Leader of the Arts Endowment, Lessons From a Shaky Past," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2009, late edition.

professionals say they are hopeful about a growing potential for art to be taken seriously as part of the national identity, rather than disparaged as an elitist, effete enterprise unworthy of federal support.”<sup>82</sup> By the end of Gioia’s six-year term as NEA Chairman, the New York Times was able to write that the incoming chair “look[ed] likely to start the job on firmer ground than any of his recent predecessors,”<sup>83</sup> Although Gioia’s techniques had not been universally admired, particularly in the arts community, there is no doubt that under his leadership the national conversation about the NEA did change for the better. Rather than constantly defending the NEA’s very existence against its detractors, Gioia had led his agency into a position in which its leadership could engage with its critics and supporters alike in a dialogue about the purpose of art in American society. Is Shakespeare, in fact, too safe and boring and overdone? Is the purpose of the NEA to serve as “a remedial public-service agency that is filling a void by bringing uncontroversial, high-quality art to a large number of Americans who lack access to it,”<sup>84</sup> or is its purpose to support artists who are creating new works, regardless of the number of Americans who get to experience those works? Is it the NEA’s role to fund reading and writing programs, or are those projects the purview of the National Endowment for the Humanities? The agency had increased its emphasis on arts education and made the best attempt in its history to ensure that live performance

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<sup>82</sup> Robin Pogrebin and Jo Craven McGinty, "For New Leader of the Arts Endowment, Lessons From a Shaky Past," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2009, late edition.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Bruce Weber, "Endowment Chair Coaxes Funds for the Arts," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2004, final edition.

experiences would be accessible for all Americans, but was that a positive or a negative move? While there is still no clear consensus in the United States as to what precisely the NEA should fund and oversee, Gioia is pleased that we are even able to engage in this debate. Such debate marks an improvement from the days in which the only debate was, “Should the NEA exist, or should we defund it because of its controversial nature?” Thanks to Gioia’s efforts, in 2009 as he retired from his position at the NEA, “political goodwill toward the endowment [was] clearly on the rise.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Robin Pogrebin and Jo Craven McGinty, "For New Leader of the Arts Endowment, Lessons From a Shaky Past," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2009, late edition.

## Chapter 4: American Shakespeare: The Branding of the *Shakespeare in American Communities Initiative*

In an introduction to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative published on the National Endowment for the Arts website in 2007, former NEA chair Dana Gioia wrote, “The National Endowment for the Arts created *Shakespeare in American Communities* to introduce a new generation of audiences to the greatest playwright in the English language. In order to understand American culture or American theater, one must first understand Shakespeare.”<sup>1</sup> The implication in this provocative statement is that Shakespeare can not only provide a means of understanding *elements* of 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture and theatre but that understanding Shakespeare is fundamental to understanding American culture as a whole. What precisely it means to understand Shakespeare and what exactly Gioia means when he says “culture” are not elaborated upon on the program’s brief introductory webpage.<sup>2</sup> The statement effectively stands on its own, sandwiched between a warm welcome to the website and a thank you to the “*Shakespeare in American Communities* Player’s Guild,” a group of film and theatre celebrities and other public figures who have contributed their time to promote the initiative. While Gioia’s statement can and perhaps should be read as hyperbole rather than being taken literally, this idea of Shakespeare as an American playwright and a belief that Shakespeare is inseparable from the founding of the United States and is an inherent

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Dana Gioia, "Message from Dana Gioia, Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed May 18, 2009, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/gioia.shtml>.

<sup>2</sup> For an exploration of the idea of culture promoted by this initiative, see chapter 4.



part of American culture provides the basis of the NEA's branding of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative.

I base my discussion in the following pages primarily on an analysis of the marketing and educational materials the NEA and Arts Midwest use to promote the *Shakespeare in American Communities: Shakespeare for a New Generation* program. These materials include the initiative's website, a teacher's guide, DVDs and a CD, and an annual brochure created primarily to be handed out to members of Congress that details the productions and community outreach funded by the *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will explore the NEA's effort to present Shakespeare as a playwright whose work was integral not only to the development of American theatre, but also to the development of American society as the United States defined itself culturally in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. This chapter examines some of the inevitable difficulties of linking Shakespeare to the America of the past as well as to American culture in the present, and also notes deficiencies in what ultimately is a rather simplistic portrayal of Shakespeare. However, this chapter also offers potential explanations for why the NEA found it necessary to emphasize these links between Shakespeare and America, tenuous as they may at times be, in order to promote the *Shakespeare for a New Generation* initiative to educators and to encourage congressional appropriations for this project.

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<sup>3</sup> See chapter 1 for details on these materials.

## ***William Shakespeare, Founding Father***

In order for *Shakespeare in American Communities* to gain a positive national reputation and thus promote the NEA, the program needed to be branded in such a way that it could be easily recognized and supported by the American public, particularly the mainstream American media. Additionally, the second phase of the program was created specifically to teach students and their educators about Shakespeare's works, a mission that could only be accomplished if educators chose to implement the program, or at least elements of it, in their classrooms. What sets this initiative apart from many other Shakespeare education programs in the United States is its choice to reach its ideal audience primarily by branding Shakespeare as a playwright with deep roots in American history; indeed, a playwright who, although not technically an American citizen himself, certainly can and perhaps should be viewed as American.

The promotional and educational literature published by the NEA to support the initiative does feature a fair amount of what one might at this point in the twenty-first century consider oft-repeated, generic (if, arguably, accurate) phrases to describe the importance of Shakespeare. Phrases such as “the wonders of the English language,”<sup>4</sup> and “the beauty of his language”<sup>5</sup> appear frequently throughout the materials, as do references to Shakespeare's relatable characters and his universality. Yet there is heavy emphasis in both the promotional and educational documents not only on Shakespeare's use of the English language and his contributions to western

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<sup>4</sup> *National Endowment for the Arts: Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2008), 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

literature, but also on Shakespeare's role in America's past and his importance to not just all people, but specifically to *American* people, today.

The NEA's brochure and teacher's guide discuss not only Shakespeare's biography and his dramaturgy, but also his role in American history. For example, a section heading in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* promotional brochure declares that the program is "Reviving an American Tradition."<sup>6</sup> The "tradition" in this case is twofold: a tradition of touring companies taking to the road to present productions throughout the United States, and the tradition of Shakespeare as popular entertainment in America. The brochure puts particular emphasis on Shakespeare's popularity in the past: "Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Shakespeare remained the most popular author in America. His plays were frequently celebrated in opulent theaters and on makeshift stages in saloons, churches, and hotels across the country."<sup>7</sup> It also notes that, "Shakespeare productions attracted a broad audience across socioeconomic and ethnic lines"<sup>8</sup> and that, "Throughout most of our history, the majority of Americans from every social class and various ethnic backgrounds knew his most famous speeches by heart."<sup>9</sup> The emphasis here is not only on the idea that Shakespeare was a popular playwright in the United States throughout the nineteenth century whose works were performed often in American theatre spaces, but also on the populist idea that these performances of Shakespeare's works were appealing

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<sup>6</sup> *National Endowment for the Arts: Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2008), 3.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

entertainment for Americans from all walks of life. The teacher's guide also draws on this idea of Shakespeare's nineteenth century popularity to explain, "Shakespearean actors from England came to America because the job prospects with touring troupes were plentiful and exciting."<sup>10</sup> By the nineteenth century, the teacher's guide emphasizes, Shakespeare had apparently become so American that actors were abandoning his (and their) English homeland to perform in the United States. This implied English/American rivalry and the triumph of America as the preferred location for tours of Shakespeare productions subtly plants the idea that Shakespeare's plays are in some sense better suited to Americans than they are to the English. In addition to connecting Shakespeare with themes of popularity and accessibility, the initiative's promotional materials emphasize a long history of Shakespeare performance in America. Although the materials' discussion of Shakespeare's popularity in the United States focuses primarily on Shakespeare performance in the nineteenth century, the teacher's guide also notes, "The earliest known staging of his plays in the colonies was in 1750. By the time of the American Revolution, more than a dozen of his plays had been performed hundreds of times in thriving New England port cities and nascent towns and villages hewn from the wilderness."<sup>11</sup> The teacher's guide also promotes a connection between Shakespeare's works and colonial settlers to North America through statements such as, "When the English colonists sailed for the New World, they brought only their

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<sup>10</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 14. Incidentally, American theatre scholar Heather Nathans notes that this information is inaccurate. The earliest known staging was 1752, and the plays were not performed hundreds of times during that period.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

most precious and essential possessions with them, including the works of William Shakespeare.”<sup>12</sup> Shakespeare, then, is ultimately presented through the written literature as a playwright whose works have been present in the United States since before the country was in fact the United States, and a playwright who appeals to a broad audience rather than an elite one.

The multimedia materials in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* Toolkit also promote these ideas of Shakespeare’s historical importance and enduring popularity. In an introduction recorded for the Shakespeare in Our Time DVD, Dana Gioia looks directly into the camera lens and tells students, “Shakespeare wrote for everyone. Both the rich and the poor, the educated and the illiterate, gathered together to see and enjoy his plays.”<sup>13</sup> Actors on the DVD discuss the publication of the First Folio and conclude their explanation by suggesting that early American colonists brought, “treasured copies of Shakespeare” with them.<sup>14</sup> The actors then echo Gioia’s assertion about Shakespeare, that “Americans at all levels of society came to know and love him.”<sup>15</sup>

In the teacher’s guide, Shakespeare is further connected to the American past through the mention of the use of his plays by popular American personalities of the nineteenth century. Despite the seemingly endless variety of connections that could have been made between Shakespeare and American historical figures, the two

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<sup>12</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Shakespeare in Our Time*, DVD (n.p.: Video Placement Worldwide, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

primary connections pointed out are those between Shakespeare and Mark Twain, and Shakespeare and Lincoln. The guide mentions Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and describes Huck's travels along the Mississippi River with a pair of rogues pretending to be Shakespearean actors as yet another sign of the popularity of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century. It describes Abraham Lincoln as, "a frontiersman whose formative reading consisted mainly of the King James Bible, Blackstone's lectures on English law, and Shakespeare," and adds, "Like so many American presidents, Lincoln had a lifelong fondness for the Bard."<sup>16</sup> A link between Shakespeare and the Bible also proves important in the program's literature, as the above quote on Abraham Lincoln's education is not the only mention of the Bible in this material. The teacher's guide also quotes German journalist Karl Knortz, who wrote in the 1880s, "There is, assuredly, no other country on earth in which Shakespeare and the Bible are held in such general high esteem."<sup>17</sup>

The teacher's guide, the *Shakespeare in American Communities* website, and the promotional brochure are all short documents intended to provide, for instance, a basic classroom lecture's worth of material on Shakespeare or a quick overview of Shakespeare's potential importance to a congressman's constituents. These documents are not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the history of Shakespearean performance and the myriad uses of Shakespeare's works by Americans, and it is perhaps unfair to expect these materials to contain a nuanced

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<sup>16</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 13.

<sup>17</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 13.

portrayal of Shakespeare's complex position in American culture. What is interesting, however, is exactly how limited the American Shakespeare depicted in these materials proves to be. For instance, the majority of the information cited in the promotional materials appears to have been sourced from Lawrence Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*. In his book analyzing Shakespeare's transition from the popular entertainment of the nineteenth century to the "highbrow" culture of the twentieth, Levine describes the flow of actors from England to America as performers including George Frederick Cooke, Edmund Kean, Junius Brutus Booth, Charles Kemble, Fanny Kemble, Ellen Tree, and William Charles Macready came to the United States seeking performance opportunities. The quote from Karl Knortz mentioned above appears in Levine's book, as do quotes from Alexandre de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* that also found their way into the NEA's materials. Levine writes, "In the cities of the Northeast and Southeast, Shakespeare's plays dominated the theater...George Makepeace Towle, an American consul in England, returned to his own country just after the Civil War and remarked with some surprise, 'Shakespearian dramas are more frequently played and more popular in America than in England,'"<sup>18</sup> and "Shakespeare and his drama had become by the nineteenth century an integral part of American culture."<sup>19</sup> Levine also quotes James Fenimore Cooper insisting that Americans have "'just as good a right' as Englishmen to claim Shakespeare as their

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<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

countryman,” and he describes Shakespeare’s popularity across the country from the east coast to the gold mines of California.<sup>20</sup>

When one reads Levine’s text in tandem with the *Shakespeare in American Communities* literature, it becomes clear that the history of Shakespeare in America as depicted in these materials is drawn from Levine’s narrative in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. All of the information enumerated above as examples of the NEA’s efforts to paint Shakespeare’s works as a formative piece of American history and to depict Shakespeare as a popular playwright can be found in Levine’s book. This is not to imply, of course, that the previously-mentioned information cannot be found in numerous other books on Shakespeare and the United States. However, the fact that all of the information the NEA cited appears in Levine’s work does not seem to be a coincidence. Chairman Gioia himself expressed his respect for Levine’s work and his reliance on *Highbrow/Lowbrow* as source material for the NEA’s literature. When the NEA initially set out to create educational materials, the organization “brought an educational group in from the outside” to write the materials. However, Gioia found the group’s finished product “so terrible” that he and Dan Stone, then the NEA’s Program and Media Manager, spent evenings rewriting the materials and then had them reviewed by “outside experts” before publishing them for distribution.<sup>21</sup> Gioia and Stone set out to write educational material that was, “academically respectable, intellectually substantial, but accessible to students and entertaining,

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<sup>20</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011. Gioia did not specify the “outside group” who was initially hired to create the teacher’s guide, nor did he specify the “outside experts” to whom the final product was sent for review.



something that captured their imagination as well as their minds.”<sup>22</sup> Apparently, Gioia chose to use Levine’s book, which he described as “wonderful,” to provide academic clout to the educational materials.<sup>23</sup> Gioia’s admiration for Levine’s work is worth quoting at length because in his description of Levine’s book he emphasizes the very qualities that the NEA was using to brand their version of Shakespeare for the American public:

“In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Levine isn’t just talking about just some historical elite. An appetite for Shakespeare was in mining camps, it was in military bivouac, it was amongst communities of freed slaves, it was in big cities, small cities, De Tocqueville points out that everywhere he went in America people had two books, they had the Bible and Shakespeare. So if we want to understand who we are as Americans, essentially we have to understand what the historical roots of our country are and you really do go back to the Elizabethan and Jacobean age of England. That’s when America was first settled by the British. With them they brought the King James Bible and they brought Shakespeare, two rather incompatible texts, but our language is based on that combination, our speech expressions are based on it, and our imagination has been nurtured by encounters with Shakespeare generation after generation after generation.”<sup>24</sup>

The apparent reliance—or at least major emphasis—on *Highbrow/Lowbrow* as the primary source material for the NEA-created *Shakespeare in American Communities* literature is problematic, considering that it ultimately allows for only a limited depiction of Shakespeare. The use of Levine’s book is also disappointing because information from this text that could have enhanced the NEA materials was not utilized. The Shakespeare depicted in the NEA’s literature is supposedly popular with people from “all walks of life,” and yet the only evidence of this popularity comes from nods to Shakespeare’s popularity in the nineteenth century, a time period

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<sup>22</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

that in the minds of most Americans, and certainly most American school children, exists only as murkily-remembered facts from history class. Unfortunately, the NEA's materials do not allow space to fully describe details of Shakespeare performance during this time period, only that the plays were viewed by many Americans. There is mention of "music, acrobatics, dance, magic shows, minstrel shows, and stand-up comedy"<sup>25</sup> that accompanied Shakespeare productions, and a reference to Shakespeare's texts "parodied through short skits, brief references, and satirical songs inserted into other modes of entertainment,"<sup>26</sup> but this brief explanation does not clearly explain the fact that much of the "Shakespeare" performed in nineteenth century America was in the form of adaptations, and it only briefly alludes to what Levine himself explains was a "national penchant for parodying Shakespeare."<sup>27</sup> While it is true, as Levine points out, that nineteenth-century Americans must have had a broad familiarity with Shakespeare in order to appreciate these parodies in the first place, the *Shakespeare in American Communities* literature misses an opportunity to contextualize the performance of Shakespeare in this period as primarily adaptation, parody, or rhetoric (another element of nineteenth-century Shakespeare studies that receives too brief a mention). In addition, the NEA misses what seems like a golden opportunity to specifically note Shakespeare performances by and for, for example, African-American or immigrant

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<sup>25</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 15.

audiences. This is information that, incidentally, is also described in some detail in Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow*. Levine's book is also underutilized in that the NEA materials do not discuss the perceived shift Levine analyzes in his book of Shakespeare from popular culture to Shakespeare as elite, highbrow culture. In the *Shakespeare in American Communities Teacher's Guide*, this shift is mentioned in just a few brief sentences: "Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did Shakespeare's relationship with the American public begin to change. His plays gradually began to be regarded as high rather than popular culture. The once universally accessible dramatist had become our most sacred dramatist—to whom most audiences were not able to relate,"<sup>28</sup> and "There are many reasons for this change in reputation, among them an increasing separation of audiences, actors, and acting styles. Specialized theaters evolved that catered to distinct interests such as avant-garde theater, theater of the absurd, and musical theater. Radio, film, and television executives chose to feature fewer Shakespeare plays because they were perceived as unprofitable. Simultaneously the oratorical mode of entertainment and education that was prevalent throughout the nineteenth century and which helped make Shakespeare popular did not survive."<sup>29</sup> Again, it is important to note that this brief summary is detailed enough for teaching materials intended to provide a high school teacher with just enough information for a lecture or two on Shakespeare. However, this summary is troubling because the NEA literature does not follow it up with evidence that provides an impetus for recovering Shakespeare from this supposed fall from

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<sup>28</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

popularity in the twentieth century, a problem that will be discussed in greater detail below.

The NEA could certainly have provided a more varied and nuanced view of the role Shakespeare's works have played in American history, but that is not how the NEA opted to use the advertising and educational materials. Through their literature the endowment opted to instead create a fairly one-dimensional, easily marketable Shakespeare brand. In addition to the literature, this branding includes the *Shakespeare in American Communities* logo. The logo is prominently featured on large posters and banners that are required to be on display at any performance funded by a *Shakespeare in American Communities* grant. It also appears on most of the program's literature and on the *Shakespeare in American Communities* website. The logo consists of a gray-scale image of William Shakespeare's face superimposed over an image of a waving American flag in bright red, white, and blue color. The image of Shakespeare is the Droeshout Engraving. This image was originally published on the title page of the First Folio in 1623. This engraving has become a standard sign that means Shakespeare.<sup>30</sup> The image of the man with the high forehead, the beard and moustache, the shoulder-length hair, and the Elizabethan-style collar is easily, immediately identified as Shakespeare. The Droeshout Engraving is effectively an icon, a "signifier [that] represents the signified by apparently having a likeness to it."<sup>31</sup> When some person or group wishes to signify

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<sup>30</sup> There is debate among scholars as to whether or not this engraving is in fact an authentic likeness of Shakespeare. Regardless of scholarly debate on the subject, the layperson is likely to identify the image as that of the playwright.

<sup>31</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001), 78.

Shakespeare, this is oftentimes the image that is employed either directly or through the creation of an image that closely mimics it. In the *Shakespeare in American Communities* logo, this iconic image of Shakespeare is depicted with an American flag, therefore becoming syntagmatically related to that flag. The American flag is of course a symbolic sign of the United States. By placing Shakespeare's image in the foreground and the American flag in the background, the image of Shakespeare becomes a syntagmatic sign, a sign that "gain[s] meaning from the signs that surround [it] in a still image..."<sup>32</sup> In this case, the meaning of the combination of Shakespeare and the American flag is quite clear: Shakespeare is intended to be viewed as a key player in the history of America. The logo immediately brings to mind patriotic images of the founding fathers. Looking at Shakespeare's visage on an American flag, one cannot help but think of an entire genre of similar images of the faces of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin depicted against an American flag background. Such images can be found everywhere from Independence Day decorations to elementary school history books to kitschy coffee mugs. The logo draws the spectator into a signifying world where the message is that Shakespeare is as American as George Washington and his fellow patriots.

### ***The NEA's Shakespeare: A Symbol of American Values***

There is a long history, of course, of countries appropriating Shakespeare and his work and claiming the bard as their own. Just as the NEA materials draw on

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<sup>32</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2001), 78.

Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow* to describe nineteenth century English players leaving their homeland to tour Shakespeare in the United States where the playwright's work was, presumably, better appreciated, Wolfgang Weiss's article, "'The Debate About Shakespeare's Character, Morals, and Religion in Nineteenth Century Germany,'" described Shakespeare's naturalization in nineteenth century Germany, where "this cultural naturalization became more and more a cultural appropriation of the Bard, with jingoistic overtones mixed with disdainful remarks on the British nation for its supposed neglect of the great countryman and the incompetence to understand him properly."<sup>33</sup> On a similar note, in 1916, Isaac Don Levine wrote an article for the *New York Times* entitled "And Through Him Russia Has Found Herself: Without Imitating Him, Her Art and Literature Were Awakened at His Touch." The "Him" is Shakespeare, and Levine writes that, "Of all the great Western European minds who have exerted their influence on Russian thought, Shakespeare occupies the most peculiar place...In the dark seventeenth century he entered Russia and, step by step, growing in brightness, expanding in all directions, he developed into the great luminary of today. Russia is now full of Shakespeare. Russia's soul is the Shakespearean soul. Russia's literature, art, music, philosophy, Russia's very political life, are permeated with the Shakespearean spirit."<sup>34</sup> It was not unusual for a nation in the nineteenth century to claim a particular affinity for Shakespeare. Lawrence Levine's accounts of Shakespeare in nineteenth century America are similar to

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<sup>33</sup> Wolfgang Weiss, "The Debate About Shakespeare's Character, Morals, and Religion in Nineteenth Century Germany," *Critical Survey* 21, no. 3 (2009): 87.

<sup>34</sup> Isaac Don Levine, "And Through Him Russia Has Found Herself: Without Imitating Him, Her Art and Literature Were Awakened at His Touch," *New York Times*, April 16, 1916.

accounts of Russia or Germany in the same time period. By stating that an understanding of Shakespeare is necessary to understand America, Gioia and the NEA are, like Germany and Russia before them, claiming Shakespeare's works as representative of a country's particular culture.

As mentioned previously, in stating that in order to understand American theatre and culture one must understand Shakespeare, Gioia does not elaborate on how precisely he is using the word "culture." However, by taking as a whole the narrative of Shakespeare's role in American history as presented in the program's literature, it is possible to gain a sense of the American culture that the NEA's Shakespeare represents. First, the Shakespeare depicted in these materials is "American" because of his abiding presence on the stage and in libraries throughout American history. In fact, at one point the *Shakespeare in American Communities* website even states, "The young nation, brought together under a unique Constitution and collective will, found common ground in a love of Shakespeare."<sup>35</sup> Through the literature's emphasis on Shakespeare's importance to everyone from pre-Revolutionary War colonists to gold miners in the 1800s, and through its claim to be reviving old traditions, the NEA material is emphasizing a backward-looking American culture, one that seeks to reverently remember, even emulate, America's past. The teacher's guide implies that perhaps part of the reason one must understand Shakespeare to understand American culture is simply because Shakespeare's works have always been present in America and thus an obligation to carry on this tradition is reason enough to ensure that the works continue to be read and performed.

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<sup>35</sup> "Shakespeare in America," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed January 25, 2012, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/education/shakespeare-america>.

There is also a sense of rugged individualism and self-motivation that permeates these promotional and educational materials. References to the colonists and log cabin pioneers who read Shakespeare, including Abraham Lincoln, for whom Shakespeare's plays are described as part of his self-taught "formative" reading, bring to mind an untamed country. In this country, Shakespeare was indispensable for his entertainment value as well as for the links his work creates to the entertainment and literary culture of England and Europe. This combination of refined cultural values with rugged motivation and inspired leadership seems to be a valuable piece of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* brand.

Another important part of the overview of Shakespeare in the teacher's guide and promotional materials is the subtly alluded to but still present idea that Shakespeare and the Bible are connected. In these materials, Shakespeare and the Bible are described as President Lincoln's early reading material, and Shakespeare and the Bible are mentioned as being held in great esteem in the United States. The way in which these mentions of the Bible function within the NEA's materials is interesting in that mention of the Bible seems to be less about connecting Shakespeare to Christian morals and more about using the Bible as an important work of literature to which Shakespeare's works should be compared and equally respected. The idea one absorbs from reading the materials is that the two books that mattered most to our American ancestors were the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare. In an interview Gioia mentioned the Bible and Shakespeare not as documents to teach moral values but as "incompatible texts" on which our English



(American) speech patterns are based.<sup>36</sup> So it is the language in both the Bible and Shakespeare's plays that is emphasized as important and key to America's culture and the basis of American language. Although I believe that it is impossible to mention the Bible, even in passing, without bringing to mind Christian values and thus subtly connecting Shakespeare's works to those values, the cultural value presented by this "incompatible" connection between Shakespeare and the King James Bible is not one of morals and ethics, but rather the value of "proper" English language that should be understood and spoken in America, language born out of early-modern England. When teased out to its logical conclusions it is tempting to suggest that this idea of proper English language has further implications such as a preference for retaining (or encouraging a return to?) an Anglophile culture in America. Shakespeare may be "American," yes, but like our most prominent American founding fathers he was an English subject before becoming an American patriot, and watching or reading his plays subtly encourages participants to consider those roots.

This emphasis on the American/English connection seems to counteract another cultural value that is mentioned in the literature: a sense of America as inclusive, a place where people from diverse ethnic backgrounds and all walks of life can share common interests (in this case, an interest in Shakespeare). However, the mentions of inclusivity are brief and unspecific, scattered between references to white, nineteenth-century males who receive specific, named mention and references to Shakespeare ultimately becoming the province of the elite. Although it would be remiss not to mention the ideas of inclusivity and diversity as values promoted in the literature, these values do not seem to hold the same importance as those mentioned

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<sup>36</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

above because they receive less attention and emphasis in the literature, DVDs, and CDs.

One last cultural value that is inescapable in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* materials is, unsurprisingly, a sense of American patriotism. The program's logo hails American viewers by drawing their attention to the country's flag, ideally suggesting to viewers that Shakespeare is as important to American history (and the American present) as any president whose image has been depicted in a similar manner. The focus in the teacher's guide on the presence of Shakespeare's works in America far outweighs the focus on Shakespeare's biography as a sixteenth-century English playwright, and this is likely not a coincidence. It is part of the NEA's push to market Shakespeare and his work as inclusive, patriotic, and historically important literature inspiring a sense of individualism and motivation.

### ***How the NEA Uses the Rules of Branding to Market Shakespeare***

The *Shakespeare in American Communities* materials referenced above are ultimately marketing materials. These materials, taken collectively, form the *Shakespeare in American Communities* brand that the NEA then "sold" to educators, Congress, and the media. Indeed, creating this brand was so important that companies participating in Phase One of the initiative sent representatives to a meeting in Washington, DC, the purpose of which was to "educate them about what the goals of the program were, what their part in this whole initiative was, how we wanted them to

speak of the program, how we wanted them to help brand the program.”<sup>37</sup>

“Shakespeare” is an immediately recognized term in America that I believe functions nowadays as an “iconic brand.” These brands, “spin narratives, complete with "plots and characters," that address "the collective anxieties and desires of a nation" and provide a kind of magical resolution of "cultural contradictions.”<sup>38</sup> It may initially seem strange to talk about the branding of this initiative as if it was a product to be sold, but although it was not sold in the same sense that we might think of selling commodities like clothes, cars, or soft drinks, it did have to be marketed just as these commodities are marketed: it had to appear appealing and useful to the American public.<sup>39</sup> *The Shakespeare in American Communities* brand intended to serve the function of improving the general reputation of the NEA.

In recent years, academics have begun to acknowledge that branding is no longer only the concern of the corporate, for-profit sector of American business. Indeed, according to Rita Clifton’s *Brands and Branding*, published in 2009, “The past few years have seen the apparent triumph of the brand concept; everyone from countries to political parties to individuals in organisations is now encouraged to think of themselves as a brand. At its best this means caring about, measuring and understanding how others see you, and adapting what you do to take account of it, without abandoning what you stand for. At its worst it means putting a cynical gloss

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<sup>37</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011. See chapter 1 for more information on Phase One and this meeting.

<sup>38</sup> Brater Jessica et al., "'Let Our Freak Flags Fly': Shrek the Musical and the Branding of Diversity," *Theatre Journal* 62, no. 2 (May 2010):9

<sup>39</sup> While the initiative as a whole is not a product that was sold for profit, there was a certain amount of literal selling of the initiative at the local level where schoolteachers or school districts often have to pay a small fee for tickets to the productions or for teaching artists to visit their classrooms.

or spin on our product or your actions to mislead or manipulate those you seek to exploit.”<sup>40</sup> Clifton points out that these ideas are nothing new, but the self-conscious, active nature of developing a brand has become increasingly important in recent decades. While the idea of branding was once confined to consumer goods and services, branding is now consciously used by non-profit, volunteer, industrial, and even utility sectors, and “branding and brand management has clearly become an important management priority for all types of organizations.”<sup>41</sup>

People involved in the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative are not shy about stating that the NEA consciously and carefully developed a brand for their program. Susan Chandler, Deputy Director of Arts Midwest, spoke about the branding of the program, especially about how Chairman Gioia played an active role in determining the program’s visual brand and the way in which all of the staff and participants in the program spoke about it to the public. Not all non-profit or government organizations are as quick to own up to the branding of their products, however. For example, Maxwell L. Anderson, ex-director of New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, has said, “I’m careful about using the word *branding*. I don’t use it unless I have to. It’s obviously appropriate to use in the private sector, but it raises concerns in the nonprofit world,” an opinion perhaps shared by some in government organizations like Arts Midwest and the NEA.<sup>42</sup> However, there is no denying that “the term “brand” has now permeated just about every aspect of society,

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<sup>40</sup> Rita Clifton et al., *Brands and Branding*, ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Kevin Lane Keller and Donald R. Lehmann, “Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities,” *Marketing Science* 25, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 754.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 193.

and can be as easily applied to utilities, charities, football teams and even government initiatives as it has been in the past to packaged goods.”<sup>43</sup> Every organization has consumers of some kind and the wise choice is to actively recognize this and market the organization’s product to those consumers. This branding does not necessarily involve spending large amounts of money to market a particular item (or, in the case of the NEA, a program). Branding is simply about offering customers distinguishing characteristics that in some way identify products and services, making customers more likely to identify and continue to use products or services that have served them well.

In his book *Branded Nation*, James B. Twitchell explores the branding of what he refers to as high culture or cultural capital. He explains that in the mid-twentieth century the branding process entered the “marketplace of cultural values and beliefs.”<sup>44</sup> Schools, churches, museums, hospitals, and even the United States judicial system have begun to deliberately use branding to make their ideological points, generate cultural capital, and “distribute their services at the highest possible return.”<sup>45</sup> We may like to think of the public and non-profit spheres and government organizations as logo-free zones. We would like to believe that branding is not necessary for these entities because they are not about transactions between buyers and sellers but instead about some kind of inherently truthful, meaningful, necessary experience, be it educational, religious, or artistic. However, in the twenty-first

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<sup>43</sup> Rita Clifton et al., *Brands and Branding*, ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>44</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

century there is an abundance of museums, educational organizations, churches, and charities, all of which must market their services and goods as actively as an airline or coffee chain if they wish to succeed. These organizations and institutions, the NEA among them, are now in the practice of “layering commercial templates over their own antiquated delivery systems,” which may not necessarily be a bad thing.<sup>46</sup> As Twitchell explains, “it means a much less patronizing and much more responsive relationship with what used to be an arm’s-length culture. Word that once came from on high now comes from the *felt needs* of the consumption community.”<sup>47</sup>

It is not unreasonable, then, to consider the NEA an organization with a specific brand and its *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative a branded product that can be deliberately marketed in a specific way and used to attempt to change the image of the NEA in the minds of consumers. Consider the examples from the marketing literature enumerated above and the manner in which all of these elements combine to create a particular *Shakespeare in American Communities* brand. Great brands are “defined by their relevance and distinctiveness,” as well as their “differentiation and credibility.”<sup>48</sup> In order to be successful, a brand must understand the needs of its stakeholders and tailor its offerings accordingly. In the case of the NEA, the stakeholder is the American taxpayer and his or her elected congressional representative. At every turn, the NEA must prove that it is a relevant organization, in tune with the needs of the American public. In the recent past, the NEA has been

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<sup>46</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 274.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Rita Clifton et al., *Brands and Branding*, ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), 65.

pegged as out of touch with the general public, placing too great an emphasis on the preferences of the artistic elite.<sup>49</sup> By creating an initiative with a nationwide reach and branding Shakespeare as something that was important to everyone in the American past and should still be accessible for everyone in twenty-first century America, the NEA is actively promoting the relevance of its product. The marketing materials also focus on the initiative as a large tour, the likes of which have not been seen in recent years, and a unique opportunity for the arts in America to reach underserved communities. Both of these things give the program a sense of the differentiation and distinctiveness necessary for a successful brand. The entry page of the program's website once listed well-known theatre professionals including Angela Lansbury, James Earl Jones, Julie Taymor, Michael Kahn, and Michael York as the "*Shakespeare in American Communities* Players' Guild."<sup>50</sup> This list of professionals who have endorsed the initiative gives the program a sense of credibility, another key element of branding *Shakespeare in American Communities*. Credibility is also granted to the initiative through the marketing materials' emphasis on Shakespeare's importance to notable historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and through the general emphasis on Shakespeare's presence in early American libraries. As Twitchell points out in his discussion of branding, one of the ways in

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<sup>49</sup> For more on this perception of the NEA, see chapter 2.

<sup>50</sup> Dana Gioia, "Message from Dana Gioia, Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed May 18, 2009, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/gioia.shtml>. Most of the theatre professionals on the list are Americans or actively involved in the American theatre scene.

which credibility is given to a particular cultural product is through “argu[ing] that this stuff [is] really important and that it had always been that way.”<sup>51</sup>

Another key element of branding is the story that the brand provides a particular product. “Behind any great brand is usually a crystal clear positioning,” an easy-to-follow narrative that can be clearly and succinctly communicated.<sup>52</sup> If a customer cannot easily understand the purpose and benefit of a product, or if a patron cannot clearly understand the purpose of an organization, they are likely to take their business elsewhere. A successful brand tells a story, ideally a single-genre story that cannot possibly confuse the “reader.”<sup>53</sup> One of the great difficulties of successfully branding a product is to succinctly tell the product’s story. It may be easy to think of dozens of potentially marketable positive qualities of a product or service, but it is decidedly difficult to narrow those elements down to a single brand story. In order to successfully brand the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, Gioia and the staff at the NEA and Arts Midwest had to decide which elements of Shakespeare to emphasize. Indeed, even by choosing Shakespeare as the playwright to be featured in the nationwide initiative in the first place, the NEA’s brand story was being consciously written. By choosing Shakespeare over an American playwright, the NEA was laying the foundation for its brand.<sup>54</sup> “Shakespeare” says tradition, credibility, English literature, and historical importance in a way that Eugene O’Neill,

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<sup>51</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 8.

<sup>52</sup> Rita Clifton et al., *Brands and Branding*, ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), 74.

<sup>53</sup> James B. Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 105.

<sup>54</sup> Dana Gioia implied that the decision to use Shakespeare was a matter of using an existing “Shakespeare infrastructure” rather than a matter of more complex consideration. See chapters 2 and 3 for more on this.



for instance, does not (or, at least, does not yet). “Shakespeare” can of course say many other things as well. In fact, Shakespeare’s perceived universality, the ability of his works to be overlaid with a plethora of messages and associations, is one of the selling points that has made the playwright’s work an enduring presence on the stage and in the classroom since the sixteenth century. Shakespeare can be viewed as safe or dangerous, popular or elite, supportive of the status quo or subtly subversive, traditional or modern, ornate or austere. Shakespeare’s works can and have been put to almost any use imaginable and can tell a great variety of stories. The NEA, then, was faced with the daunting task of determining the particular type of Shakespeare they wished to market. This is why I argue that the brand story of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* program tells us far more about the NEA under the tenure of Dana Gioia than it does about Shakespeare. As I have stated above, the NEA ultimately decided to brand the program as an educational opportunity that emphasizes the importance of continuing a long history of Shakespeare in America and of bringing Americans back to an idealized past where Shakespeare was a shared interest for all Americans. This brand story ignores more facets of Shakespeare than it embraces, and in the following pages I will explore other potential brand angles that the NEA ignored in favor of the interpretation that they marketed to the public. These brand stories not chosen tell us as much about the NEA as the brand story that the organization did choose to tell. However, by opting to brand the initiative as the revival of an American tradition with appeal for twenty-first century Americans, the NEA created a single, easily-digestible story to market to the public.

All of the elements of a brand anchor “the mission and vision, operating principles and tactics of an organisation.”<sup>55</sup> The narrative of the brand must consistently reflect the organization’s core beliefs, how the organization interacts with its stakeholders, how the organization wants the public to think about the brand, and the organization’s logo and “verbal themes.”<sup>56</sup> Above, I enumerated the ways in which I believe the marketing and educational materials created for this initiative are intended to paint a specific picture of the NEA and Shakespeare in consumers’ minds. Reception theory posits that the basic acceptance of the meaning of a particular text occurs when a group of readers have a shared cultural background and are therefore predisposed to interpret the text in similar ways. In this case, I believe that the NEA hoped that this program’s advertising would automatically bring to mind several things for the American general public and the organization’s stakeholders, particularly Congress. The logo and much of the verbal themes come together to create a sense of patriotism, unimpeachable historical and literary importance, American tradition, and a sense populism that only nods at, rather than specifically embraces, diversity.

All of these qualities are intangible, and yet it is precisely these appealing intangible qualities that must be emphasized in order for a brand to be successful. These “brand intangibles” are the primary means by which marketers differentiate their brands with consumers.<sup>57</sup> A good brand is relevant at both a functional and

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<sup>55</sup> Rita Clifton et al., *Brands and Branding*, ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), 46.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Kevin Lane Keller and Donald R. Lehmann, "Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities," *Marketing Science* 25, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 741.

emotional level. In the case of *Shakespeare in American Communities*, its functional relevance comes in terms of meeting the needs of the audience and participants. Ideally, teachers find the program easy to teach and participate in, students find the program fun and enlightening, the productions funded through the grants appear to be of a professional quality that is in some way in its production values notably different from local amateur productions, and participating companies earn an economic or prestige boost from having participated in the initiative. This type of functional relevance is fairly easy to see and define. McDonald's hamburgers, for example, must taste good, Starbucks coffee must be hot, and so on. Emotional relevance, on the other hand, is more difficult to define and attain but arguably more important than functional relevance.<sup>58</sup> Studies have suggested that people often make decisions based on emotions and then justify them afterwards based on logical reasons. Since emotions play a major role in decision-making, a brand must evoke the emotional experiences that its target audience desires, thereby driving their decision to purchase, or in this case, fund or participate in, the product.<sup>59</sup> People have a tendency, all other things being equal, to choose things with which we are most familiar. Advertising examples and psychological experiments have shown that if a brand is famous, people generally assume that it is popular and has the endorsement of others.<sup>60</sup> The emotional relevance of a product, then, is based on brand intangibles, the product's brand story, and its overall familiarity. Piecing these elements together, one can begin to see why the NEA consciously or subconsciously chose the familiar and

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<sup>58</sup> Rita Clifton et al., *Brands and Branding*, ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), 77.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

popular Shakespeare as the playwright for the tours and marketed this initiative in the manner described above. Evidence suggests that the consumers Gioia and the NEA theorized when they created this program were not the students that would participate in it. While the program had to appeal to potentially participating companies, the functional relevance of the program—the fact that companies could earn money for participating—was likely merit enough to “sell” the initiative to theatre companies. Primarily the program needed to appeal to the public, but, I suggest, not the public as a whole. Rather, the program needed to appeal to the voting public: the members of the public who are responsible for putting congressmen and women in office who in turn determine the funding ultimately received by the NEA. A census of voter participation in the 2008 presidential election shows clear trends in voting patterns. White, non-Hispanic citizens are more likely to vote than Blacks, Asians, or Hispanics of any race. People over the age of 45 are more likely to vote than people between the ages of 18 and 44, and senior citizens between the ages of 65 and 74 are the age bracket most likely to vote. Eighty-two percent of people with an advanced degree voted in 2008, versus only 40 percent of people with less than a high school education. And income is directly correlated with voting, with 92 percent of those earning more than \$100,000 per year voting versus only 52 percent of people who make less than \$20,000 per year.<sup>61</sup> It is perhaps unfair to make assumptions based on these statistics and to assume that Gioia and the NEA consciously and deliberately took this type of information into account when formulating the *Shakespeare in*

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<sup>61</sup> Thom File and Sarah Crissey, "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2008," Current Population Reports, accessed January 31, 2012, last modified May 2010, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2010pubs/p20-562.pdf>.

*American Communities* initiative and deciding how to market it. However, it also seems obvious that many of the emphasized brand characteristics mentioned above are more likely to be emotionally appealing to the demographic who votes most (and whom is best-represented in Congress), and characteristics that might be more appealing to, say, high school students or minority populations have taken on less emphasis in the NEA's brand story for this program.

The final important element of branding a product is determining the best venues for marketing the product. In the twenty-first century, marketers are increasingly looking to alternative forms of marketing. This is especially true for a government organization like the NEA, for which promoting the program through traditional means such as television or radio commercials or billboards would be cost prohibitive. The NEA does rely on paper brochures to promote the program, but the Endowment has also embraced "guerilla marketing" to create a buzz about the initiative.<sup>62</sup> Much of *Shakespeare in American Communities*'s advertising is done through the initiative's website, as creating an online presence is now imperative to creating a strong brand. Theatre companies apply for grants through the website, and teachers order educational materials through the site as well. The entire brand story, including the initiative's logo, is accessible through the website. This online presence is supplemented with the CD and DVD technology that teachers can use in their classrooms. All of this serves to remind consumers that Shakespeare and the NEA are both changing with the times and relevant in the twenty-first century. Several

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<sup>62</sup> Kevin Lane Keller and Donald R. Lehmann, "Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities," *Marketing Science* 25, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 744.

articles about the initiative have appeared in major national publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, and *Reader's Digest*.<sup>63</sup> Other articles and reviews of specific *Shakespeare in American Communities*-funded productions have been published across the country in local newspapers. This type of promoting is cost effective and necessary to build a brand's reputation.

All of this promoting and branding of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative served a greater purpose than simply getting a Shakespeare tour into as many American communities as possible. The purpose of the initiative and the reason it was branded carefully and promoted widely was to change the reputation of the NEA.<sup>64</sup> Rita Clifton writes that in many ways, the term "brand" is almost synonymous with the word "reputation."<sup>65</sup> "Brands grow primarily through product development (line and category extensions) and market development (new channels and geographic markets)."<sup>66</sup> The *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative was both of these for the NEA. It was a new "line," a new product for the organization that had never been presented before. The initiative was also created specifically to reach new geographic markets, those communities in the United States that are considered underserved by the performing arts. As Susan Chandler explained, "The NEA was firmly and deeply in its role as a granting agency and it occasionally did some special projects, but it had never seen itself as an organization

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<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of this media response, see chapter 3.

<sup>64</sup> See more on this topic in chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>65</sup> Rita Clifton et al., *Brands and Branding*, ed. Rita Clifton (New York: Bloomberg Press, 2009), xiii.

<sup>66</sup> Kevin Lane Keller and Donald R. Lehmann, "Brands and Branding: Research Findings and Future Priorities," *Marketing Science* 25, no. 6 (November-December 2006): 748.

that would support projects that would have this very visible national reach that would intentionally reach people all around the country.”<sup>67</sup> The NEA was therefore attempting something it had never attempted before in order to change the perception of its “brand.” Chandler further explained that Dana Gioia played a “very big part” in determining the visual brand of the program and the way in which the NEA staff spoke about the program because it “all spoke very much to his goal for the agency.”<sup>68</sup> Gioia wanted to distance the NEA from past controversies by “creating something that would be sort of undeniably high quality and important to students and families and people in any size community, any size town, people who may love the arts or be apathetic to the arts.”<sup>69</sup> According to Chandler, “it would sort of be a no-brainer: ‘Oh, it’s Shakespeare.’”<sup>70</sup> Through deliberate branding and marketing of this initiative, Gioia hoped to change the reputation of the National Endowment for the Arts, ensuring that the first thing to come to mind when Americans hear “NEA” is Shakespeare and educational programs, not elitism and controversial art.

### ***The Brand Story Not Told***

In presenting the cohesive, memorable, easily-marketable brand story described above, the NEA had to ignore other angles that could have been used to “sell” the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. In addition, by choosing

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

to emphasize a single brand story, the NEA unwittingly created contradictions within the marketing and educational materials. As previously noted, Shakespeare is a malleable subject. One of the likely reasons for Shakespeare's enduring appeal as a playwright and subject of study is the ability of his works to serve as vessels for a vast variety of different messages. The NEA chose one specific message, a brand story based on the American past and Shakespeare's enduring literary and historical legacy both in the United States and in England. However, the promotional and educational materials are also peppered with other messages that, because they blatantly contradict the overall brand story or because they are present in the materials but not neatly tied into the overall brand story, actually serve to dilute the message crafted by the NEA.

The most obvious of these "side-stories" is Shakespeare's relevance to Americans, especially school children. "Relevance" is very much a buzzword for Shakespeare practitioners in the twenty-first century. Theatre companies specializing in Shakespeare seem to always seek to make Shakespeare relevant to audiences, whether this means setting Shakespeare's plays in a variety of contemporary settings and focusing on current events, modernizing Shakespeare's language into some type of local vernacular, or simply trying to convince audiences that Shakespeare's plots and characters are relatable to modern audiences regardless of how the story is produced. The Maryland Shakespeare Festival, for instance, uses the slogan "Relevant Renaissance Theatre" to promote their original practices Shakespeare productions.<sup>71</sup> The *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative's marketing

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<sup>71</sup> The Maryland Shakespeare Festival is a community theatre group in Frederick, Maryland, dedicated to original practices Shakespeare performance.



materials are a part of this current trend of promoting Shakespeare's relevance. This makes sense, of course. One of the best ways to market a product is to explain to consumers how that particular product is relevant to their lives. However, the problem with the NEA's use of "relevance" to promote this initiative is that true relevance, either in the sense of some sort of useful life necessity or immensely enjoyable, not-to-be-missed experience, is alluded to but never firmly established by the promotional literature.

The attempt to depict Shakespeare as relevant to twenty-first century Americans is established through the marketing materials in three basic ways. The first is by describing Shakespeare's popularity in the past and using this past popularity to imply that a similar level of popularity and accessibility of Shakespeare's work is possible—perhaps even already underway—today. As described previously, Shakespeare's relevance to nineteenth-century audiences is greatly emphasized in the program's literature. As Levine describes in *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, "Shakespeare was popular, first and foremost, because he was integrated into the culture and presented within its context. Nineteenth-century Americans were able to fit Shakespeare into their culture so easily because he *seemed* to fit—because so many of his values and tastes were, or at least appeared to be, close to their own, and were presented through figures that seemed real and came to matter to the audience" [sic].<sup>72</sup> Levine also points out that Shakespeare's works were particularly popular in nineteenth-century America because they lent themselves to a melodramatic style with clear-cut heroes and villains during a period in which

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<sup>72</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 36.

melodramas were a mainstay of the stage. The promotional and educational materials, especially the teacher's guide, describe this nineteenth-century popularity in some detail. However, the teacher's guide fails to explain why this nineteenth-century popularity and relevance should automatically translate to twenty-first century relevance. It does not seem to be enough to suggest that Shakespeare is still relevant because his works were an important part of America's theatrical past, although one would be hard pressed to find a better justification within the marketing materials. It is clear that the people behind these materials believe that nineteenth-century importance is linked to twenty-first century importance, though, even if that relevance is not explicitly stated in the materials. For instance, David Fraher, Director of Arts Midwest, described a "very strong tradition" in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of Shakespeare's "broad populist appeal." He also explained that "Shakespeare is inextricably linked to American literature as one of the great voices writing in English," and noted that Shakespeare's words, impact, and the "continual...almost reinvention" of his works with every production that he has done make the plays a part of contemporary American culture.<sup>73</sup> Chairman Dana Gioia also linked Shakespeare's current potential relevance to his nineteenth-century importance, stating, "I really do believe that in order to be alert to the present world, you have to have some sense of historical consciousness. The beauty of Shakespeare is that you can take him almost any which way you want to, politically, culturally, literarily, poetically, and it's there. These are infinitely rich texts and part of the

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<sup>73</sup> David Fraher, telephone interview by author, June 20, 2011.

richness comes from all of the things that we have overlaid on them.”<sup>74</sup> However, although Gioia and Fraher make it clear that they believe that Shakespeare’s twenty-first century importance comes from decades of the reinvention of his works to reflect changes in American culture, statements like these that express why Shakespeare’s historic importance to Americans should matter to present day Americans did not find their way into the program’s literature.

Instead, the second and primary way that the promotional and educational materials attempt to make Shakespeare and his plays relevant to twenty-first century schoolchildren (and to the people who teach them and make decisions to fund their educations) is by showing the students how many recent films are based on Shakespeare’s plays and how many popular celebrities have been influenced by Shakespeare. The literature shifts gears entirely from speaking about theatre in the nineteenth century to film in the twentieth. While much has been written about Shakespearean stage productions in America in the past 100 years, the authors of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* materials appear entirely unaware of twentieth century American stage productions. The teacher’s guide does not mention any important twentieth century stagings, which initially seems problematic for an initiative intended to encourage live performance, but may in fact be a good strategy for encouraging Shakespeare’s relevance to students who are much more likely to have seen a recent movie than a play. Still, to emphasize the relationship between Shakespeare’s plays and films and ignore Shakespeare on the stage in literature promoting a program that introduces students to theatre productions of Shakespeare is

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<sup>74</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

contradictory. In another contradictory move, when the teacher's guide does mention Shakespeare in twentieth century America it is primarily to focus on the decline of Shakespeare's popularity, blaming an increase in new genres and a loss of interest in rhetoric for Shakespeare's relative decline.

Judging from the advertising materials analyzed here, the only place in which twentieth century Americans are able to relate to Shakespeare is through movies. In the teacher's guide, a handful of American films are listed under the heading "Shakespeare in Contemporary Culture."<sup>75</sup> The list includes *Ten Things I Hate About You* (a 1999 adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (a 1999 release featuring actors Kevin Kline, Calista Flockhart, Michelle Pfeiffer, Rupert Everett, and Stanley Tucci), *Romeo+Juliet* (Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film starring Claire Danes and Leonardo DiCaprio), *West Side Story* (the 1961 film adaptation of the musical, which sets *Romeo and Juliet* among interracial gang warfare in New York City), Akira Kurosawa's American release of *Throne of Blood* (an adaptation of *Macbeth*, originally released in 1957), and *Forbidden Planet* (a 1956 cult classic movie inspired by *The Tempest*). A poster included in the free teacher's guide features images of well-known actors such as Danes, DiCaprio, and Mel Gibson in Shakespearean film roles. One of the DVDs provided with the educational materials, *Shakespeare in Our Time*, clearly seems from its title to be part of the effort to establish Shakespeare's relevance for American students. However, even in this DVD Shakespeare's current relevance is established primarily through showing film clips of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. The DVD includes clips

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<sup>75</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 15.

from *Romeo+Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Julie Taymor's *Titus Andronicus*, *O* (an adaptation of *Othello*), and a version of *Hamlet* starring Ethan Hawke and set in the corporate world of the 1990s United States. Ideally, these film clips are intended to establish in students minds that they are perhaps already more familiar with Shakespeare than they think they are and that Shakespeare has had a notable influence on pop culture movies. Although the two actors who narrate the DVD discuss performing Shakespeare on stage and a few clips from stage productions are shown briefly, the emphasis on the DVD is definitely on Shakespeare's works on film, not the stage. While no twenty-first century films are mentioned in the literature or shown on the DVD, the above-referenced list of well-known Americans who support the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative appears on the program's website and in its promotional brochure. In addition to the list of advisory board members referenced above, Former First Lady Laura Bush and the late Jack Valenti, then-Motion Picture Association of America President and CEO, are listed as honorary chairs of the initiative.<sup>76</sup> While these are distinguished Americans, it is important to note that the list and the honorary chairs are more likely to impress teachers and congressmen than American schoolchildren, who may not be familiar with all (perhaps most) of the featured supporters.

The third way in which Shakespeare is depicted as relevant is through an emphasis on the idea that familiarity with Shakespeare provides trivial knowledge that can bring Americans together. As an interview subject in the *Why Shakespeare?* DVD explains, "Shakespeare is important because it's something that binds our

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<sup>76</sup> *National Endowment for the Arts: Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2008), 3.

heritage as an American. Something that I think you can go up to anybody and say, “Have you read Shakespeare? Have you heard of this guy?”<sup>77</sup> Note the question is not, “Do you enjoy Shakespeare?” or “Are you able to understand and explain a Shakespeare play after you have seen it?” The question is, simply, “Have you heard of this guy?” The implication in the materials, here and elsewhere, is that, although all Americans do not need a detailed knowledge of Shakespeare’s works or the ability to analyze them as literature, all Americans should be able to be familiar enough with Shakespeare’s oeuvre to name a play or two or recognize the origin of a Shakespearean phrase uttered during cocktail party chatter.

The attempt to establish Shakespeare’s relevance to twenty-first century audiences, then, is a muddled pitch. How are students and educators to believe that Shakespeare is relevant to their lives today if he and his works are presented primarily as an historical artifact? If students realize that they are already familiar with Shakespeare’s plays because of their adaptations into popular movies, is this likely to encourage students to engage with a live Shakespeare performance, or will it instead lead them to believe that they already know all that they need to know about Shakespeare? Are teachers being encouraged to teach Shakespeare as a subject of enduring educational value, or merely as trivia?

In her book *Extramural Shakespeare*, Denise Albanese criticizes *Shakespeare in American Communities* for its contradictory treatment of Shakespeare’s relevance. Albanese explains, “the NEA produces Shakespeare both as an inalienable part of the

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<sup>77</sup> *Why Shakespeare*, DVD (Washington, DC: Arts Midwest and the National Endowment for the Arts, 2004).

U.S. imaginary and, somehow, as external to popular American experience.”<sup>78</sup> Further, she writes of the NEA’s depiction of Shakespeare, “On the one hand, Shakespeare is foundational to American culture; on the other, he is beyond the experience of far too many Americans.”<sup>79</sup> It is impossible for Shakespeare to be simultaneously relevant, indeed, central, to American culture as well as unknown to Americans outside of major cities. Yet it is exactly this contradiction which the NEA postulates in its materials.<sup>80</sup> Albanese believes that the presence of Shakespeare in American education has only increased in recent decades, and “the inextricability of his plays from education at the secondary level and, indeed, even at educational levels below high school means that durable fantasies about the texts and their author coexist with an ever-widening Shakespearean net into which more and more of the population is increasingly drawn, and which the rhetoric of innovation characteristic of the “Shakespeare in American Communities” endeavor partly obscures.”<sup>81</sup> As Albanese’s points help to demonstrate, promoting Shakespeare’s relevance to American students does not fundamentally work as a selling point of the program. This is perhaps why the brand story of the initiative that I outlined above does not focus on current relevance so much as on Shakespeare’s historical importance in America. Comprehensive analysis of the marketing materials reveals the

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<sup>78</sup> Denise Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 6.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

<sup>80</sup> Albanese’s work theorizes that this contradiction is a result of the belief that Shakespeare is somehow still the property of the elites in America as opposed to simply their taste or delusion of privilege, or as opposed to the idea that Shakespeare is now so widely institutionally dispersed that his texts are now public culture. This idea is discussed further in chapter 5 of my work.

<sup>81</sup> Denise Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 32.

contradiction of attempting to present Shakespearean performance as both “relevant” and as a faltering art form calling out to be revived for the American public.

“Relevant” in this case is often used as a synonym for “ever-present” or “popular” or “well-known.” If Shakespeare is currently relevant in this sense to Americans and an integral part of their lives, then in theory his works are alive and well in most American communities and the NEA’s *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative is unnecessary. For the initiative to be necessary, Shakespeare must not be relevant to the majority of Americans. If that is the case, the NEA has not adequately articulated why the playwright must be forced to once again be a relevant part of American education and entertainment culture. This is perhaps why the brand story of the initiative that I outlined above does not focus on current relevance so much as on Shakespeare’s historical importance in America. Yet, ultimately, the creators of the advertising and educational materials could not resist the siren call of the trend to promote Shakespeare as relevant. However, the promotional materials would have been stronger and less vulnerable to criticism of their contradictions if their creators had left out the question of relevance and focused only on the primary brand story of a patriotic American Shakespeare begging to be revived in order to revitalize key American values. Had the NEA taken this approach, the question of why Shakespeare needs to once again be a thriving part of American education and entertainment culture could have received attention and a satisfactory answer. Instead, that question is avoided in favor of pointing out Shakespeare’s supposed current relevance as a large part of the reason why it is important to see Shakespeare plays, rather than providing a compelling explanation for why Shakespeare needs to be continuously



revived. This tactic ultimately creates a twenty-first century Shakespeare who is simultaneously and paradoxically all too prevalent and not too relevant.

Another element of the branding of the program that is present, yet not clearly tied into what I have suggested is the primary *Shakespeare in American Communities* brand story, is the idea of diversity. It would seem that the promotion of diversity in relation to Shakespeare would be a natural angle for the NEA to take in promoting this initiative. After all, if one of the major goals of the initiative is to bring live Shakespeare performances to underserved populations, it would be apropos to emphasize Shakespeare's potential importance to youth in ethnically diverse inner cities, or to discuss the potential for Shakespeare performance in communities made up primarily of minority groups (or, indeed, to discuss Shakespeare performances already occurring in these communities). Yet instead of focusing on Shakespeare's appeal to diverse twenty-first century audiences, the NEA chose an historical brand story with little emphasis on diversity. The creators of the marketing materials and teacher's guide did not entirely ignore Shakespeare's potential to appeal to diverse audiences, yet this is another instance in which the subject is only discussed in terms of the nineteenth century. In terms of diversity, the promotional brochure states only, "Throughout most of our history, the majority of Americans from every social class and various ethnic backgrounds knew his most famous speeches by heart. Only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century did Shakespeare's relationship with the American public begin to change. His plays gradually began to be regarded as high rather than popular culture."<sup>82</sup> The teacher's guide makes an identical point, first stating "Shakespeare

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<sup>82</sup> *National Endowment for the Arts: Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2008), 4.

productions attracted a broad audience across socioeconomic and ethnic lines,” but then on the same page continuing, “Only in the twentieth century did the nature of Shakespeare’s relationship to the American public change. He was still the most widely known, respected, and quoted dramatist, but his work gradually came to be seen as part of high culture rather than popular culture. His plays became more a form of education than entertainment, more the possession of an elite crowd than the property of all Americans. The accessible dramatist whom audiences once identified with, and even parodied, now became the sacred dramatist to whom everyday people could hardly relate.”<sup>83</sup> Other than the phrase, “inner cities” used as part of the description of *Shakespeare in American Communities*’s reach, there are no other mentions of diversity in the promotional material.<sup>84</sup> The audiovisual elements of the educational and promotional materials do address diversity slightly more effectively than the written text. The *Shakespeare in Our Time* DVD is narrated by two actors from Washington, D.C.’s Shakespeare Theatre Company, one of whom is an African-American woman. The second DVD in the Toolkit, *Why Shakespeare?*, focuses on Shakespeare Festival/LA’s Shakespeare program for at-risk youths in East Los Angeles and features young people from various ethnic backgrounds. Of the 27 images in the promotional brochure, six feature performers of color.

These nods to diversity are slight, though, and thus through their relative lack of presence serve only to draw attention to how little the subject seems to be

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<sup>83</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 14.

<sup>84</sup> *National Endowment for the Arts: Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2008), 3.

prioritized by the NEA. This is a shame because diversity is an oft-emphasized piece of the narrative history of America, and it could have provided a through line to a compelling brand story that could link nineteenth and twenty-first century America in a more effective manner than the existing promotional materials manage to achieve.

In summary, I suggest that in choosing to focus the *Shakespeare in American Communities* brand story heavily on Shakespeare's historical past in America, his English roots (and Americans' Anglophilia), and his ability to stand for traditional American values, the NEA lost the ability to focus equally on other brand stories such as diversity and relevance. By opting to briefly reference elements of these unselected brand stories rather than ignoring them entirely in favor of their primary marketing strategy, the NEA did not strengthen its marketing campaign but rather weakened its branding of the initiative and left it open to critical interpretations.

### ***The Effect of Hyperbole on the Brand Story***

As I have stated above, the effects of advertising are often more emotional than logical. Logically, I can state that the NEA does not include enough obvious appeals to diversity as a program purporting to reach underserved audiences reasonably should be expected to do. I can further suggest that promoting a topic's current relevance based primarily on its relevance two hundred years ago is not an effective strategy. Yet in a remarkable manner, the creators of this program recognized that it is not logic that matters, but rather emotional appeal.

Dana Gioia's statement, "In order to understand American culture or American theatre, one must first understand Shakespeare," is at the heart of the

emotional appeal of this initiative.<sup>85</sup> Even to members of theatre companies that participated in the initiative, the statement reads as exaggeration when it is taken literally. When asked whether they believed that understanding Shakespeare was in fact necessary to understand America, program participants all shared similar reactions. For example, Director of Arts Midwest David Fraher's initial response was, "That's one I want to think more about before I really answer...I would leave the response to that question in the broadest way to Dana himself."<sup>86</sup> Kurtis Donnelly, education director at the Greenbrier Valley Theatre in West Virginia, said, "Wow, that is a tough question. I think that's definitely probably true."<sup>87</sup> The director of education at The Acting Company, Justin Gallo, initially laughed in response to the question. And Carmela Lanza-Weil, education director of the Baltimore Shakespeare Festival, replied, "I mean, I can sort of see...I mean, the British were a part of the settlement of the United States of America... I'm not quite sure what that means. Does [Gioia] elaborate on that? Or is it just "I'm head of the NEA and therefore—?"<sup>88</sup> She later concluded, "I think people can understand America without having been Shakespearean scholars, but maybe I'm wrong. I could be wrong!"<sup>89</sup>

My interview subjects found it difficult to explain how an understanding of Shakespeare is necessary for an understanding of American culture because Gioia's

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<sup>85</sup> Dana Gioia, "Message from Dana Gioia, Chairman, National Endowment for the Arts," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed May 18, 2009, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about/gioia.shtml>.

<sup>86</sup> David Fraher, telephone interview by author, June 20, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> Kurtis Donnelly, telephone interview by author, August 11, 2010.

<sup>88</sup> Carmela Lanza-Weil, interview by author, Baltimore, Maryland, July 14, 2010.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

assertion was hyperbole. It is a statement that is both vague and an exaggeration. How can anyone truly understand and explain the various complex facets of American culture, with or without the consideration of Shakespeare's place in that culture? Even if understanding Shakespeare is somehow necessary in order for Americans to understand their culture, what precisely does it mean to "understand" Shakespeare? Yet in making that statement as part of the introduction to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* program, Gioia's hyperbole accomplished exactly what successful marketing needs to achieve. The statement boldly told readers that experience with Shakespeare was an absolute necessity, and, as is the case with all effective advertising, the people hailed by the statement did not think about how the statement was potentially false, but instead thought about how it could likely be true.

The interview subjects above, all of whom initially laughed off Gioia's assertion or expressed uncertainty in their ability to link Shakespeare and American culture, still rapidly recovered their composure to respond with answers that supported Gioia's hyperbolic statement. Fraher discussed the "array of frames" that can be created through Shakespeare's works to frame American culture.<sup>90</sup> Donnelly replied that, "someone that was unfamiliar with America, they could learn about America through Shakespeare because he's kind of the foundation of a lot of what we do now even though it was so long ago, and still the issues kind of ring true."<sup>91</sup> Gallo discussed the array of books, movies, songs, and other American cultural artifacts that can be traced back to Shakespeare in some way and said, "I really think he is a part of

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<sup>90</sup> David Fraher, telephone interview by author, June 20, 2011.

<sup>91</sup> Kurtis Donnelly, telephone interview by author, August 11, 2010.

our everyday lives in a completely conscious and subconscious way.”<sup>92</sup> Lanza-Weil suggested that Shakespeare can be linked to American culture through a focus on the “political shenanigans” that occur in many of Shakespeare’s plays and the manner in which the political and sociological elements of his plays can be applied to American experiences.

These responses demonstrate that the statement, “In order to understand American culture or American theatre, one must first understand Shakespeare,” did exactly what Gioia likely hoped it would do. It encouraged all who read it, including this author, to think about how Shakespeare has had an effect on American lives. The statement works as emotional appeal. If accepted at face value, it encourages Americans to participate in the initiative because the statement makes it seem obvious that Shakespeare is important to Americans. If readers manage to take the additional step to move beyond the emotional appeal and analyze the statement, evidence suggests that most will still come to the true conclusion that Shakespeare has had an effect on Americans’ language, entertainment, and educational system. The connection between Shakespeare and our specifically American culture may not run as deep as Gioia suggests, but there is a connection between the two.

### *A Successful Paradox*

Despite Dana Gioia’s assertion that we cannot understand American culture without understanding Shakespeare, the program literature analyzed here persistently points to Shakespeare’s importance in the American past and then to his enduring

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<sup>92</sup> Justin Gallo, telephone interview by author, July 21, 2010.

presence in the United States as either high culture typically inaccessible to the general public or lowest-common-denominator films, a paradox of “culture” which is not referenced or explained.

The promotional literature blatantly contradicts itself, as in the case of two paragraphs in the teacher’s guide:

“Many scholars assert that the end of the nineteenth century, with the development of industrial manufacturing processes, changes to American work schedules, and resulting increased social classism, saw a significant decrease in the place of Shakespeare in everyday society. Education values really shifted because of the industrial revolution as well, with families knowing that a good laborer could support a family and didn’t necessarily need an education that included strong literacy skills. The American language moved rapidly away from the rich Elizabethan style of Shakespeare, making his words alien to a people who once so effortlessly understood their power.

Still, for more than four centuries, Shakespeare has played a defining role in American culture. Today he remains America’s most widely produced playwright—performed in theaters, on film, in schools, at festivals, and read in millions of homes across the country.”<sup>93</sup>

The NEA has created at least two paradoxes in the promotion of its *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. The first, as illustrated by the above paragraphs, is that Shakespeare is somehow still relevant and yet simultaneously “alien.” The second paradox is that Shakespeare is somehow popular and “America’s most widely produced playwright” while at the same time Shakespeare performance is not reaching enough Americans, making a program like *Shakespeare in American Communities* necessary.

The program’s promotional literature and teacher’s guide suggest that this program will help Americans to reclaim Shakespeare by teaching his work in an exciting, interactive manner to a new generation, but at the same time contradicts

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<sup>93</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, *Teacher's Guide: National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities* (Washington, DC: National Endowment for the Arts, 2011), 15.

itself through repetitive references to the past with little focus on what Shakespeare could be or do in the future or the diverse roles that Shakespearean performance has played in America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Yet despite these criticisms, it can still be said that the NEA created a shrewd marketing campaign for the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. By creating a brand story focused on a patriotic “American” Shakespeare during a political administration for which “patriotism” was a key buzzword, and by persistently pushing hyperbolic yet emotionally appealing statements about the critical importance of Shakespeare to the lives of twenty-first century Americans, the NEA did indeed convince millions of Americans that viewing performances of Shakespeare’s plays was a worthwhile educational and entertainment pursuit. By convincing American educators and students that they knew enough about Shakespeare that he was relevant to their lives, but perhaps not as much as they should ideally know, the NEA was able to place its particular brand of Shakespeare in classrooms across the country. By emphasizing elements of the history of Shakespeare most likely to appeal to congressmen and -women on Capitol Hill and their most influential constituents, the Endowment was able to successfully revitalize its reputation and preserve its funding. Although not without its flaws, the *Shakespeare in American Communities* brand ultimately proved a success for the NEA.



## Chapter 5: “Populist Elitist”: How Dana Gioia and the NEA

### Define Culture

“Well, culture can be anything, of course.”<sup>1</sup> This was Dana Gioia’s initial response when asked what precisely he meant when he used the term “culture” as he described the benefits and goals of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. Gioia had stated in the program’s promotional literature that one must understand Shakespeare in order to understand American culture. He had further suggested that programs such as the Shakespeare tour and educational workshops were important because, “The NEA has to lead the cultural conversation, to define issues and create opportunities for all Americans.”<sup>2</sup> Since Gioia understood that the NEA was uniquely positioned to be a cultural leader in the United States, and believed that the Endowment could and should teach citizens about their specifically American culture through the arts, it is not possible to have a full understanding of the NEA’s goals for *Shakespeare in American Communities* and the related initiatives created during Gioia’s chairmanship without exploring his understanding of culture. Yes, “culture can be anything,” but what is it to Dana Gioia and the NEA under his leadership? What idea of culture did Gioia have in mind when he announced that the NEA programs developed during his six years as chair can teach us about our culture?

This chapter describes two separate but connected facets of the idea of “culture” as it relates to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. First,

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<sup>1</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Regina Hackett, "Gioia Is Upbeat on the Arts," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, May 14, 2007.

what role does the NEA itself believe that it can play in defining American culture, and what potential cultural role is attributed to it by the media and the general American public? What was Gioia's understanding of culture, and how did his understanding influence the NEA under his leadership and lead to the development of initiatives such as *Shakespeare in American Communities*? Second, what role does Shakespeare play in the educational culture in the United States at the turn of the millennium, and how has the NEA benefitted from Shakespeare's position in the cultural field of American education? Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the authoritative discourse, Pierre Bourdieu's field of cultural production, and Alexei Yurchak's understanding and use of J.L. Austin's concept of a performative utterance, this chapter aims to explore these questions. This chapter utilizes interviews with and speeches by Gioia, newspaper articles featuring the media's understanding of the NEA and culture, and histories of the role of Shakespeare's plays in American education to address these questions. While this chapter in no way definitively pins down a definition of culture, it offers thoughts on how the NEA seems to understand culture in the context of a program such as the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative.

### ***The NEA As Cultural Authority***

“I worry that the NEA's position in the American cultural landscape is not well understood - by either the agency's critics or its supporters,”<sup>3</sup> said Dana Gioia in

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<sup>3</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?" (Speech, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., June 30, 2003).

a speech to the National Press Club in 2007. Indeed, Pierre Bourdieu would agree that “It is difficult to conceive of the vast amount of information which is linked to membership of a field [of cultural production].”<sup>4</sup> When considering the NEA’s particular role in influencing American culture, one must take into consideration all of the elements that any “reader” of the NEA and its policies invests in thinking about the Endowment: the role of government institutions as a whole, the impressions of people leading those institutions, the history of the organization and similar organizations, the gossip, rumors, and assumptions that circulate regarding the organization, and so on. To present a full analysis of the NEA’s position within Bourdieu’s field of cultural production is an ambitious undertaking and beyond the scope of this project. Yet it is within the scope of this particular dissertation chapter to analyze some of these elements to determine the role the NEA has played, or, perhaps more accurately, hopes to play, as arbiter of artistic culture in the United States.

The NEA in the twenty-first century is in a contradictory position. As previous chapters have demonstrated, the NEA has often been derided for being an “elitist” entity. Its predominant reputation, developed through Congressional discourse and media such as the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* places the NEA most firmly in the field of “restricted production.”<sup>5</sup> This is what Bourdieu refers to as, “production for producers”—art intended to most impress and appeal to fellow artists, or fellow artistic elites—and concerns what we typically think of as “high

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<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 32.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

arts”: “classical” music, “serious” literature, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Surely some of the NEA’s critics would argue that it is precisely this “production for producers” mentality that led to the funding of controversial works by avant-garde artists. These works were never intended to appeal to the general public, but rather were created to appeal to an artistic community already “in the know.” Restricted production, on the other hand, is the opposite of the field of “large-scale production,” which is what we typically refer to as mass or popular culture. Radio, mass-produced literature, and most television shows and movies fall into this category. Those who engage in restricted production are often at direct odds with those engaged in large-scale production. Authors or musicians who achieve popular, mass-market success are often accused of “selling out;” artists who achieve primarily “high society” successes and the praise of other artists are often perceived as “out of touch,” as has been demonstrated in previous chapters.<sup>7</sup> The “principle of legitimacy corresponding to ‘bourgeois’ taste and to the consecration bestowed by the dominant fractions of the dominant class,” is opposed to the “legitimacy which its advocates call ‘popular’, i.e. the consecration bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers, the ‘mass audience.’”<sup>8</sup>

This opposition plays out in a notable way through Dana Gioia’s NEA and its *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. In a *New York Times* editorial subtitled “The NEA Is Elitist, True, It Should Be,” critic and composer Edward Rothstein argues for a positive understanding of the word “elitist,” claiming that in

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 46

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

the art and entertainment world “there is no way of judging even vastly divergent styles without some notion of differentiation and choice -- in other words, elitism.”<sup>9</sup> The elitism that Rothstein references here is akin to Bourdieu’s senses of symbolic and cultural capital. Cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, “concerns forms of cultural knowledge, competences or dispositions.”<sup>10</sup> It is “a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and cultural artifacts.”<sup>11</sup> Symbolic capital is the “degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour,” held by an individual or organization.<sup>12</sup> The NEA, argued Rothstein in his commentary written at the height of the culture wars in the 1990s, should not be accused of elitism in a negative sense, but rather praised for the organization’s social and cultural capital that allow it to serve as a necessary guide of taste. Rothstein seems to suggest that the United States needs an agency like the NEA, endowed with cultural and symbolic capital, to tell us what is worthwhile in the vast world of artistic production.

In his descriptions of the role and goals of the NEA and the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, Gioia grappled with this contradiction. He argued that the NEA should serve a leadership role in the arts community, an “elite” role as

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Rothstein, "The N.E.A. Is Elitist, True. It Should Be." *The New York Times*, February 26, 1995, late edition.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Rothstein defines it. The programs and initiatives he started under his chairmanship were jazz programs, opera programs, and Shakespeare programs, much more rooted in the field of restricted production than in the field of large-scale production. Yet Gioia once referred to himself as a “populist elitist,” a contradictory distinction that manifested itself in his goals for the Endowment.<sup>13</sup> As NEA chair he took on the ambitious, and likely impossible, task of growing the NEA’s popular appeal through the broad distribution of art previously viewed as elite. It seems that Gioia’s vision for the NEA rested on a hope that somehow restricted production art could become a part of mass culture without simultaneously losing its elite elements.

Gioia’s “populist elitist” goal for the NEA was, above all else, “access to artistic excellence.”<sup>14</sup> For Gioia, what constitutes artistic excellence is, primarily, art that he feels was once a part of our mass culture but is now being lost. He likes to share an anecdote from his own childhood in the 1950s and 1960s to summarize his idea of what constitutes culture:

“I don't think that Americans were smarter then, but American culture was. Even the mass media placed a greater emphasis on presenting a broad range of human achievement.

I grew up mostly among immigrants, many of whom never learned to speak English. But at night watching TV variety programs like the Ed Sullivan Show or the Perry Como Music Hall, I saw—along with comedians, popular singers, and movie stars—classical musicians like Jascha Heifetz and Arthur Rubinstein, opera singers like Robert Merrill and Anna Moffo, and jazz greats like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong captivate an audience of millions with their art.

The same was even true of literature. I first encountered Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, Lillian Hellman, and James Baldwin on general interest TV shows. All of these people were famous to the average American—because the culture considered them

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<sup>13</sup> Bruce Weber, "Endowment Chair Coaxes Funds for the Arts," *The New York Times*, September 7, 2004, final edition.

<sup>14</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

important.

Today no working-class or immigrant kid would encounter that range of arts and ideas in the popular culture. Almost everything in our national culture, even the news, has been reduced to entertainment, or altogether eliminated.”<sup>15</sup>

Gioia includes Shakespeare in this category of arts and ideas that was once prevalent in popular culture but has now receded to the realm of high art. “My mother was a poor Mexican girl in LA, and she could recite passages from Shakespeare,” Gioia likes to tell people.<sup>16</sup> He describes watching Shakespeare specials on television and listening to John Barrymore’s one-hour adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays on the radio. But, Gioia says, there is “a myth that people have today to excuse themselves, to make themselves feel less guilty, and that myth is ‘People were always ignorant. We’re not any dumber than our grandparents, we’re not any less learned than our grandparents.’ We are, we are. We’ve lost so much.”<sup>17</sup> According to Gioia, what we have lost is high culture as popular entertainment. Gioia believes that there was a time not long ago in which popular culture and high art, which are now commonly viewed as mutually exclusive, were largely one and the same. But gradually the United States has developed a media culture that is about advertising rather than educating, and now all of popular culture is primarily about selling the audience something. “If someone’s on the Tonight Show today, it’s because they have a movie opening, a show opening, an album coming out that next week. When I was a kid they would have people like Truman Capote, Mary McCarthy. As a little kid with my grandparents who couldn’t speak English I’d see Carl Sandberg or John Steinbeck on

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<sup>15</sup> Dana Gioia (Commencement Speech, Stanford University, June 17, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

television. It's inconceivable now!" says Gioia.<sup>18</sup> Whether or not Gioia is objectively correct in his belief that the mid-twentieth century was a time in which high culture and popular culture overlapped is beside the point. The point is that the initiatives he developed for the NEA were created with a mind to taking Americans back to a perceived golden age where the art forms that we now consider high culture, restricted production fare were easily accessible for Americans from all walks of life. Gioia believed that his job as NEA chair was to "combat the cultural impoverishment that threatens" Americans.<sup>19</sup> "In an era of 'reality' television, and a music scene where even Merle Haggard is hardly heard on commercial country music radio stations, Mr. Gioia doesn't consider it necessary to define 'cultural impoverishment,'" wrote reporter Nat Hentoff in a *Wall Street Journal* article on Gioia's expansion of the NEA Jazz Masters program.<sup>20</sup> What Gioia views as cultural impoverishment is clear: Americans no longer see classical musicians, dancers, dramatists, and thinkers as part of their standard entertainment diet. According to Gioia, Americans are becoming culturally illiterate. We "live in the present tense - cut off from [our] own history and cultural heritage."<sup>21</sup> For Gioia, then, culture is about looking backward to the artistic achievements of the American past. He wants to see an emphasis not on new art, but on art forms that have a proven history in the United States. Shakespeare is emblematic of the type of artistic culture in which Gioia would like to see

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<sup>18</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Nat Hentoff, "The Gioia of Jazz," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 15, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies U.S. House of Representatives, 108th Cong. (2004) (statement of Dana Gioia) (LEXIS).



Americans engaged. Shakespeare is literature that has “a historical consciousness,” Shakespeare is a playwright that is “generally recognized as the single most important author in the history of the English language.”<sup>22</sup> To deny anyone the opportunity to learn about Shakespeare creates a deprivation of a “primary, imaginative and intellectual encounter.”<sup>23</sup> If Americans are not introduced to Shakespeare but instead focus only on literature or forms of entertainment that have been created in recent decades, “you give them the illusion that there’s no such thing as history, that ideas don’t have their own biographies, that some things change between ages and some things stay the same.”<sup>24</sup> Gioia believes that cultural capital comes primarily from learning about great artists from our past, not from focusing on artists who are producing works today, works that have not yet stood the test of time.<sup>25</sup>

According to Gioia’s statement to Congress at the NEA’s 2004 budget hearing, the primary role of the NEA is to “promote, preserve, and celebrate the best of our culture, old and new, classic and contemporary.”<sup>26</sup> The words “preserve,” “old,” and “classic” are what is key to Gioia’s understanding of culture, however, which is made clear in his next sentence: “It must reacquaint America with its own

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<sup>22</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Gioia does not believe that Shakespeare is the only playwright who can help to create historical consciousness. He gives both Sophocles and Chekhov as examples of playwrights who could replace Shakespeare in a school curriculum and still provide students with a worthwhile cultural experience.

<sup>26</sup> *Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies* U.S. House of Representatives, 108th Cong. (2004) (statement of Dana Gioia) (LEXIS).

best self.”<sup>27</sup> One does not “reacquaint” by presenting brand new material, after all. Gioia’s view of culture is a conservative one. It is conservative in the literal sense that during his tenure as Chairman of the NEA he was more interested in conserving art from the American past and preserving cultural heritage than he was in seeking out and promoting new forms. Perhaps coincidentally, this conservative view of culture also has tended to be more popular with conservative politicians than with liberal artists. As demonstrated in previous chapters, many artists would prefer to see more support for new works, while the conservative politicians who are most likely to be opponents of the NEA would prefer that it focus its efforts on funding known entities (if it must exist at all). The perceived benefit of this conservative stance is that a well-known artist’s work has already been tested and found worthy by the elites, and therefore has tacit approval and is unlikely to cause major controversy, even when, as is the case with Shakespeare, it is possible to subvert the “approved” message.

When it comes to culture, Gioia also believes that the proper role of artistic culture is to challenge. He is concerned for a generation of Americans that “bit by bit trades off the challenging pleasures of art for the easy comforts of entertainment.”<sup>28</sup> Gioia believes that what constitutes culture is its ability to edify. Shakespeare, for example, is a form of cultural capital because it is not easily grasped and understood. As Denise Albanese explains this idea in *Extramural Shakespeare*, “To become part of Shakespeare’s public, to shed “ignorance,” is to accede to the lingering demands

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<sup>27</sup> *Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies* U.S. House of Representatives, 108th Cong. (2004) (statement of Dana Gioia) (LEXIS).

<sup>28</sup> Dana Gioia (Commencement Speech, Stanford University, June 17, 2007).

and investments of high literacy.”<sup>29</sup> When one looks at the majority of the initiatives created by the NEA under Gioia’s tenure, they initially seem to have little in common. Jazz, opera, Shakespeare, memoir-writing, and poetry recitation contests are similar, however, in one major way: all of them are not readily accessible to the average American. They are not art forms that Americans encounter every day, and they only become accessible once they are simplified and taught. All of the NEA initiatives created by Gioia and his staff are accompanied by educational materials because there is an implicit understanding that such materials are necessary in order for Americans to be able to understand and therefore potentially appreciate the art. For Gioia, the art forms that he wished to highlight at the NEA were those that were not readily available in popular forms. This is not to say that they have never been popular forms, only that by the time the NEA began to promote them they were no longer forms of entertainment that could be understood without remedial materials to raise the consumer’s competence.

Culture, as the NEA understands it, consists of these elite art forms that are beyond the grasp of the average American because they either have become a part of the historical past and are no longer easily accessible, they are too challenging to be readily understood by those who are entertained primarily by mass-market media such as television shows and films, or some combination of the two. The NEA’s job, then, becomes “to spread cultural wealth to communities with generally limited

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<sup>29</sup> Denise Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 142.

access to high-caliber theater” and arts in general.<sup>30</sup> This is where Gioia’s “populist elitist” label comes into play as his agency attempts to introduce so many Americans to these elite art forms that these art forms from the field of restricted production essentially merge into the field of large-scale production and become a part of mass culture (or, perhaps, return to their rightful position as part of mass culture, as Gioia views it). The *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative was developed because Gioia believed that Shakespeare is “the last beachfront of culture.”<sup>31</sup> In a sense, Shakespeare is the last vestige of the blending of elite culture and popular culture. Although Shakespeare is arguably no longer appreciated or understood by most Americans, particularly young Americans, in the manner that Lawrence Levine argues it was in the nineteenth century, or that Dana Gioia argues it was in the mid-twentieth century, Shakespeare is still being read in classrooms across America as part of the standard public school education. Therefore, the NEA can grasp the opportunity inherent in millions of school children reading Shakespeare every year. Since students are already reading Shakespeare, albeit perhaps not appreciating Shakespeare’s work in the same way in which they enjoy the latest popular movie or reality television show, the NEA can nudge students toward a greater understanding and appreciation of the bard. By “bringing Shakespearean plays to ‘cities and towns’ that have not had the opportunity to witness them,” the NEA is “leveling the cultural playing field, presumably while prizing Shakespeare from rarefied clutches.”<sup>32</sup> Gioia

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<sup>30</sup> Bruce Weber, "Stratford-Upon-Main-Street: Shakespeare to Tour Thanks to N.E.A." *The New York Times*, April 23, 2003, late edition.

<sup>31</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Denise Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 16.

suggests that artists and intellectuals are partially to blame for the widening gap between mass popular culture and high culture that has led to an uneven playing field. “Most American artists, intellectuals, and academics have lost their ability to converse with the rest of society,” Gioia has stated. “We have become wonderfully expert in talking to one another, but we have become almost invisible and inaudible in the general culture. This mutual estrangement has had enormous cultural, social, and political consequences. America needs its artists and intellectuals, and they need to reestablish their rightful place in the general culture. If we could reopen the conversation between our best minds and the broader public, the results would not only transform society but also artistic and intellectual life.”<sup>33</sup> This, ultimately, was Gioia’s goal as Chairman of the NEA. He wanted to reintroduce Americans to art forms that were once popular in America’s past but had somehow lost their mass appeal. By doing this, he believed that the NEA could benefit both the artists who needed to “reestablish their rightful place in the general culture” and the American citizens facing a cultural deficit. If Gioia prevailed, the culture defined by the NEA would be an artistic culture that challenged Americans intellectually and that reconnected them to the history of American art. Ultimately, what Gioia wanted his NEA programs to achieve was something of a contradiction: he hoped to bring Shakespeare and other similar cultural products into the field of large-scale production. By doing so, however, his goal was not to cause Shakespeare and similar arts to lose their elite, restricted-production status. Rather, he hoped to encourage all Americans to develop elite values and tastes. This is, of course, contradictory because by definition “elite” means not accessible to all. It is impossible for something to be

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<sup>33</sup> Dana Gioia (Commencement Speech, Stanford University, June 17, 2007).

both popular/populist and elite, and yet Gioia genuinely was pursuing a goal to make American artistic culture simultaneously both of these things.

### ***The Authoritative NEA***

How much influence does the NEA actually have in defining American artistic culture? In his “Can the NEA Matter?” speech, Gioia presented a nuanced answer to this question. Gioia’s primary stance is that “An astonishing amount of the media discussion of the NEA overlooks an obvious fact about its past, current, and presumably future situation - namely that the Arts Endowment cannot now and, in fact, has never operated like a centralized ministry of culture. It has never possessed the resources to impose its will on the American arts world. It cannot command or control the policies of individual institutions.”<sup>34</sup> Gioia feels that this “putative weakness is actually one of the agency's basic strengths” because the NEA is not in a position to dictate artistic culture, but must rather enter a series of conversations about culture at the local, regional, and national level.<sup>35</sup>

Yet Gioia also acknowledges that the NEA holds a leadership and advocacy role in the arts world. In his speech to the National Press Club, Gioia said, “NEA leadership begins with the illuminating fact that although the Endowment represents less than 1% of total arts philanthropy in the U.S., it nonetheless remains the nation's

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<sup>34</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?" (Speech, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., June 30, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

largest annual funder of the arts.”<sup>36</sup> This demonstrates the diversity and decentralization of the American arts system. Yet just because the American arts world is diverse, that does not mean that it does not have “leadership, trends, or direction.”<sup>37</sup> Gioia argued in his speech that it is part of the NEA’s job to provide all of these things, and, indeed, the NEA has done so. The best demonstration of the NEA’s leadership is this funding. Its relatively small budget “has always been magnified by its outsize cultural influence, the thinking goes; the stamp of approval conferred by even a paltry N.E.A. grant can provide an arts organization with a powerful fund-raising tool.”<sup>38</sup> According to the *New York Times*, a grant from the N.E.A. “provides an imprimatur that attracts additional support from local governments, foundations and private patrons.” Each dollar it grants may be used to raise as much as \$11 from other sources such as corporate funding or private donations.<sup>39</sup> It is clear that the NEA has the power to legitimize and validate organizations. It is also clear that the NEA “has the enormously potent political and symbolic advantage of being the official arts agency of the U.S. government and the only truly national arts agency that supports and covers all of the arts in America. Consequently, it occupies a uniquely broad, public, and influential position. Cultural trends can begin anywhere in the U.S., but they may not be noticed for some time.

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<sup>36</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?" (Speech, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., June 30, 2003).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Robin Pogrebin and Jo Craven McGinty, "For New Leader of the Arts Endowment, Lessons From a Shaky Past," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2009, late edition.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Rothstein, "The N.E.A. Is Elitist, True. It Should Be." *The New York Times*, February 26, 1995, late edition.

But the NEA has the ongoing advantage - and disadvantage - of being highly visible at all times. Its politics, policies, programs, personnel, and funding are not only matters of public record but also of public interest.”<sup>40</sup>

Because of its unique position in the field of cultural production, the NEA holds the power to influence American culture. Indeed, “Administrative moves [by the NEA] can have a major impact on the nation’s cultural life.”<sup>41</sup> This is possible because the NEA and its chair occupy a position as an authoritative voice in artistic culture. It is because of the NEA’s cultural position that official statements from the Endowment, such as Dana Gioia’s welcome to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative in which he stated, “In order to understand American culture or American theater, one must first understand Shakespeare,” can have a major impact on the arts experience for American citizens.

In his book *Everything Was Forever, Until It was No More*, anthropologist Alexei Yurchak draws on the theories of J.L. Austin and Mikhail Bakhtin to create a description of an utterance that is somewhere between a constative utterance (a statement that can be judged as true or false) and a performative one (a statement that changes the reality which it describes). Yurchak drew on Austin’s work and on critical readings of his discussion of the performative by other theorists, and

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<sup>40</sup> Edward Rothstein, "The N.E.A. Is Elitist, True. It Should Be." *The New York Times*, February 26, 1995, late edition.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Knight, "Can Rocco Landesman Make the NEA Relevant Again?" editorial, *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/05/can-rocco-landesman-make-the-nea-relevant-again.html>.



developed a “method for analyzing discourse that goes beyond these readings.”<sup>42</sup> What Yurchak, and I, find particularly productive is the notion that “Austin pointed out that any strict division into constative and performative acts is an abstraction and that ‘every genuine speech act is both.’ Speech acts should not be seen as either just constative or just performative; rather, concludes Austin, depending on the circumstances, they are more or less constative and more or less performative.”<sup>43</sup> Gioia’s statement that in order to understand American culture one must understand Shakespeare is not a true performative. It is not, “a deed done”<sup>44</sup> in the sense that stating, “I bet” constitutes the act of betting, or stating, “I now pronounce you man and wife,” marries a couple. Gioia’s words are not “the performing of an action.”<sup>45</sup> His words do not immediately “change things in social reality.”<sup>46</sup> However, his words are also not simply a constative utterance, a statement of fact, “just saying something.”<sup>47</sup> Gioia’s statement on the “Welcome” page of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* website, and indeed all of the proclamations he made to the press about why the initiative would be good for Americans, have elements of Austin’s successful, or “happy” performative utterance. Gioia’s words do more than simply describe reality. They hold the power to alter it. This is because Gioia

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<sup>42</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 285.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 22

<sup>44</sup> Diana Taylor, "Bush's Happy Performative," *TDR* 47, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 5.

<sup>45</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 6.

<sup>46</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19.

<sup>47</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, ed. J.O. Urmson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 7.

occupies a privileged position. He is “the appropriate person uttering the appropriate words in the appropriate circumstances in order to obtain conventional results.”<sup>48</sup> At the time Gioia wrote those words for the *Shakespeare in American Communities* website, gave the speeches cited above, and described his mission for the NEA to the American media, he was in an influential leadership position within the arts community. “Bourdieu argues that the source of power of conventional speech acts ‘resides in the institutional conditions of their production and reception’ and that their power is ‘nothing other than the delegated power of the spokesperson.’”<sup>49</sup> In this case, Gioia is the “spokesperson” who, because of his position as leader of the NEA, can give weight to his statements that they would not have otherwise. Because Gioia is speaking in a formal channel (giving a speech, providing a statement for a newspaper, testifying before Congress, writing for the NEA’s official website), and because he is the leader of the agency, his words take on an element of the performative utterance. They do not immediately cause a change in social reality, but because he is, effectively, the right man in the right place at the right time, and because he is engaging in a variation of what Bakhtin would call authoritative discourse, his statements have the ability to influence the behavior of those who hear them.

Bakhtin defines authoritative discourse as a “kind of discourse that demands of its recipients an unqualified acknowledgment, it is the word of the ancestors, it

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<sup>48</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 19.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

comes to us with its authority already acknowledged in the past. In the horizon of this discourse others' voices become anonymous..."<sup>50</sup> Gioia's words are not necessarily "word of the ancestors," precisely. They are also not exactly authoritative discourse in the sense of "privileged language that approaches us from without," language that "is distanced, taboo, and permits no play with its framing context (sacred writ, for example)."<sup>51</sup> However, just as Gioia's statements are more performative than constative, his words also function in similar ways to authoritative language. Gioia's statements about the importance of Shakespeare are passed down to us with an "authority already acknowledged in the past." Gioia's words function as prior discourse. The idea that Shakespeare is important, necessary, and an important part of American culture is not Gioia's original thought, nor is it something that he feels the need to qualify or prove. In fact, had Gioia followed up his statement on the *Shakespeare in American Communities* website with an explanation for why exactly Shakespeare has been and must remain a necessary part of American culture in general and American theatrical culture specifically, his authoritative word would cease to be fully authoritative. Gioia's statement of Shakespeare's importance and necessity is an idea that is transmitted by him, but not created by him. Because it is not his own idea, but rather an idea that has been articulated in the "lofty spheres" of the academy and elite arts circles in the United States throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it takes on what Bakhtin would describe as a sense similar to "the

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<sup>50</sup> Arnetha Ball and Sara Warshauer Freedman, eds. *Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 319.

<sup>51</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15.

authority of religious dogma, or of acknowledged scientific truth.”<sup>52</sup> The role of Shakespeare in American society has been effectively predetermined. True, not everyone is in complete agreement as to what exactly that roles has been, or should be. But Bakhtin says that “In a society that is relatively open to diverse values, that minimal, but still significant, function of an authoritative voice is the most important one. It demands not adherence but attention.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, because Gioia speaks with an authoritative voice, his statements must be acknowledged, if not adhered to completely. This dissertation project, for instance, interrogates Gioia’s statements and the role Shakespeare plays in American culture, but it does so precisely because Gioia is in a position to be an authoritative voice. Had Gioia not been in an authoritative position when making his statements about the necessity of Shakespeare, his statements would have been ignored rather than perpetuated in the media and analyzed in scholarly projects such as this one. Because of Gioia’s position as Chairman of the NEA, he was able to make statements about the importance of certain art forms that were necessarily acknowledged and that, frankly, most of the American public accepted at face value.

Although the arts culture in the United States is diverse, the NEA maintains a unique position within that field of cultural production. Because it is the official government agency dedicated to the arts in the United States, Americans can and do

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<sup>52</sup> Arnetha Ball and Sara Warshauer Freedman, eds. *Bakhtinian Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Learning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 319.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

look to it to tell us what we should be listening to, watching, and reading.<sup>54</sup> Because of the potential of an NEA grant to attract on average seven to eight times the amount of the original grant in financial support to arts organizations, it is clear that what the NEA supports plays a role in determining what survives as a part of American arts culture.<sup>55</sup> While the NEA is not always, or even often, responsible for creating trends, its funding can help to sustain them. Indeed, as some of the rhetoric for the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative implies, the NEA's most important role is to sometimes "save" and continue to attempt to make prominent an arts form that otherwise might fade into obscurity and cease to play a role in American culture.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, because the NEA is clearly playing a defining role in the field of restricted production, and under Gioia operated with the goal of influencing the field of large-scale production by pushing the arts it promotes back into the realm of American popular culture, it is clear that the NEA does play a role in determining artistic culture in the United States. In the past decade the NEA has further increased its influence by focusing greater attention on the role it can play in another major aspect of American culture: American education.

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<sup>54</sup> Again, it is important to note that Americans do not necessarily blindly adhere to what the NEA deems important, but what the NEA deems important is acknowledged in the media. Americans can then adhere, or not but, regardless, acknowledgment to the NEA's decisions is made in a manner that only a few other arts organizations in the United States also experience.

<sup>55</sup> Dana Gioia, "Can the National Endowment for the Arts Matter?" (Speech, National Press Club, Washington, D.C., June 30, 2003).

<sup>56</sup> I do not mean to imply here that the NEA is responsible for "saving" Shakespeare in the United States. As previous chapters have demonstrated, it was in fact the opposite: the already large and dynamic field of Shakespeare in the United States was put to use to help to stabilize the NEA. But part of Gioia's push to fund *Shakespeare in American Communities* was a desire to bring back other art forms that are no longer part of popular culture and that the NEA believes need to be preserved.

## *Shakespeare, American Education, and the NEA*

Shakespeare has long been enlisted as “an agent in the formation of American citizens and American culture,” through the use of his plays in the American educational system.<sup>57</sup> In the book *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance*, Coppelia Kahn writes that Shakespeare’s presence in American education, both formal and informal, has always been strong and complex. “In myriad complex ways,” she writes, “Shakespeare was appropriated, challenged, or transfigured by diverse groups in American culture—all struggling to create their own sense of how an appreciation of his works could be fitted into the education of American citizens and harmonized with republican values.”<sup>58</sup> In Denise Albanese’s *Extracurricular Shakespeare*, the author points to the “persistence of pedagogical agendas” and the sense that “Shakespeare is, above all, schoolroom matter,” and treated as such, even in entertainment forms that are not generally pedagogical in nature.<sup>59</sup> The key argument in Albanese’s book is that Shakespeare is a part of public culture in the United States because the “mass-education” project of the twentieth century made him so.<sup>60</sup> Albanese focuses her analysis on the College Entrance Examination Board reading lists of the early twentieth century and suggests that it was Shakespeare’s inclusion on these reading lists that made “the ability to

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<sup>57</sup>Theodore Leinwand. Coppelia Kahn, Heather Nathans, and Mimi Godfrey, eds. *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance* (Newark, Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2011), 277.

<sup>58</sup> Coppelia Kahn. Coppelia Kahn, Heather Nathans, and Mimi Godfrey, eds. *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance* (Newark, Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>59</sup> Denise Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 5.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

demonstrate knowledge of Shakespeare inseparable from collegiate-level literacy,” and therefore made understanding of his works a necessary component of education for any student who was college-bound.<sup>61</sup> As increasing numbers of students throughout the twentieth century turned their sights toward a college education, an increasing number of students engaged in compulsory reading of Shakespeare in secondary school as a means of preparing for that college education.

Other scholars trace the history of Shakespeare in American education to earlier points in time. After all, Shakespeare’s plays only found their way onto College Entrance Examination Board reading lists because they were already considered important and necessary elements of a well-rounded education by the beginning of the twentieth century. It was Shakespeare’s role as “a key figure in the elocutionary movement that shaped American education throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,” that initially secured his position as a staple of American education.<sup>62</sup> Oratorical manuals used in the classroom provided segments from Shakespeare’s plays as “models of eloquence and persuasive power.”<sup>63</sup> Speeches from Shakespeare’s plays were often printed out of context, selected not for their dramatic merits, but because the compilers of these oratorical lesson books believed that the selected texts were somehow useful to ordinary Americans. In this way, these

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<sup>61</sup> Denise Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 68.

<sup>62</sup> Coppélia Kahn. Coppélia Kahn, Heather Nathans, and Mimi Godfrey, eds. *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance* (Newark, Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

educational materials “allowed his texts to become a kind of palimpsest upon which Americans continually reinscribed new notions of identity and belonging.”<sup>64</sup>

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century American classroom, that sense of “belonging” often translated into an education in assimilation into a predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture. Shakespeare’s plays were prescribed as a remedy for the increasing heterogeneity of the United States. A dominant belief during this period was that the basis of American democracy was to be found in its ‘Anglo-Saxon’ roots.”<sup>65</sup> All citizens, therefore, needed to be educated in Anglo-Saxon culture, and Shakespeare provided a useful tool for this education. At a time in which many Americans in leadership positions believed that the country would function best as a “melting pot,” Shakespeare was used as a means for ensuring that American citizens would have a shared cultural background. When Joseph Quincy Adams, Supervisor of Research for the new Folger Shakespeare Library gave his inaugural speech in 1932, he referred to immigration as “a menace to the preservation of our long-established English civilization.”<sup>66</sup> He believed that the benefit of Shakespeare was the playwright’s ability to serve as a cornerstone for “a homogenous nation, with a culture that is still essentially English,” although it was created from diverse immigrant populations.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Coppélia Kahn. Coppélia Kahn, Heather Nathans, and Mimi Godfrey, eds. *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance* (Newark, Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 82



Echoes of this rhetoric can be seen in the NEA's *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative. As articulated above, one of Gioia's driving forces to create a major Shakespeare performance initiative for the NEA was to conserve a part of American culture that he believes is being lost as Americans lose touch with their artistic heritage. As Americans' cultural tastes diversify (and, Gioia would argue, become more consumer driven and less inspired by a sense of "artistic excellence" as defined by those artists and critics within the authoritative restricted field of production), a major goal of the NEA is to help Americans maintain some sort of shared culture.<sup>68</sup> Shakespeare, whose longstanding and widespread presence in the field of American public education means that for generations Americans have had at least some familiarity with his plays, is an ideal source for the maintenance of a shared cultural experience. In the twenty-first century, no one would go so far as to suggest that the purpose of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative is to create a homogenous America in which diverse citizens are forced to embrace Shakespeare as a replacement for, rather than in addition to, their own particular cultural heritage. At any rate, the NEA could not achieve such a goal of assimilation even if it tried. As Coppelia Kahn states, "Shakespeare has been far less the cultural discipline than Adams thought it was, and far more a series of contestatory, innovative reinventions."<sup>69</sup> But one of the key goals of the NEA's big nationwide initiatives is to create a point of commonality, a cultural experience that is shared by

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<sup>68</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>69</sup> Coppélia Kahn. Coppélia Kahn, Heather Nathans, and Mimi Godfrey, eds. *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance* (Newark, Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2011), 22.

all Americans. In the twenty-first century Shakespeare still appears to be the best conduit for achieving that shared cultural touchstone.

Of course, Shakespeare's prominent position in American education creates a contradiction for Gioia and the NEA. Gioia and his team at the NEA developed the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative because they "saw Shakespeare as an attractive and powerful foundation for theatrical touring and for arts education."<sup>70</sup> According to Gioia, "the infrastructure exists" in the United States to easily produce Shakespeare's plays. Gioia's goals of creating a sense of shared artistic culture for Americans and making art forms that were perceived as elite accessible to the masses could have been achieved by presenting the works of other playwrights. Gioia has named some of these other playwrights in interviews: Eugene O'Neill, August Wilson, Sophocles, Moliere. But "it just couldn't have been done" with these playwrights because they are not already an ingrained part of the American education and arts system.<sup>71</sup> The NEA was "lucky that there's a whole national infrastructure of Shakespeare festivals, Shakespeare theatres, or repertory theatres that regularly produce Shakespeare" that the Endowment could use to support its mission.<sup>72</sup> Shakespeare was, anecdotally, "the only dramatist that was still more or less universally taught in American schools,"<sup>73</sup> in the first decade of the twenty-first century, which is one of the primary reasons why the NEA was encouraged to create

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<sup>70</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

a Shakespeare initiative in the first place. The NEA leadership suspected that an initiative bringing Shakespeare performances to schools would be widely supported, as Shakespeare was being taught in so many classrooms already. This initiative would build on, or at least connect to, what students were already being taught.

Furthermore, according to various scholars, and to Gioia himself, Shakespeare is also self-perpetuating within the context of American education. “The beauty of Shakespeare is that Shakespeare is universally known, universally admired, and my experience as a teacher is that kids like Shakespeare,” Gioia stated as a reason for choosing Shakespeare for his signature initiative.<sup>74</sup> Gioia also claims that there are “tens of thousands of English teachers in [American] high schools who love literature and they have deep relationships with the writers they teach and they’re devoted to Shakespeare—other writers, too—and they’ve been fighting to protect him in order to create that encounter. And they also know that students like him.”<sup>75</sup> Denise Albanese, too, argues that to some extent Shakespeare remains a part of the standard high school curriculum because it has been there throughout institutional memory. She suggests that “it seems likely that literary aesthetics and standards of taste are themselves formed in relation to the Shakespearean, rather than having an independent and abstract life as arbiters of Shakespeare’s quality.”<sup>76</sup> Another example of this idea comes from an essay by scholar Elizabeth Renker in which she writes, “Discussions among educators from grade school through college level during the years of my

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<sup>74</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Denise Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 79.

study about how to teach Shakespeare typically share one large assumption: that “Shakespeare” was, and ought to be, a curricular given, and that the only active question was that of pedagogy.<sup>77</sup> In other words, Shakespeare was already being widely produced and taught throughout the country at the time the NEA began *Shakespeare in American Communities* in 2003.

Yet in order to make its Shakespeare initiative seem necessary, and to convince Americans that it was a productive use of taxpayer money, the NEA had to downplay the very Shakespeare infrastructure out of which it created and supported its project. The NEA had to utilize that infrastructure, while at the same time convincing the American public that Shakespeare was in danger of disappearing from school curriculums and was inaccessible for students in much of the country.

Although he has no data to back up this claim, Gioia cites anecdotal evidence to suggest that Shakespeare was in danger of losing his place in the academic canon.

“When I was becoming chairman and I began talking to school administrators and high school teachers, I learned that many states were in the process of dropping Shakespeare from the high school requirements. Shakespeare was the last playwright universally taught in American high schools, and I looked on that as a kind of sign that Shakespeare in a sense was the last beachhead of culture and if we could not defend that then we were in trouble, we would lose our whole historical consciousness about the development of arts and ideas. And I do believe that launching a program of this size and this quality helped keep Shakespeare in the high

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<sup>77</sup> Elizabeth Renker. Coppélia Kahn, Heather Nathans, and Mimi Godfrey, eds. *Shakespearean Educations: Power, Citizenship, and Performance* (Newark, Delaware: Delaware University Press, 2011), 151.

school curriculum. Now, that is a claim I cannot back factually, but certainly I can back it anecdotally because I knew that a lot of states were considering dropping it, and I don't believe that ultimately any of them did,"<sup>78</sup> Gioia said in a 2011 interview. Opining the state of theatre and literature education in the United States, Gioia said, "Now, obviously, you'd want [students] to be doing everything from Sophocles to August Wilson but you gotta begin somewhere and we're losing the whole field."<sup>79</sup> Although Gioia and the NEA took advantage of what he admits is a fairly robust infrastructure for the production of Shakespeare's plays, he simultaneously suggests that the very infrastructure on which the Endowment based the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative was on the decline.

How could the NEA rationalize insisting that Shakespeare needed to be supported when, in fact, Shakespeare's relative prominence in the United States was a key force in choosing the playwright to anchor a national program in the first place? Perhaps the key lies in Gioia's understanding of culture and his self-defined populist/elitist label. True, most students across the country would experience compulsory exposure to Shakespeare's plays at some point in their educational career. However, Gioia would argue that most were not seeing live productions, and certainly not live *professional* productions. Therefore, while all students might study Shakespeare in their classrooms, not everyone, or even many, would understand or appreciate him. Without the NEA to help promote understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare through the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative,

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<sup>78</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Shakespeare would continue to be appreciated only by America's artistic elites. It is not enough merely to study Shakespeare, one must understand and, ideally, enjoy his works in order to return to Gioia's (imagined) golden age in which Americans were culturally literate.

Thus, under Gioia's leadership, the NEA styled itself as an arts education advocate. Although the NEA holds a privileged and influential position within the field of arts production, under Gioia the Endowment began to diversify. "I felt that if you could make it a program that was both an artistic program and an arts education program, you could really have an important impact on American culture," Gioia said when discussing the decision to create and market the Shakespeare Toolkits, the educational materials that have now reached almost 25 million American students.<sup>80</sup> Gioia saw a need for the NEA to focus on the role of arts in the American classroom at a time when arts programs for schools are often being cut due to budget constraints and increased focus on standardized testing and science, technology, and math initiatives. The United States "does not have visible effective advocates for arts and arts education. We have a lot of people [advocating for the arts] locally, but on a national level we don't have these people that really throw themselves into it. We have somebody who will give a speech once every two years or whatever, but really going there, walking the corridors of power, both in the public and in the private

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<sup>80</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

sector, we have very few of those people. And we need more of them,”<sup>81</sup> Gioia believes.

It is also important to note that, just as promoting a Shakespeare program was in some ways a “safe” move for the NEA that would shore up its damaged reputation, taking on the label of arts education advocate in general could help to secure the Endowment’s future. Just as the NEA had partnered with the Department of Defense to fund the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, Gioia also began a partnership with the Department of Education in 2004 to “provide model programs and guidance to teachers, parents, school boards, and districts” on methods for teaching the arts and development of effective arts curricula.<sup>82</sup> Education grants dominated NEA financing for much of Gioia’s tenure, most notably from 2003 through 2005. During Gioia’s first year as chairman, spending on arts education grants increased by 49 percent.<sup>83</sup> These education grants benefitted American citizens, who did need advocates for the arts. Perhaps more so, however, they benefitted the NEA, which could now be viewed as a team player with another federal agency and which would now be seen no longer as a funder of controversial art projects, but a leader in children’s education.

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<sup>81</sup> Dana Gioia, interview by author, Chevy Chase, Maryland, May 9, 2011.

<sup>82</sup> Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior and Related Agencies U.S. House of Representatives, 108th Cong. (2004) (statement of Dana Gioia) (LEXIS).

<sup>83</sup> Robin Pogrebin and Jo Craven McGinty, "For New Leader of the Arts Endowment, Lessons From a Shaky Past," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2009, late edition.

This shift towards arts education advocacy can be seen in the NEA's official mission statement. This statement changes periodically, typically with each new chairperson, to reflect the primary goals of the NEA during a particular time period. In 2003 when Dana Gioia began his chairmanship, the mission statement read, "The mission of the National Endowment for the Arts is to enrich our nation and its diverse cultural heritage by supporting works of artistic excellence, advancing learning in the arts, and strengthening the arts in communities throughout the country."<sup>84</sup> By 2008, the year before Gioia retired as chair, the mission statement read, "The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts, both new and established, bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education."<sup>85</sup> The changes are small, but distinctive. Both mission statements speak of supporting artistic excellence, but where the 2003 mission statement speaks of strengthening the arts in communities, the 2008 mission statement speaks specifically of bringing art to all Americans. It also makes a point of emphasizing "established" arts as one of its missions, demonstrating to both artists and conservative senators that it is no longer primarily in the business of funding new works. Where the 2003 mission statement speaks vaguely of "advancing learning in the arts," the 2009 mission statement directly announces that the NEA will provide "leadership in arts education."

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<sup>84</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Endowment for the Arts Announces Start-Studded 'Players' Guild' for Shakespeare in American Communities," Newsroom, last modified October 9, 2003, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news03/Guild.html>.

<sup>85</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Endowment for the Arts Announces 2008-2009 Shakespeare for a New Generation Grant," Newsroom, last modified April 23, 2008, <http://www.arts.gov/news/news08/Shakespeare.html>.



This 2009 mission statement reflects Gioia's understanding of culture and how it influenced the NEA's projects under his leadership. It tells its audience that Gioia's NEA will bring excellence in the arts to all Americans, effectively making the elite accessible and, ideally, popular. It tells Americans that we should not constantly seek new art forms, but instead look backward to our shared cultural history, conserving that which has come before to give us knowledge of an idealized past. Finally, it reminds Americans that the NEA intends to play a role as influencer not only in the arts community, but in American education as well.

## *Epilogue*

The *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative marked its tenth anniversary in 2013. Since 2003, 94 theatre companies have received grants to participate in the program. These companies have presented 30 of Shakespeare's plays. The data compiled by the NEA over the ten-year history of the program shows that approximately 7,000 performances have taken place as part of the initiative, and 17,000 educational activities have been presented to students. The initiative has reached all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands. More than 5,500 schools and 2,800 communities across the United States have participated in the program.<sup>1</sup>

In 2005, during the initiative's second full year of operations, Gioia proudly told a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor*, "Both our National Council and our congressional subcommittee have asked us to make this a permanent program, and I am happy to oblige."<sup>2</sup> Critics of the NEA, however, were not sure that *Shakespeare in American Communities* would be beneficial as a permanent program. In 2009 Robert L. Lynch, president of the lobbying group Americans for the Arts, said that while he admired Gioia's effort to create a better public image for the Endowment through the Shakespeare initiative, such programs are, "not necessarily a long-term strategy."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, when I spoke with David Fraher, Director of Arts Midwest, and his Deputy

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<sup>1</sup> "About the Program," National Endowment for the Arts Presents Shakespeare in American Communities, accessed January 31, 2013, <http://www.shakespeareinamericancommunities.org/about>.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Campbell, "Shakespeare is Coming Your Way," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 19, 2005, page 11.

<sup>3</sup> Robin Pogrebin and Jo Craven McGinty, "For New Leader of the Arts Endowment, Lessons From a Shaky Past," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2009, late edition.

Director, Susan Chandler, in the summer of 2011, both informed me that the NEA would soon be accepting grant applications for the 2012-2013 season, which was to be *Shakespeare in American Communities*' last.

Although the NEA's budget had increased under Gioia's chairmanship, it could not withstand the global financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 unscathed. Government payrolls are always slow to catch up to nationwide trends, but by 2011 the NEA was beginning to feel the pinch of the recession. The NEA's budget was cut by 13 million dollars from 2010 to 2011, and an additional 8 million dollars were cut for fiscal year 2012. Although the fiscal year 2012 budget was still 30 million dollars higher than it had been when Gioia began his chairmanship in 2003, it had fallen 20 million dollars from its high point of 167 million in 2010.<sup>4</sup> With the budget decrease, the NEA began to explore different ways to use its available funds. Chandler explained that Gioia's successor, theatre producer Rocco Landesman, had "a different set of priorities and a different set of issues" that he was interested in pursuing, and that *Shakespeare in American Communities* was no longer to be a "high priority."<sup>5</sup> With every change in administration, NEA programs come and go, and it seemed in 2011 that *Shakespeare in American Communities* was to be no exception.

Yet a visit to the *Shakespeare in American Communities* website in February of 2013 revealed a button in the lower right-hand corner of the computer screen that says "2013-2014 Request for Proposals Now Available." A click on the button takes one to a page announcing a February 21, 2013 deadline by which to submit proposals

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<sup>4</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Endowment for the Arts Appropriation History," About Us, accessed February 2, 2013, <http://www.arts.gov/about/Budget/AppropriationsHistory.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Chandler, telephone interview by author, June 29, 2011.

for plays to tour the United States from August 2013 until June 2014. This indicates that the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative will continue for at least one more season. According to Arts Midwest Deputy Director Susan Chandler, the congressional appropriations committee specifically asked that the initiative continue, proving that the initiative remains popular with congress. Perhaps it does indeed have the long-term staying power Gioia envisioned when he and his team kicked off the program a decade ago.

When most NEA chairmen are quick to develop their own special initiatives and allow past projects to fade, why did Gioia's successor, Rocco Landesman, allow Gioia's signature initiative to continue throughout his tenure as chair? Perhaps it is because Landesman ultimately developed initiatives that were not that different from Gioia's. For example, under Landesman's tenure the NEA continued to collaborate with the Department of Defense. The *NEA/Walter Reed Healing Arts Partnership* began in 2011 to provide music and writing therapy for U.S. military troops. The program was "inspired by the NEA's acclaimed program *Operation Homecoming: Writing the Wartime Experience*," a program begun when Dana Gioia was NEA Chair.<sup>6</sup> The *Blue Star Museums Program* is another initiative funded through a partnership with the Department of Defense. Through this program, begun in 2012, the NEA enables museums to offer free admission to active duty military personnel and their families each summer. NEA's *Our Town* initiative, one of Landesman's signature programs, provides grants to communities across the United States to use

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<sup>6</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "NEA/Walter Reed Healing Arts Partnership," National Initiatives, accessed February 4, 2013, <http://www.nea.gov/national/walter-reed/index.html>.

“arts to shape their social, physical, and economic characters.”<sup>7</sup> This is yet another initiative that seems to be heavily inspired by the *Shakespeare in American Communities* model: the program aims to have a nation-wide reach, provides almost half of its grants to small communities that can be described as under-served by the arts, and builds on an existing infrastructure rather than creating brand new projects. All *Our Town* grants are “made to partnerships that consisted of a minimum of a not-for-profit organization and a local government entity,” allowing the NEA to take advantage of places where some amount of funding already exists, enabling the Endowment to provide less money per grant but more grants overall.<sup>8</sup> In addition to continuing the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, Landesman’s NEA also continued to fund Gioia’s successful *Poetry Out Loud* and *The Big Read*, and although Landesman attempted to eliminate the NEA Jazz Masters Fellowships and the NEA’s National Heritage Fellowships, both were restored by Congress.<sup>9</sup> During his tenure Landesman made attempts to restore grants to individual artists, but he was unsuccessful. His greatest success as NEA chairman was arguably his choice to put “a finer point on the idea of art as economic driver” and engage in work that “deepened

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<sup>7</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Endowment for the Arts Announces 2012 Our Town Grant Recipients," Newsroom, last modified July 12, 2012, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news12/Our-Town-announcement.html>.

<sup>8</sup> National Endowment for the Arts, "National Endowment for the Arts Announces 2012 Our Town Grant Recipients," Newsroom, last modified July 12, 2012, <http://www.nea.gov/news/news12/Our-Town-announcement.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Lonnae O'Neal Parker, "Head of National Endowment for the Arts Gets Mostly Rave Reviews as He Exits the Stage," *The Washington Post*, December 27, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/head-of-national-endowment-for-the-arts-gets-mostly-rave-reviews-as-he-exits-the-stage/2012/12/27/b220149c-4ab2-11e2-b709-667035ff9029\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/head-of-national-endowment-for-the-arts-gets-mostly-rave-reviews-as-he-exits-the-stage/2012/12/27/b220149c-4ab2-11e2-b709-667035ff9029_story.html).

and leveraged ties with other federal agencies and found new private sector money.”<sup>10</sup> In that, too, he continued in a similar vein to Gioia, bringing funding to the arts from agencies such as the Department of Defense and the Department of Housing and Urban Development. After stating upon his appointment in 2009 that he intended to serve only one term as chairman of the NEA, Landesman did exactly that, announcing his retirement in November of 2012.<sup>11</sup>

While Landesman leaves behind an NEA in which the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative is still going strong, it remains to be seen whether the program is accepting applications for the 2013-2014 school year only because Landesman did not prioritize defunding it during his chairmanship and it now makes sense to carry on with the current state of affairs until a new chairman can be appointed, or whether the initiative has proven so successful that it will be able to continue under a third chairman. If it does, such a long-lasting NEA initiative will surely be, if not unprecedented, certainly rare. Despite the fact that the NEA is intended to be a nonpartisan agency, few programs continue through two administrations, much less three or more.

### ***The Conversation About the NEA: 2013***

Throughout the 2012 presidential election campaign, Republican candidate Mitt Romney’s stump speeches promised vast reductions in federal spending and a

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> As of this writing in 2013, a new NEA Chairman has not been appointed to replace Landesman. Currently, Joan Shigekawa is the acting chairman. She had served as the senior deputy chairman of the NEA since 2009.

balanced budget. When reporters would ask him for a list of programs he would cut to make his budget balance, Romney would first mention “Obamacare” and then rattle off a list of other subsidies he wished to end: “the Amtrak subsidy, the PBS subsidy, the subsidy for the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities...”<sup>12</sup> Once again, the NEA found itself on the national stage on the metaphorical chopping block. Despite Dana Gioia’s effort to secure the NEA’s position in American culture, conservatives continue to use the Endowment as a handy example of government excess. Yet a careful look at Romney’s rhetoric shows that the conversation has changed, at least somewhat. “Some of these things, like those endowment efforts and PBS I very much appreciate and like what they do in many cases, but I just think they have to stand on their own rather than receiving money borrowed from other countries, as our government does on their behalf,” Romney said.<sup>13</sup> In the heyday of the culture wars, few Republican politicians would have confessed to appreciating or liking the NEA. In 2012, however, Romney felt the need to clarify his position to make it clear that he would not choose to cut funding to the NEA because he felt it was elite, or out of touch, or vulgar, or controversial. These words no longer dominate descriptions of the NEA. Instead, the Endowment is described as liked and appreciated, and the worst Romney could bring himself to say about it was that it would be better for it to be funded by private donations. It is small praise, but it is perhaps a step toward fiscal stability for the NEA. In 2009 Rocco

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<sup>12</sup> Emily Yahr, "Mitt Romney Says He Would Cut Federal Funding for PBS to Trim Budget," *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2012, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/tv-column/post/mitt-romney-says-he-would-cut-federal-funding-for-pbs-to-trim-budget/2012/08/16/8af3bd22-e7b3-11e1-936a-b801f1abab19\\_blog.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/tv-column/post/mitt-romney-says-he-would-cut-federal-funding-for-pbs-to-trim-budget/2012/08/16/8af3bd22-e7b3-11e1-936a-b801f1abab19_blog.html).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Landesman felt confident enough to state, "I think the culture war stuff is receding in history and people are focusing on much more important issues."<sup>14</sup> With praise from the right, however, comes criticism from other venues. A common theme in arts circles in 2013 is that the NEA has been "neutered."<sup>15</sup> Gioia's NEA was often accused of pandering to conservatives and not providing enough support for artists. The "current NEA hodgepodge of conservative-appeasement programs is nonsensical. Should an arts endowment really be funding programs that encourage citizens to read?" scoffed art critic Christopher Knight in a 2009 editorial.<sup>16</sup>

It seems that the NEA may never be able to free itself from this tightrope, hanging precariously in the balance between primarily-liberal artists who feel that it is not doing enough to meet their needs and primarily-conservative critics who feel that it does far too much, and much of what it does is controversial. The Endowment may be doomed to be forever caught in a tug-of-war between those who believe that it falls woefully short of the funding amount needed to support a true national arts agency, and those who believe that any government spending on something as seemingly-frivolous as the arts is too much.

With the NEA so embattled, is it any wonder that a program like the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative came into existence? Gioia

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<sup>14</sup> David Ng, "NEA's Rocco Landesman: No More Culture Wars," *L.A. Times Blogs*, last modified October 21, 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/10/neas-rocco-landesman-downplays-partisan-fighting-emphasizes-optimism.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Knight, "Can Rocco Landesman Make the NEA Relevant Again?" editorial, *Los Angeles Times*, May 13, 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2009/05/can-rocco-landesman-make-the-nea-relevant-again.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



promoted the initiative as a means of teaching Americans what they must know about culture in order to be well-informed citizens. The initiative drew its inspiration from a long history of Shakespeare's use in the classroom as a tool for teaching American values and disseminating cultural capital, and it was intended to encourage its participants to believe that they could all find common ground in a shared cultural connection to Shakespeare. *Shakespeare in American Communities* was also intended to create an audience for the arts and encourage the return of Shakespeare and other classical authors pop culture. Whether or not the initiative was at all successful on this front remains to be seen. The first students to participate in the initiative are now in their late twenties. As the millions of students who participated in this initiative reach adulthood, will they become arts advocates? Will theatre companies across the nation see a bump in audience numbers as the *Shakespeare in American Communities* generation ages? Will the dozens of small Shakespeare companies sustained in part by a yearly NEA grant be able to continue their work and thrive if the *Shakespeare in American Communities* grants cease to exist? My dissertation has explored the congressional and media response to the initiative, but the response of students, teachers, and artists at the local level still needs to be studied if we wish to get a sense of the full impact of the initiative.

Ultimately, only time will tell if the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative had long-term benefits for the American public. It is already clear, however, that the initiative had immediate benefits for the NEA. The debate on government support for the arts in the United States seems far from a resolution, but thanks in large part to Gioia's signature initiative, the NEA has strengthened its position in that

debate. As a direct result of the *Shakespeare in American Communities* initiative, the NEA has broadened its scope and reach. The Endowment is now an agency with the perceived ability to cooperate with other federal agencies to create programs that benefit both organizations. It has successfully pitched itself as an advocate for arts education, strengthening its mission on the basis that it now serves an educational as well as artistic role. By deliberately reaching out to military families, rural, and disadvantaged communities, it has branded itself as an agency that can have an influence on Americans from all walks of life, not just artists and urban elites. All of these things have served to improve the NEA's reputation, diversify its perceived purpose, and ensure that it can continue to play a role in the field of artistic production in America for the foreseeable future. While suggesting that it was funding the biggest American Shakespeare tour of all time to benefit all of us, the NEA was also benefitting itself.

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