VITAL SIGNS:
PEOPLE'S THEATER
FESTIVAL & AMERICAN
WRITERS CONGRESS
1: LEARNING FROM CALIFORNIA

The People's Theater Festival (PTF) held in San Francisco, CA, September 20 - 27, was the Gathering and the Alternate Roots annual meeting, were covered in NAPNOC notes #15.)

This fact -- that the PTF was one of a national round of meetings -- did not go unremarked by participants. A number of Gathering participants were there, and that helped people talk about the need for future national meetings -- and to put the PTF in a new light as a regional component of an increasingly coherent national movement.

Perhaps because we were conscious of the PTF's place in this movement -- and perhaps because California (trite as it sounds) can offer us a glimpse of what's next -- we feel there are lessons to be learned from the Festival that have implications for the movement as a whole.

The first five days of the PTF featured performances, mostly in the evenings; the workshops and discussions were concentrated in the final weekend. So the first discussion on the role and purpose of the Festival was a special meeting for participants held toward the end of the week.

Some of the issues discussed were internal to the Festival: should a more collective and democratic form of organization be used to develop subsequent versions of the 4-year-old Festival? Recent PTF's have been largely the work of Bob Martin, and the first few festivals were organized by him and Susan Hoffman (now directing the People's Theater Coalition, also in San Francisco), then graduate students at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

A Familiar Issue

This issue of individual initiative versus group action will not be unfamiliar to notes readers. In northern California's busy and crowded theater community -- with its acute consciousness of "process" -- this conflict is played out again and again. For whatever reasons (impatience with sometimes time-consuming participatory, democratic forms is common), a community project becomes an entrepreneurial activity -- someone's personal project.

(continued on page four--)

NEW THEATER OF CUBA

Editors' note: Cricket Parmalee recently returned from three weeks in Cuba as part of a delegation of Latin American theater workers in the United States. She sent us a copy of the following report on that visit, saying that if we thought it was interesting, "maybe you could circulate it." We found it very interesting indeed, and hope readers will too.

In late August, thirty of us went to Cuba for three weeks of interchange about progressive theatre in the United States and Cuba. Our group was made up of theatre workers representing different Latino peoples theatre groups from around the country and Puerto Rico, plus a few representatives of the larger people's theatre movement, like myself from the Provisional Theatre of Los Angeles. The trip was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and several other Cuban cultural organizations (Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos, Casa de las Americas, and Conjunto, the Cuban theatre magazine). It was organized on this end by El Teatro de la Esperanza of Santa Barbara, and Teatro 4 from New York.

The Tour

'The Buck Stops Here'

For whatever reasons (impatience with sometimes time-consuming participatory, democratic forms is common), a community project becomes an entrepreneurial activity -- someone's personal project.

(continued on page four--)

INSIDE:
NATIONWIDE GARAGE SALE & A D.C. UPDATE

NAPNOC notes is published by the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee (NAPNOC). Copyrighted articles may not be reprinted without permission of the author(s); other material may be reprinted so long as proper credit is given to the authors and notes. Signed articles represent the views of their authors and not necessarily of NAPNOC.

NAPNOC welcomes comments, letters and suggestions for articles. Please put NAPNOC on your organization's mailing list. Please address all correspondence to NAPNOC, P.O. Box 11440, Baltimore, MD 21239, or telephone 301/727-6776. NAPNOC notes is co-edited by Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard.
Whether others are satisfied with the final outcome of the project or not, this style of organization is likely to be an issue. Reliably, the entrepreneurial organizer will feel isolated, unsupported and insufficiently appreciated for such commitment and effort. And equally reliably, others will feel squeezed out -- that there is no place for their own efforts and initiatives, that they have no personal stake in the event. This is complicated by the fact that organizers sometimes find themselves occupying the entrepreneurial role not by choice, but by default, as it seems others will not come forward to take on their share of responsibility.

These are the kinds of organization conflicts that arise again and again in the neighborhood arts movement -- and all too often worthwhile projects can bog down in them. A couple of years ago we wrote a case-study dealing with this problem, and would gladly share it with notes readers. (NAPNOC members can write for a free copy of "The Entrepreneurial Organization: On Dialogue and Community Organizations"; nonmembers should send $2 per copy to cover the cost of copying and postage.)

What People Want

PTF participants had plenty to talk about besides the organization of the Festival itself. In nearly four hours of meeting, members of the performing companies in the festivals came together with people offering workshops or leading discussions to develop a yard-long list of their expectations for future regional meetings and festivals.

Many of these expectations will also be familiar: 'A chance to show work and get feedback, and to see others' work...a place to develop working contacts...to have structured opportunities for criticism...to break down isolation and build a sense of the larger movement...to contribute to building progressive culture...to address problems of reaching audiences, working with various communities, building alliances with other progressive groups...to document work...to provide workshops, training, skill exchanges and not only theory and discussion of abstract ideas...to serve as a basis for cooperative touring, to begin by having companies host each other...to achieve a balance between participants' exchange with each other and broader contacts with community audiences...to develop a strong basis for national cooperation and exchange...'

In other words, PTF participants expressed their desire for the same kinds of help and cooperation we've heard people discuss across the country these last few months: help in honing their skills and improving their work -- through practical workshops and the opportunity to give and receive criticism; the chance to think and talk together about the direction progressive cultural work is taking, and then to take cooperative action; the help of their peers in working through the problems of surviving and building good relationships with their communities; and the chance to feel and be a part of a larger movement. These describe the most important tasks facing the entire neighborhood arts movement right now, not just performing groups.

What People Will Give

When it came to talking about what people felt they could contribute, besides their own presence, to making their expectations real, the list was much shorter. The PTF, like most gatherings of neighborhood arts people, has been largely grant-supported.

People have serious (and probably well-founded) doubts about the future of grant support -- and some have reservations about relying on outside sources to provide the opportunity to meeting and work together. But virtually every PTC participant we spoke with, especially those based in the San Francisco Bay Area, offered us a variation on a single theme: 'my group's work is so all-consuming, we really haven't got time to take on outside activities.'

This conflict has always made neighborhood arts organizing difficult, but the fear now is that it will make it impossible. Few groups want to undo the expansion -- in budgets, staff, in output -- that they've achieved in recent years. But supporting an expanded program with a shrinking grants pool means redoubling efforts at fundraising, regardless of what fundraising targets and goals might be. There's an unfortunate irony in this situation: just at the moment that neighborhood arts groups needed to share and cooperate, their concentration on their individual needs and problems makes cooperation most difficult.

Public Issues and Private Troubles

While in California for the PTF we visited with a number of other neighborhood arts groups in the region; they're facing some of the same problems we've seen in other regions this year. Neighborhood arts groups in CA find it hard to confront and deal with growing external obstacles to their work: cuts in government funding, a failing economy, a future uncertain in every respect.

Sometimes, if people are unable to confront these obstacles -- if the enormity and seriousness of these problems is just too daunting -- they are trapped into acting out a kind of surrogate drama in which interpersonal conflicts stand in for external problems which seem to big to attack. The only antidote we know is to become conscious of what's happening. Have the last few months meant more fights among your group's members? Has everyone come to feel that one or two people in the group are at the root of your difficulties? Do you find yourself spending endless hours talking over the small details or disagreements or grudges within your organization?

If the answer to any of these questions is yes, try looking outside. Is anxiety about money growing? Does the future seem too scary to talk about? Perhaps your group is acting out -- inside, where it's safer -- its members' fears about the outside world and the future of their work.
This is a sure way to defeat yourself. Try to sort out the public issues from the private troubles before it's too late.

Politics and Experimentation

The other ground for debate at PTF was political and aesthetic at once. The final panel discussion of the Festival -- and by far the best-attended -- featured eight people, half of them politically radical and committed to theater which communicates a political vision, the other half more interested in formal experimentation than political messages -- not that the lines are so clearly drawn.

In making an effort to be cooperative, most panelists hastened to draw a connection between these two tendencies. Performance artist George Coates pointed out that both political and what he called "sensory" theater are aimed at shaping people's perceptions -- and neither theater has the money or other tools needed to achieve a mass effect.

Carlos Baron of Teatro Latino said that everyone must come to a position in life, and one's work always reflects that. Doug Paterson of the Dakota Theatre Caravan supported Baron by stating, "All culture is political and has a point of view...it is not just what is said that's important, but what's not said as well." Doug went on to add that this is not simply a question of the content of a piece, "but who it's for." Coates responded that "performance art is political because it encourages freedom of imagination."

Solo performer Bob Carroll asserted, "Theater is basically political; the rest of the world wouldn't doubt it...the Right thinks culture is important; it's only the Left which makes this argument possible."

Joan Holden of the San Francisco Mime Troupe disagreed, saying, "Critics and professors create this dichotomy...The greatest praise the Mime Troupe can get from reviewers is that it's good despite its politics."

At that point Ronnie Davis, a founder of the Mime Troupe, rose from the audience to speak for a collaboration between the formal experimenters and political theaters, a notion seconded (with some reservations) by all the panelists -- until Chris Hardman of Antenna noted that the audience for experimental theater is even smaller than for political theater. "But," said Joan Holden, "there is an enormous audience for theater that is passionate, experimental, with good content." Carlos Baron noted that the incredible risk-taking of artists in South America -- and the response to it -- were ample evidence of that.

When the conversation turned to funding, the sense of rivalry between these two camps moved to the fore. George Coates said that the "political theater groups are much further ahead in terms of funding sympathy," and the political theater people responded by noting that the formal experimenters can get more support from high arts patrons and institutions. Then Bob Martin spoke up from the audience to say there are "lots of boats out there. All of us doing 'different' work (that is, different from conventional theater) are in the same boat...."

Some Basic Questions

This discussion went on well past the time allotted for it, a sense of impending explosion pervasive throughout. But what was it about?

There seemed to be two serious questions at stake, though neither was asked or answered explicitly: First, there was the question of unity and difference. Is it useful to make an issue of difference? Why is it important? Why bother? Clearly, all the panelists would have thought it silly to conduct a screaming argument over the superiority of their own artistic and political choices; but was it silly to hold the discussion at all?

The second question was on the artist's political responsibility. All the panelists conceded there were political implications to their work. Carlos Baron told a story of how a performance piece without any political intention resulted in a passionate political response from his audience. By and large, the experimenters with form felt this political element to be a kind of wild card, an unintended by-product of their artistic choices, while the political theater people felt it was their duty to have and act on political intention in their work.

We came away from this discussion thinking how important it is for neighborhood artists to give this last question serious consideration -- to think and talk and write about it. If you would like to make a contribution to this debate, please send your thoughts -- any length, so long as they're legible -- to NAPNOC notes, and share them with people across the country.

People's Theater History

For us, the highlight of the Festival was a panel discussion among participants in the W.P.A. Federal Theater Project and the labor theater of the 1930s and '40s. Some of the panelists hadn't seen each other in twenty years, so it was a kind of reunion as well.

The panelists spoke of the camaraderie of the period and the Federal Theater Project's veneration of their good fortune at having the opportunity to work fulltime in the theater, a profession that even in prosperous times seldom provides its members with fulltime employment. As young actors, the FTP panelists had been able to study -- in one case for a full year prior to public performance -- and to work with older, more experienced actors, on stage and off.

They also told stories of formidable bureaucracy, of censorship, of insensitive direction from distant decision-makers -- and of how the FTP companies played to larger and more diverse audiences, a production of T.S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral" playing to "a theater full of working people." One panelist told how the project in Los Angeles maintained five theaters around the city; to find the huge audience this required, they began by giving tickets away in laundry bundles, and found that "few people had previously seen a real live play."
The labor theater vets were passionate about their experiences, telling stories of making theater about the most urgent issues of the day. One production was supported for three months in a commercial theater by prepaid block ticket sales to unions and community groups; after that time, it was able to run another six months on box office alone. This production was "Deep At The Roots," by the group Stage for Action, and concerned the homecoming to the still-feudal South of a black veteran. Despite this success, the labor theater of the period was destroyed by the witchhunt and its repercussions, just as reactionary politics and war preparations had stopped the WPA.

Naturally, panelists expressed regret that these progressive theater projects ended; most were bitter about the manner and abruptness with which that end came. But the big disappointment, shared by all the FTP participants who spoke, was this: they felt betrayed because the FTP did not continue and develop to realize their dream of a permanent national theater.

Will History Repeat Itself?

To the younger people in the audience, this feeling of betrayal seemed odd -- after all, the idea of a national theater is not longer a central concern for the panelists' present-day counterparts. But there's a parallel nonetheless: the FTP veterans felt that because of the success of the project the government should naturally want to formalize and extend it -- just as neighborhood arts people expected that CETA or other public funding would continue and expand, since it could clearly be demonstrated the money was well-spent.

The FTP people felt betrayed, yes; but when the project ended the war intervened and other concerns became more pressing -- including the necessity of earning a living. They were unable to find any community support -- for a progressive, community-based theater. Many of them went to work in other fields, and those who persevered had a hard row to hoe, and a lonely one. And when progressive theater began to bloom again in the 1960's, the young people involved had no real access to their predecessors -- and their own long, hard row ahead.

If government funding for neighborhood arts work ends, and a wave of reaction makes it difficult to produce work that is critical of the political status quo, will neighborhood arts people feel betrayed and unprepared, as did those '30s activists? Or is there time to learn a lesson that prevents history from repeating itself? What do you think?

Don Adams Arlene Goldbard
Contact Bob Martin and the People's Theater Festival at 676 9th Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94118 or call 415/387-2675.

**VITAL SIGNS** is continued on page seven with a story on the American Writers Congress.

---

**New Theater of Cuba** (continued from page 4)

Istry, etc. As much as we were eager to learn about them, they were eager to learn about us, since the U.S. blockade has left them knowing as little of us as we of them. We spent the days in meetings and discussions, and in the evenings we went to Havana for performances, or people came and performed for us at the camp. Some of the discussions focused around position papers from a major meeting of progressive Latin American theatre workers which had happened in Havana in June, and which will take place again in Nicaragua two years from now.

(We also did three days of construction work on a nearby school, visited museums, bookstores, the Coppelia Ice Cream Parlor, a model dairy, a collective farming community, a psychiatric hospital, the Tropicana Night Club, beaches with water that really looks like the travel posters, the Cinema Institute ICAIC, a children's theatre festival, the Havana Hilton -- now the Havana Libre, the mountains of Escambray, and also saw various music and dance events, the Bread and Puppet Theatre from the U.S., watched TV, played checkers, drank rum, fell in love, smoked cigars, and two of us got married. Among other things. But this report is about theatre, especially the New Theatre Movement, Teatro Nuevo.)

Beginning A New Theater

After the success of the revolution in Cuba in 1959, theatre went on, but no one knew quite what to do. Shakespeare, the classics, Ibsen and Chekov, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller -- these were done, and done well. But people working in theatre felt more and more aware of the distance of these works from the very exciting reality they were living in, and then, too, almost all the theatres in Havana were attended by only a very small fraction of the population. Theatre workers, although employed by the National Council of Culture, felt themselves to be falling behind the revolution rather than being part of it. The question was how to take part actively in the process of social transformation.

So in 1968, twelve actors and directors from different groups, some with many years of experience, joined together to form a group "para empezar de nuevo," to begin again. Asking themselves where shall we do theatre and for whom, they decided to move out of Havana to the mountain region of Escambray and make theatre which would be drawn very specifically from the lives and history of the people there, and performed for them. From this move and this approach came the beginning of what is called Teatro Nuevo, the New Cuban Theatre.

The purpose of the theatre of Grupo Teatro Escambray, and the many other groups which have sprung from it, is to directly serve the community (region, factory, etc.) that it is part of. In a country where resources are limited, and the contribution of each individual's labor is important, this idea of serving the community is not an abstraction. We know our community does come all that we need, including our livelihoods, and we repay it by doing theater that fills its needs.
A New Method

In the method developed by Teatro Escambray, the teatro nuevo groups do research, often with the help of a sociologist, and spend many hours doing interviews, analyzing discussions and even visiting "door-to-door," storing up a wealth of raw material -- stories, opinions, anecdotes -- from which plays are shaped around what the boundless source of material for theatre.

More and see the usefulness of its work, door, storing up a wealth of raw material discussions, and even visiting door-to-door, storing up a wealth of raw material -- stories, opinions, anecdotes -- from which plays are shaped around what the group determines are the most important or immediate problems. Once the initial plays are done and people come to trust the group more and see the usefulness of its work, people open up more and more, providing a boundless source of material for theatre.

Plays are sometimes written by specific authors, sometimes evolved collectively, but there is always a strong collective involvement in the realizing of the piece. A common form, developed out of Teatro Escambray's experiments, is a play which presents dramatistically many sides of a problem, but, rather than resolving it, at the height of the conflict opens itself up to the audience for intense and lengthy discussion. (Cubans love to talk about what interests them. Grupo Piños Nuevos, a theatre of young actors just finishing drama school who were sent to form a theatre on the Isle of Youth, the big island just south of Cuba where over 50,000 young people go to study, told us they knew they were on the right track when the discussions following their first piece often lasted three times as long as the piece itself.)

The interesting thing about this is that it really happens: the discussions happen, and they work. The plays, through their artistry, are able to frame complex problems clearly in a discussable way, and they provoke a dialogue which breaks down barriers and moves toward understanding and solutions. Because we were there in August, vacation time, we didn't get to see these groups performing for their home audiences, but the San Francisco Mime Troupe, which toured in Cuba last fall, saw Teatro Escambray doing their latest piece, Los Novios, The Sweethearts, about the young daughter of a Communist party functionary who gets pregnant, to her father's horror (what will the neighbors say?), and the Mime Troupe people said the discussion which followed was amazing.

Quality and Utility

This is mostly theatre being performed for people who previously didn't know theatre existed, but from what we saw it is theatre of high quality, using many different styles (realism being only one of them) to communicate, and always with the strong base of humor, rhythm, color, music, and the local language and way of speaking. The groups think of artistic quality and social usefulness as being inseparable, and that the stronger their work becomes artistically, the more effective it will be. Nor do they finish any play and then set it aside, but are continually working to find better ways to go about what they're doing.

Once Teatro Escambray was established, some of its members left to begin new groups, and other groups were set up by the Ministry of Culture where it felt there was a need, as with Piños Nuevos and the Isle of Youth. We spent time with this, and in most cases performances or excerpts of work by: Piños Nuevos; Cubana de Acero, which works in the steel plant of the same name, formerly American Steel; Cabildo Teatral Santiago, from Santiago de Cuba at the southeast end of the island, whose work shows the French and Haitian influence there; and Grupo Participación Popular, an amateur group from the port area of Havana.

Rather than being homogeneous, each group has its own regional character and flavor. One of the benefits of such localized work has been the revival and preservation of local folk forms, for instance storytelling and carnival traditions, as well as the research into and retelling of local history, both recent and long past. Cabildo from Santiago does plays about peasant and slave rebellions there in past centuries. One of Cubana de Acero's plays, Huelga, deals with a strike at the plant in the '30's; another, Mujer, is about when women first came to work at the plant in 1960-61.

We saw a group of drama students in Havana perform an early piece of Teatro Escambray's about counterrevolutionary struggles in the Escambray region in the early '60's. Because of the distance which already separated the students from that time and that reality, they chose to play all the action within the framework of a series of games. Presented as a graduation project, this production (directed by a woman from Cubana de Acero) was extremely well done. People were very excited about it, and the Ministry of Culture was as proud of it as many of the students as wished to form a new group next year in the province of Matanzas.

Live Among The People

One of the basic principles of teatro nuevo is this idea of convivencia, going to live among the people you will serve. Trairrd people forming or joining a professional group often come from other places, and many of the people we met had schedules where the group members would work together for three weeks, then spend one week visiting with their friends and relations, sometimes even spouses and children, elsewhere. This is a choice people will make to be able to do the work they want to do. At least the distances are not so great as to make it impossible, and the situation is so common that the group life is planned around it.

There are also flourishing amateur groups in the different regions, often helped by the professional groups. Grupo Participación Popular, for instance, from Havana's waterfront district, is led by a former member of Escambray, and their program lists everybody's full-time occupation (dockworker, secretary) next to their name. And teatro nuevo is only one of the approaches to theatre in Cuba, since conventional theatre ("Not commercial!") is still done in the cities. Teatro Estudio, for example, the original source of many of the founders of Escambray, is an excellent group still going strong in Havana. New plays are done, as well as the classics of different periods of Cuban drama and the rest of the world.
There are a number of beautiful theatres, new and old, in Havana, and ticket prices are cheap, but the audience for this kind of theatre is limited, and music events are a bigger draw. In the countryside, though, theatre is becoming a more popular form (in both senses of the word), and groups often perform outside in small villages with the help of lights hung from their portable scaffolding.

We also saw a great deal of children's theatre, with many different approaches. (As it happened, the very first thing we all saw together was a children's play that was as slick and cutesy and over-produced as anything you might see here. Everyone somewhat held their breath afterwards: So this is Cuban theatre? To our relief, the Cubans thought it was pretty awful too.) We saw a version of Little Red Riding Hood, African stories, plays that children had written and/or were performing themselves, and what turned out to be a delightful piece about one of those naughty rabbits found throughout world literature who insist on eating everybody else's lettuce. This rabbit was gently re-educated with a lot of enthusiastic help from the kids in the audience.

A startling thing about seeing theatre in Cuba, especially teatro nuevo because in some ways it is like work many of us are doing here, is the size of the groups. Escambray has around fifty people, actors, directors, writers, musicians, technicians, a gardener, drivers, two cooks, all living in a compound they built themselves; Cabildo has forty-five; they're mostly big. And the ages: people range from their early 20's on up into their 60's. Working together. And earning a living from it.

Important Work

It's oddly disconcerting to sit in an elegant theatre with carpets and chandeliers, as when one of the teatro nuevo groups comes to Havana to share its work, and see a large group of people, young ones and middles and silver-hairs, doing good theatre about issues that they (and you) think are important, theatre that is unpretentious, low key, colloquial, infectious, and often very well conceived of and done. Kind of challenges your notions of what's possible.

But then, Cuba in general...

They, by the way, think that what we are doing is very important. And, they say, perhaps ultimately the most difficult work of all.

Two informational footnotes:

1. We have articles (in Spanish) by and about the different groups and teatro nuevo in general. Write us and we will send you copies, for the printing and postage cost.

2. Grupo Teatro Escambray hopes to tour here for the first time this spring, probably on the West Coast and in New York. Write if you would like to know more, and by all means don't miss them.

Contact Cricket Parmalee at Provisional Theatre, 1816 N. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90027; (213) 664-1450.

NATIONWIDE GARAGE SALE

Los Angeles' Provisional Theatre is spearheading a coast-to-coast simultaneous garage sale on Sunday, November 1, to benefit Cherry Creek, the theater group in St. Peter, MN, that sponsored The Gathering (read about it in NAPNOC notes #15).

Cherry Creek went into debt to sponsor the nationwide national meeting and festival; notes readers will recall that a smear campaign by a far-Right group seriously damaged the company's ability to raise funds from local foundations and businesses. Because The Gathering was such an important event for the neighborhood arts movement, many of the participants feel a responsibility to help Cherry Creek back into the black.

When last we heard from Provisional, garage sales were planned for Washington, DC, Cincinnati, OH, Ann Arbor, MI, and Los Angeles, CA -- and other fundraising events are scheduled to take place in Minneapolis, MN and Milwaukee, WI. By now, it's likely that other cities have scheduled sales and benefits.

Provisional Theatre is assuming the role of "Central Command." As each garage sale or other benefit is brought to a close, the sponsors will call Provisional's office in Los Angeles to report the total of money raised, and Provisional will follow up by keeping Cherry Creek informed of the national total.

If you would like to sponsor a sale or benefit and participate in this coast-to-coast fundraising extravaganza -- even if you can't get it together by November 1 -- call the Provisional Theatre. They will be able to give you the names of others in your region sponsoring fundraisers for The Gathering, and can answer any questions you have about the plan.

Contact Provisional Theatre, 1816 N. Vermont Ave, Los Angeles, CA 90027, (213) 664-1450.

D.C. UPDATE

Ronald Reagan had a busy lunch on October 14. He took formal delivery of the final report of his Presidential Task Force on the Arts and Humanities (see NAPNOC notes #14) and made an announcement of his nomination of Frank Hodsoll as the new Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (see notes #15 for Hodsoll's background).

The Task Force's final report was delivered by Co-Chair Hanna Fray, President of the University of Chicago. In response, Reagan had assurances for his guests: "I will read it." Though previews of the final Task Force report contain no remarkable new developments since we last reported on the Task Force, members of the public will have to wait an extra week to see for themselves.

Noting that "American support for the arts and humanities has come mostly from the private sector," President Reagan declared...
"Our goal is to strengthen that public and private partnership." Reagan also said that "Our cultural institutions are an essential national resource. They must be kept strong."

Hodsoll’s appointment should be considered in the Senate early in November; the confirmation process is expected to be easy, despite Hodsoll’s lack of arts or cultural policy experience.

As for the Chair of the Humanities Endowment, following his nomination lunch Hod-
soll told the press that Reagan "wasn’t made up his mind." The Washington Post credited White House sources with the claim that two candidates remained, one of whom is Professor Melvin Bradford of the University of Dallas. Bradford, who had earlier been rumored to be out of the running, is highly conservative. His academic work features a revisionist history of Abraham Lincoln as a violator, and not a defender, of civil rights.

It is rumored that Bradford’s appointment is being pressed within the administration as a concession to the far-Right foes of Sandra Day O’Connor’s appointment to the Supreme Court. Despite strong opposition from some quarters, Bradford has powerful support in the Senate, where his nomination would have to be confirmed.

For a moment, things looked good for the National Endowments’ budgets for Fiscal Year 1982: The continuing resolution under which the federal government is operating through November 20 (since Congress hasn’t completed a final budget for the fiscal year of 1982 which began on October 1) allowed the NEA, NEH and all other programs which come under the Interior section of the budget to continue operations at either their Fiscal Year 1981 level or at the budget level authorized by the House of Representatives for 1982, whichever is lower.

For the Endowments, this lower level is the one approved by the House in July (and reported in subsequent issues of notes) -- $157.5 million for NEA and $144.1 million for NEH.

Though lower than last year’s budget level, the continuing resolution would allow operations to proceed at a budget rate far above Reagan’s recommendation last March that the NEA should be cut to $88.5 million.

But less than one week later, on October 7, the Endowments received orders that undid the relatively good news from Congress: the administration is requesting a deferral of funds from these agencies’ budgets in keeping with the 12% across-the-board reduction in program spending the President called for in his national TV speech on September 24. By the 21st of October, the Office of Management and Budget will submit a package of budget revisions to the Congress including these new Endowment cuts.

(Deferral allows for postponement of the expenditure of already-appropriated funds for a period specified by the President.

The deferral goes into effect automatically unless specifically overturned by either House of Congress. See NAPNOC notes #10 for a description of the Federal budget process.)

The effect of this 12% deferral is to place the Endowments at operating levels between now and November 20 that work out to something like an annual budget rate of $77 million. By that time the continuing budget resolution will have expired and new budget action will have to come from Congress. With this deferral, the Endowments will be operating at a reduction of 56% from the 1981 budget levels.

If Congress fails to overturn Reagan’s deferral the President will have succeeded in obtaining major reductions in Endowment spending despite the maneuverings of NEA and NEH supporters in Congress and despite his own extravagant public assertions of the importance of "keeping cultural institutions strong."

VITAL SIGNS Continued from page 4

2: AMERICAN WRITERS CONGRESS

On October 9 - 12, The Nation magazine convened The American Writers Congress at the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City. The call to the Congress, signed by a long list of well-known writers, said that "rapidly advancing concentration in the communications industry threatens as never before to exclude and silence serious writers who are out of political or literary fashion. Government support for the arts is being slashed. Attacks on writers -- libel suits, book burnings, censorship -- are increasing...."

These were the topics that occupied some 3,000 writers attending the conference.

One of the participants was Joan Holden of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. She stopped off in Baltimore after the conference and we had a chance to interview her while her thoughts were fresh. Joan makes no claim to having a comprehensive overview of the meeting, but these excerpts from her impressions, fresh from the Congress, are perhaps worth more to those of us unable to attend.

We’ll keep track of the Congress follow-up and keep you posted. If other notes readers attended the meeting and would like to add to or take issue with Joan Holden’s account please call or write NAPNOC and we’ll arrange to run something.

Joan Holden: I still don’t know what my feeling is about the Writers Congress.

NAPNOC notes: Well, maybe we’ll find out.

JH: There were 3,000 people. Madness! Just huge crowds of people milling around inside the ballroom of this hotel. It was obvious they hadn’t expected the crowds; they had no way of dealing with these crowds.

In this big ballroom were the keynote addresses. The most moving thing was Victor Marchetti, who spoke and told these long, rambling, very funny tales about his adventures with the CIA. But the reality -- what he got to was he’s under a lifetime injunc-
tion to submit anything that he writes, factual or fictional, anything that has to do with intelligence has to be cleared by the CIA. At the end, as the moderator keeps trying to get him off the stage he says "Censorship will drive you to the basement blues, despair, alcoholism and possibly suicide." Think about that: a lifetime injunction.

Then the biggest literary cocktail party in New York consisted of 2,000 people standing in line while one guy sells drink tickets and two guys make drinks. I wander out into the hallway and there's this huge crowd of people with their arms around each other at the end of the corridor. Wasn't 'till the next day I found out that they had linked arms to keep the angry masses out to comply with the fire laws; they were breaking down the door.

Now, I don't think that these 3,000 writers were breaking down the door just in the interest of higher salaries. I absolutely felt they turned out to see other writers, to talk about the things that are closest to them and the work that they do and the difficulties they have in doing it. But people have to be concerned about money because otherwise writing is going to be a profession only rich people can afford.

Nn: Tell us about some of the themes that brought the group together.

JH: They're concerned about everything, of which income is certainly an important part, but that's sort of a very easy way of putting what was on their minds. People don't only join unions to raise their wages. They join unions because they want not to feel helpless, because they want not to feel alone.

Nn: Do you see a union coming, then?

JH: Well, it was partly about a union, but it wasn't clear enough. There were two things that were going on. One was documenting the worsening conditions that writers are working under -- censorship, conglomerates, funds being cut, the death of newspapers and magazines, all those things that are threatening writers.

And the other was to talk about a national writers' union. The Congress didn't make up its mind to be a Congress called to organize a national writers' union, which maybe it should have, 'cause a whole lot of people turned up who were ready for that. There was only one session scheduled on it and it was in conflict with a lot of other things. At the final session they presented a resolution which simply endorsed the principle of a union, which everybody was ready to do, but everybody was frustrated at the lack of discussion about what that meant. That's a whole 'mother meeting.

But it's significant to me that the desire was there because of the people who were there, the multiple thousands who voted overwhelmingly in favor of the principle of the national writers' union. We want something.

The panelists were largely notables. Not all, I mean, a lot of them were anonymous people like myself. But I think that's smart; people are interested in "names" and you have to have some way of beginning.

The panels were organized this way: An hour from the panel, an hour from the floor. So the panelists would each give their rap and then there would be an hour of questions and discussion. I was extremely impressed with that. The criticism I would make is that the panels didn't meet beforehand to discuss what they were going to do, and they would have been better if they had. And there was always three things that you wanted to go to at the same time.

When I get home, I'm going to say "It was great to see all those writers in the same room." That was really it.

Nn: So tell us about your panel.

JH: The one I was on was -- horrible title! -- "Whither Theater?" And the question was "Can you do serious writing for commercial theater?" One panelist, Marsha Norman (she wrote "Getting Out") had some really interesting things to say. She's the regional theater person, the young up-and-coming star and supposedly very successful. What Marsha Norman had to say was that the regional theaters, which are supposed to have a whole lot of money, the ones that have the playwriting contests, that have the national prizes and the talent searches are all just part of the -- they're like the New York Yankees farm team system. They're a machine for generating hits and she says she'll never again try to make her money in theater because you can't write serious plays. And this is the young star, the product of the system.

I said whether you can do serious plays in a commercial theater depends on what you're serious about. Certainly, if you're serious about family conflict, you can do serious plays in a commercial theater. But there are many subjects that you can't write about in the commercial theater.

The discussion was really engaged, very interesting, and about audience. We talked about who is the audience, and the vision. I decided that the thing to talk about was alternatives. You have to control the means of production; you have to do it yourself. It was a good response, but afterwards a whole lot of people came up to me and said "It's beautiful, what you're talking about, but you can't do it in New York," which was very close to the truth. It's real estate values; real estate values control the theater in New York. I think it's good for people in the "provinces" to be aware of the conditions that people in New York are facing because we tend to think they're all "sell-outs." When you can't rent a theater for less than $2,500 a month you have to charge $10 a seat. And to just be very superior and say you wouldn't do that is very naive. I think righteousness is a sin that many of us in the the neighborhood arts movement are too often guilty of.

There was a lot of talk about what a writer's work was: To tell the truth. I didn't
like Barbara Grizzuti Harrison's keynote article (The Nation, Vol. 233 #10, October 3, 1981), but I have to admit she called me on some things. I have written things I felt weren't the truth -- happy endings on plays that didn't want them, for example, because of deciding on the Left that we're always supposed to have happy endings.

Jules Feiffer borrowed a phrase Kurt Vonnegut had used earlier, the miner's canary theory of writing. That's what writers are supposed to be; they're supposed to tell the truth, they're witnessing.

I think there's a lot of writers who are uncomfortable with what they feel is a conflict between their vocation and their political direction. At points, your rational, political head tells you that politically, it's better to write this, but in your heart you think that is true. I think David Mamet was write when he said we don't write about our deepest fears. And I think the people's theater movement has been very guilty of that, a kind of easy optimism, a lack of criticism and self-criticism.

In plays the story should be simple, but which story do you tell? Sometimes you tell the easy story and not the hard one, sometimes you tell the idea that the people on the left will trash nobody as not as smart as you, which is never the case. Sometimes because of the pressure of collectivity and what I call left-wing intellectual terrorism -- the fact that people on the left will trash nobody as quickly as someone else on the Left for doing something they think is not correct. And also a kind of oatmeal produced by excessive collectivism. You know, you have to learn to balance people's opinions, rather than having the necessity of agreement produce something that's merely compromise.

Nn: The reason we're dwelling on this point is that the Right is telling a very simple, very partial story over and over again.

JH: All the more reason that we should bring out the complexities. Against liberal obfuscation and complexity and individualism and ambiguity and irony, we advance the simple truth, the idea that the truth in its essence is always very simple -- but as you experience it, it is extremely complicated.

To put it simply, you can believe that it's class struggle that motivates history and that the basic struggle is between us and them, but that doesn't make all of us good. And to give a false picture turns off your audience eventually.

Nn: What will happen next?

JH: There's still the basic problem of a union or not. There's a committee appointed to continue looking into the question, to come back with a specific proposal. There's a western caucus to decide how to continue the organization on the west coast, and other caucuses across the country. There's a continuations committee to decide what to do next.

The general feelings were clear: everyone wants an organization, everyone feels the need for some kind of political strength everyone feels threatened. Most people want to keep working in the media that they're working in, where they can make a living. There's a difference from the '60s in that the call for creating alternatives was not nearly as loud.

I think there was really a modest recognition of the role of writers which really is to be witnesses; they're the only individual voices. Every other record of everything is produced by corporate entities. Personal voices are the only way our history is recorded, really, except for documents. Who tells what the times were like? So there was some sense that writers have an important role that I felt was reaffirming and not pretentious; it wasn't overcome.

Thanks to Buzz Alexander of Ann Arbor, MI, we have a copy of the statement of principles adopted by the Congress:

Despite the technological revolution in communications, the written and spoken word remains the basic unit of cultural currency. Words define, order, and define future. When free expression is endangered, culture is endangered.

Today, writers in America are again faced with a resurgence of political, racial, and cultural oppression. Writers cannot hide from or imagine away this fact. In the face of a common threat, individuals unite, and writers face such a common threat today. It is time for us as American writers to come together around shared values and crucial needs.

The first of these is the need for writers to look for new ways of engaging in collective self-preservation. All writers, whatever their understanding of the nature of the human project, must see that only professional solidarity offers hope for our joint protection.

Second, the unity of writers, if it is to come to pass, must be a unity in diversity. It can only grow from a recognition that the marketplace individualism of our world obscures the representative function that many writers serve in giving voice to the buried lives of the oppressed, the excluded, the unheard.

Finally, writers must not forget that they are more than practitioners of a trade or a special interest group; they are citizens. Both as writers and as citizens we face four crises: the deepening social, economic and political inequality in our country and among the family of nations; the threat of nuclear war and rampant militarism; the degradation of the natural environment; and the erosion of the freedom to write and be read in an increasingly intolerant culture.

These crises are ineluctably linked. It is impossible for writers to act effectively to defend and expand the dimensions of creative expression without facing up to the larger contexts in which the ever increasing monopolization of cultural institutions excludes the unpopular and the powerless, and in which indifference to humanity places the physical survival of civilization itself at peril. As our own society and the world order polarize in response to these realities, we writers too are faced with a choice. All of us have already taken sides, whether we admit it or not. Let us be quite clear, therefore, that as American writers we
stand for peace, equity and liberation.

The urgent necessities for democratic change to eliminate inequalities of race, class, gender and sexual orientation demand that we be prepared to fight for those aspects of social life that give us access as citizens and room to function as writers, including the free choice of women all over the world as to their reproductive rights.

In sum, writers are not simply individuals, engaged in individual acts of self-expression, but are also comrades, representatives, citizens. We encourage the efforts of all writers' organizations to fight for writers' rights. We encourage all attempts to organize writers around the larger social issues what ought to unite us. Only by breaking out of our isolation can be effectively take a stand for cultural freedom and against the colonization of the human spirit.

JOIN NAPNOC and help build CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

NAPNOC has set a target this year; with 600 members and subscribers by the summer 1982 Annual Meeting, our organization will be self-sustaining. The movement for cultural democracy needs NAPNOC's independent, unbought voice -- and if you are concerned about community cultural work, you need it too.

Individual memberships are $25 a year; each membership includes a free subscription to NAPNOC notes. Libraries, institutions and others who don't want to become members can take out a year's subscription at $25.

☐ I want to become a member. ☐ I'm an angel. Enclosed is my check for $25.
☐ Sign me up for a year's subscription (10 issues).
☐ I've enclosed $25.

Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of $____.

Name
Organization name (if any)*
Mailing address
Zip
Contact phone
Please return to NAPNOC, P.O. Box 11440, Baltimore, MD 21239 or telephone 301/727-6776.

* Please send information about your organization and its program, and be sure to put NAPNOC on your mailing list. Use the space below to give us the names and addresses of others who might want NAPNOC information.

NAPNOC neighborhood arts programs national organizing committee
P.O. Box 11440, Baltimore, MD 21239