



Backstage: The TBA Blog

From the Executive Director: 'Tis the Season

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By Brad Erickson



With acacias and fruit trees already coming into bloom, spring arrives early in Northern California. With the flowers and the showers comes a flurry of activity in the area of arts advocacy. Government bodies from cities to the feds are setting their budgets for the coming year, and legislative and election cycles are revving into high gear. As the season unfolds, Theatre Bay Area will be representing the interests of Bay Area artists and arts organizations before policy makers at every level. Here's what to watch—and where to get involved—this spring:

Federal

As with every year, the number-one goal at the federal level is increased funding for the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA). Last year saw a \$2 million rise, bringing the total to \$149 million. This year, advocates will be asking for another boost. While it's likely that any increase during this electoral year will be modest, advocates are setting their long-term sights on doubling the Endowment's funding to \$300 million, or nearly one dollar per person. This might seem wildly ambitious, but that figure would only bring the Endowment back to its 1990 level of funding, in inflation-adjusted dollars; 1995 was the year the agency, a victim of the culture wars, saw its funding cut in half in the furor over the "NEA Four." [Americans for the Arts](#) (AFTA)—the national leader in arts advocacy—has publicly set the goal of one dollar per capita, and AFTA leaders report that powerful lawmakers are not pushing back—at least not yet.

The NEA is particularly important to California and the Bay Area. In most areas of federal spending, California is a “donor state,” meaning we pay Washington more in taxes than we get back in investments. The National Endowment for the Arts is one of the few federal agencies that funds California with investments (nearly) proportionate to our population. Californians make up one out of every eight Americans, and the NEA funds California arts groups with one out of every nine grant dollars (we’ll call it even). Bay Area arts groups fare especially well in the NEA portfolio, and as any managing director will attest, NEA dollars are famously useful for attracting contributed income from other sources—individual donors as well as foundations and public agencies.

As the Presidential campaign unfolds, AFTA is again using this election **season** to educate the candidates and press each of them for their policy positions on the arts. Some are responding, others are not; but in any event, the arts are being put before the candidates of both parties as a vital component of our civic life.

State

This year marks the 40th anniversary of Theatre Bay Area, but also of the [California Arts Council](#) (CAC). This milestone was honored last week at an event in Sacramento with Governor Brown, the agency’s founder, headlining the commemoration. The CAC’s first director, Bay Area actor Peter Coyote, reminded the assembly of the Council’s early successes—quickly winning \$20 million in appropriations and funding a raft of programs that supported **artists** and art-making across the state. The agency’s funding ultimately grew to \$30 million in 2000 (reaching the national median for state investment in the arts of one dollar per person), but was slashed in 2003 to a paltry \$1 million—where it was stuck for more than a decade. In the past several years, arts advocates have won significant victories, raising the CAC’s appropriations by a whopping 800 percent. This sounds spectacular until one realizes that, with a population of 38 million, California’s investment in the arts (about 25 cents per person) is still far below the national average, and behind even red-state rivals like Florida and Texas. Arts advocates will return to Sacramento this spring to press for further increases, citing the vast areas of the state—such as inner cities, suburbs and the inland counties—still starved for access to the arts.

Exciting news for arts education advocates (and theatre and dance folks) across the state is a new bill introduced by Senator Ben Allen (D-Santa Monica), that would reestablish subject-specific teaching credentials for theatre and dance. As it is, California is only one of two states in the nation lacking accreditation for theatre and dance (teachers must be certified in all other academic subjects); currently, anyone wanting to teach theatre or dance in a California public school must be certified in English (theatre) or Physical Education (dance). Senator Allen’s bill, SB 916, “The Theatre and Dance Act,” would ensure that theatre and dance teachers are adequately trained by establishing specific credentials for both subjects. The bill has both Republican and Democratic coauthors and is widely

supported by the arts advocacy community. Joe Landon, executive director of the [California Alliance for Arts Education](#) (CAAE) says, “This is an opportunity for all advocates to come together with one voice to give dance and theatre teachers what is long overdue—dignity, equality, and a credential!”

Local

On the local front, cities and counties across our region are crafting their budgets for the coming fiscal year. In San Francisco, [Arts for a Better Bay Area](#) (ABBA) is once again convening advocates around the budget for the city’s two arts agencies ([SF Arts Commission](#) and [SF Grants for the Arts](#)), looking to follow last year’s boost of \$2 million with further increases. ABBA has also convened a working group to focus on the urgent issues of displacement and soaring rental rates for both arts spaces and housing. A third group (including theatre reps Tony Kelly, Jonathan Moscone and myself) is exploring a possible ballot initiative that would lock in increased support for the arts by reconnecting arts funding with the city’s hotel tax.

As your service organization’s executive director, I represent Theatre Bay Area artists and companies in a number of advocacy settings: as AFTA’s state captain for California, leading the state’s delegation to Washington, D.C. for AFTA’s annual [Arts Advocacy Day](#) (March 7-8 this year); as treasurer and past president of Californians for the Arts; and as a steward of ABBA. While Theatre Bay Area is deeply committed to our work in this arena, advocacy is not an effort that can be outsourced. Each of us—as citizens, as artists, as representatives of arts organizations—must add our voices to the chorus calling for fully adequate and fully equitable arts funding. Join us this spring!

Brad Erickson is executive director of Theatre Bay Area.