

PRAXIS: An Editorial Statement

By Kent Neely

Has the United States become possessed with self correction and propriety? Are we bent on insuring a way of life comforted by the world's highest standard of living and an endless supply of life's necessities? Have the ideals of the 1960s been displaced by a compassionless, technocratic view of life that mocks the past without concern for future generations? State and federal legislation of the last decade has attempted to limit immigration, to declare English the national language, to reduce the number of recipients of welfare and food stamps and generally revert to a state's rights agenda that heralds Thomas Jefferson's statement: "That government's best which governs least." Today's American culture has fulfilled the 1960s' fears as (ironically) social misfits of three decades past have become corporate officers or retirees supported by lucrative portfolios.

We are wedged in a time period of contradictions. The unusual position was made poignant by Vanderbilt's Freedom Forum, *State of the First Amendment* (Donna Demac, 1997). For instance, a majority of Americans would vote "yes" if the Constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech, press, religion, and association were being ratified today. Yet a significant number of that same group said flag burning should be outlawed, that newspapers have too much freedom and the press should not print government secrets. Most distressing perhaps was the overwhelming majority who believed Americans should be able to express unpopular opinions but public speech, art, and music should not be allowed if it is offensive.

More relevant here is the change manifested by last year's National Endowment for the Arts publication *The American Canvas: An Arts Legacy for Our Communities* (Gary O. Larson, National Endowment for the Arts, 1996). The document examined the not-for-profit arts community and the Endowment, both interrelated and dependent. The text read as a 180 degree change from the rhetoric which helped establish the Endowment some three decades ago. Then artists and legislators called for a decentralization of arts and government support which would engender private giving. In the time since the Endowment began, all states have arts agencies and the number of artists and arts organizations nationwide is far greater than in 1965. Still, art and artists, *The American Canvas* concludes, have not been relevant to a majority of Americans, the fare too sophisticated and removed from most people's experience or understanding. (Somewhere Spiro Agnew's invectives about "effete snobs" are echoing). It

would seem then that plays that examine public issues, and make us squirm as a result, could be reconsidered or eliminated. Artists should involve the community more and seek bridges of understanding. Would *Spring Awakening*, Reza Abdoh's *Tight, White, Right*, or Dario Fo's *Can't Pay, Won't Pay*, or a multitude of other possibilities be viable? *The American Canvas* implies we have a less tolerant modern audience that must be nurtured and pleased because that audience is inextricably connected to laws of supply and demand and, hence, survival. After all, this is the generation that must resolve the national debt and wasteful government support has to be eliminated; those that cannot exist in the marketplace should not. Would such an audience endorse a revised version of Jeremy Collier's 1698 *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*? Perhaps an updated playbill of Colley Cibber's or Richard Steele's comedies or George Lillo's *The London Merchant* would find warm reception?

The distressing point about *The American Canvas* is that it raised the white flag for American art, an acceptance of the inevitable trend of conservatism. While they praise the artistry of a Tony Kushner, they reify management strategies that are consumerist. While they laud the necessity of a not-for-profit theatre as the voice of the under-represented, they say that the large majority of Americans have been alienated by arts irrelevant to them.

One is finally left with the realization that a sea change has occurred since the landmark studies by William Bowman and William Baumol and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Those works persuasively made a case that the arts were different and, sui generis, could not operate efficiently in a capitalist economy. Today, the arts must be efficient, familiar, and accessible, popular . . . marketable . . . profitable. As Ben Barber eloquently summarizes in his *An Aristocracy of Everyone: The Politics of Education and the Future of America* (Ballantine Books, 1992), we once believed, like Socrates, that the unexamined life was not worth living but now we believe the profitable life is above examination.

This issue of PRAXIS then deals with differing views on the arts that may help us reflect on the changes surrounding and penetrating the cultural environment today. Becky K. Becker, in her review of *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*, examines current unconventional performance style. *Paradise Revisited: the Current State of The Living Theatre* strikes a counter note. David Callaghan examines one of the 1960s' most counter-culture theatre groups and follows their journey into the 1990s. Finally, John Freeman's *The Location and Theory of Looking* provides a provocative thesis that may be applicable to the broader dilemma noted above—do we have immoral art or is art depicting immorality?