

The Artist Visa Quota Fight

The Washington Post

May 13, 1991, Monday, Final Edition

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Section: STYLE; PAGE B7; ARTS BEAT; COLUMN

Length: 943 words

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Series: Occasional

Body

The National Endowment for the Arts advisory council has stepped into another controversy -- this time over new legislation limiting the number of foreign artists who may visit this country each year.

Last week, the council passed a resolution stating its concern that the Immigration Act of 1990, which takes effect in October, will have "unintended adverse effects" on international cultural activity. This places the council squarely in opposition to organized labor, which says the NEA council is siding with performing arts presenters rather than with U.S. artists. The council resolution is "a reflection of the elitist attitude of the endowment," said Jack Golodner, president of the AFL-CIO's Department of Professional Employees.

Among the council's concerns is a provision allowing a maximum of 25,000 artists, athletes and entertainers to enter the country each year when those performers apply as part of a group -- as would an orchestra or ballet company. Visas would be issued on a first-come, first-served basis; the law would deny visas to individuals who have been affiliated with a company or group for less than a year.

The NEA council also takes issue with a set of proposed rules being prepared by the Immigration and Naturalization Service. According to a draft of those proposals, an individual artist could get a visa only by showing evidence of extraordinary ability or achievement, such as a Nobel Prize. In many fields, the NEA council contends, such documentation doesn't exist.

Visas would be issued only after the INS consults a peer group, union or management organization about the applicant's artistic ability. The NEA council's resolution says such consultation "devalues the artistic integrity of American cultural institutions and impedes effective planning."

Another planning problem: Visa applications would have to be filed no more than 90 days in advance. Presenters argue that they plan their schedules a year or two in advance and need early assurances that visas will be available. The NEA council calls the 90-day requirement "unworkable."

Organizations that present performing artists -- such as the League of American Theatres and Producers and the American Symphony Orchestra League -- are cranking up opposition to the law. Some say the provisions in question slipped through late in the last congressional session while they were distracted by the bitter fight over NEA reauthorization.

In a May 7 letter to the INS, actress Carol Channing said the new law "will seriously jeopardize the performing arts in the country and ultimately deprive numerous Americans of job opportunities created by ... temporary aliens, putting further economic strain in this most fragile industry."

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But the AFL-CIO's Golodner said that's the viewpoint of "the employers of artists, who would love to be able to employ whoever they want." The NEA jumped into the fray without talking to any of the artists' unions, he said.

"The immigration law that was passed was thoroughly debated by Congress, hearings were held," he added. "The endowment never said a word, nor did any of the major or minor institutions who were employers of artists. It seems a little late for them now to be complaining about something which they have passively contributed to by not advising or saying anything."

Writers' Week

Area scribes get their due as Washington Writers' Week gets underway tonight with the first of four literary awards ceremonies. At "A Celebration of Washington Poets" (5:45 p.m., International Monetary Fund Visitors Center, free), Belle Waring will receive the Poetry Committee Book Award for the best book of poetry by a local writer in the past year. Waring, a nonresident faculty member at Vermont College, was chosen by poet laureate Mark Strand "for her vitality and tough-mindedness." Waring's winning entry, "Refuge," also won the Associated Writing Programs' Award Series in Poetry. Tonight's event will feature readings by Waring and other local poets, as well as an exhibit by local presses and independent publishers.

Tomorrow night Paul Derek Moore, a senior at Georgetown University, will receive the first annual Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Award for exemplary fiction writing by a local African American college student. The award was conceived by author-poet Marita Golden "to encourage black students to consider fiction writing as a career possibility and to encourage the creative impulse." Moore will receive a \$ 750 prize at the ceremony (7:30 p.m., Stables Art Center, \$ 10 suggested donation), which will feature guest speakers Mary Helen Washington and Barry Beckham.

At a private event Friday at the Folger Shakespeare Library, the D.C. Commission on the Arts will announce the winners of the ninth annual Larry Neal Writers' Awards. Named for the late executive director of the commission, the awards are presented to adults and youth for excellence in poetry, fiction, dramatic writing, essays and criticism.

And finally, the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award will be presented to John Edgar Wideman for "Philadelphia Fire" at a private ceremony Saturday at the Folger. Wideman and the other finalists will read from their works.

Carla Perlo Day

Three cheers to Dance Place founder and director Carla Perlo, who is celebrating her 10th anniversary at the performing arts center. Perlo will be feted Saturday by the board and staff of Dance Place. "It's one thing to work hard for yourself to make a dream," said Perlo last week. "It's another to rally people to do it also. I'm moved that people have the same vision that I have and are dedicated to making it exist."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (90%); LEGISLATION (90%); IMMIGRATION LAW (90%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (89%); VISUAL & PERFORMING ARTS (89%); LABOR UNIONS (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); ORCHESTRAS (78%); CULTURE DEPARTMENTS (78%); CUSTOMS & CULTURAL HERITAGE (78%); ASSOCIATIONS & ORGANIZATIONS (78%); AGENCY RULEMAKING (77%); MUSIC GROUPS & ARTISTS (75%); EMPLOYMENT SEARCH (74%); ENDOWMENTS (73%); DANCE COMPANIES (73%); BALLET (73%); AWARDS & PRIZES (70%); PROFESSIONAL WORKERS (69%); NOBEL PRIZES (64%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (50%)

Company: NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS; IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION SERVICE

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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS (95%); NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS (93%); AFL-
CIO (56%)

Organization: NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS (95%); NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
(93%); AFL-CIO (56%); NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS; IMMIGRATION AND NATURALIZATION
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(93%); AFL-CIO (56%)

Industry: **ARTISTS** & PERFORMERS (92%); ORCHESTRAS (78%); ACTORS & ACTRESSES (75%); MUSIC
GROUPS & **ARTISTS** (75%); DANCE COMPANIES (73%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (94%)

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