

STAGE & ARTS

Minnesota arts groups reel from abrupt NEA cuts to grants

Children's Theatre Company, Penumbra and Ragamala are among the companies grappling with the loss of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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Ragamala Dance Company had its world premiere of "Children of Dharma" at Northrop in November 2024 before taking it to New York and Chicago. (Luis Luque)

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When Children's Theatre Company staged the world premiere of "Milo Imagines the World" in February, it did not imagine that such plays may be endangered in the future.

The Minneapolis company had plans for similar premieres over the next two years, but now it faces tough choices. That's because "Milo" received \$40,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which abruptly canceled grants Saturday for scores of arts and culture groups across the nation after President Donald Trump proposed to eliminate the agency a day earlier.

"The loss of NEA funds is a big deal for any organization, large or small," said Children's Theatre Company (CTC) managing director Ryan French, adding that "there's often a two-year lead time on some of these requests and this support is fairly important."

CTC is one of many Minnesota groups left reeling after the NEA canceled or withdrew grants. In January, the independent federal agency posted that 35 arts and culture groups in the state had won \$882,500 in grants.

The cancellation email stated: “The NEA is updating its grant-making policy priorities to focus funding on projects that reflect the nation’s rich artistic heritage and creativity as prioritized by the president. Consequently, we are terminating awards that fall outside these new priorities.”

The NEA was established in 1965 and had a budget of \$207 million last year. According to its 2024 financial report, the agency distributed more than \$163 million in grants.

Ben Johnson, arts and cultural affairs director for the city of Minneapolis, called the NEA’s cuts devastating and said they will have a deleterious effect not just on the arts but on the economies and vitality of communities across America. “It’s [just] really demoralizing ... and everything is happening all at once.”

Mixed Blood Theatre was in the throes of prepping for its big September event in greater Minnesota when it got word Saturday that the remainder of its \$95,000 project grant from the NEA had been rescinded.

About \$75,000 of those funds were to support a production by award-winning playwright Kira Obolensky, according to artistic director Mark Valdez. The event was also to feature discussions about integrating immigrants into the community.

“We’re helping to build local capacities and provide an opportunity for different types of folks to have conversation in a rural town that has seen an increase in immigrants moving in to work at the Marvin Windows factory,” Valdez said. “This recision has a serious impact on a psychological and practical level. And it throws everything up in the air.”

St. Paul’s Penumbra Theatre, famed for giving Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson his first professional production, had its \$50,000 grant canceled. Those monies were to support a new play next year.

“We have to pivot in terms of what we will be producing next season,” said Chief Operating Officer Amy Thomas. “We’re not only sad about that for us, but grieve for the NEA, which has been a cornerstone of support for arts and culture.”

Some of the affected organizations have already used the funds promised by the NEA. Ragamala Dance Company spent the allocated \$30,000 on a tour of “Children of Dharma,” an Indian dance, music and literature work that premiered at Northrop last November.

Ragamala has already taken “Dharma” to New York and Chicago and had planned to perform it in Auburn, Ala., next.

“It always takes a little time to get your money from the NEA but then to get this message that it’s been canceled is terrible,” executive artistic director Aparna Ramaswamy said.

TU Dance is now \$15,000 short after receiving its NEA termination letter. The funds, which represent about 10% of the company’s annual budget, were for the company’s 20th anniversary performance, which occurred last week at the O’Shaughnessy.

“Our company has a Black woman founder; I’m Latino, gay and an immigrant, and our goal is to provide access to anyone who had not had access to modern dance and ballet,” said executive director Abdo Sayegh Rodriguez. “It feels like they are targeting us.”

Linda Ewing, executive director of Coffee House Press, said she became alarmed three months ago when she received a letter from the NEA.

“It had a three-page list of words we should not use in our grant application, like ‘woman,’ ‘Black,’ ‘gay’ – all the marginalized people we’ve been trying to embrace as worthy,” Ewing said. “I was shocked by that communication. And now this, which means we’ll probably have to cut staff or publish fewer books.”

On Monday, a group of NEA directors overseeing grants for dance, theater and visual arts announced their resignations.

The Mellon Foundation in New York last week announced \$15 million in funding to humanities councils across the country after the National Endowment for the Humanities abruptly cut off federal funding.

Another federal agency, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, made cuts to the tune of \$1.3 million to cultural organizations in Minnesota in late April. This included \$625,000 from the Science Museum and \$250,000 from the Walker Art Center.