

## *Dancing to a Different Donor— Arts Groups Adapt to Federal Cutbacks*



DURHAM — The African-American Dance Ensemble has gained international renown for its energetic performances inspired by traditional African music, dances, costumes, and story-telling. Led by Chuck Davis, a Raleigh native who established his reputation as a dancer and choreographer in New York City, the ensemble stages more than 200 performance activities a year across the United States. Yet audiences are more likely to see the Durham-based dance company perform in small, rural communities like Brevard or Lillington than in large cultural centers like New York or Los Angeles.

"That's our niche — out in the communities," says Rodney Trapp, executive director of the ensemble. "Chuck Davis has a wonderful saying, 'In order to understand dance, study the people. In order to understand people, study their dance.' But we don't like to just go into a community, have a performance, and then leave. The audience may have an exciting show, but their lives aren't changed. We prefer a deeper relationship with our audience, by spending two or three days in the community, visiting the school system, conducting workshops, and then staging a concert."

Since its inception in the mid-1980s, the ensemble has held performances, workshops, demonstrations, and other activities in 48 of North Carolina's 100 counties, including many small communities that generally have little exposure to contemporary performance art. "About one-half of our work takes place in North Carolina," Trapp says. "Although we tour around the country, we do an extremely large number of touring events across the state."

The ensemble's grassroots approach to performing as well as its reputation in the dance field has helped it become one of the state's leading recipients of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts in the 1990s. That's because one of the NEA's goals is to bring cultural events down to the local level, often by awarding grants for dance and musical performance tours in small communities. The ensemble also has benefited from the NEA's attention to arts groups that promote cultural diversity.

But the ensemble is visiting fewer small communities across the state these days, due to cutbacks in federal funding from the National Endowment for the Arts. The group's funding from the NEA has been cut in half over the past few years — from \$77,400 in FY 1992 to \$39,000 in FY 1995 — and a further drop is

*"The NEA is allowing us to subsidize our fees so that school systems can have us in and augment their educational programs. When you take that away, you hurt young people. . . . We know the important role that the arts play in a community, and we know the impact that the cutbacks will have."*

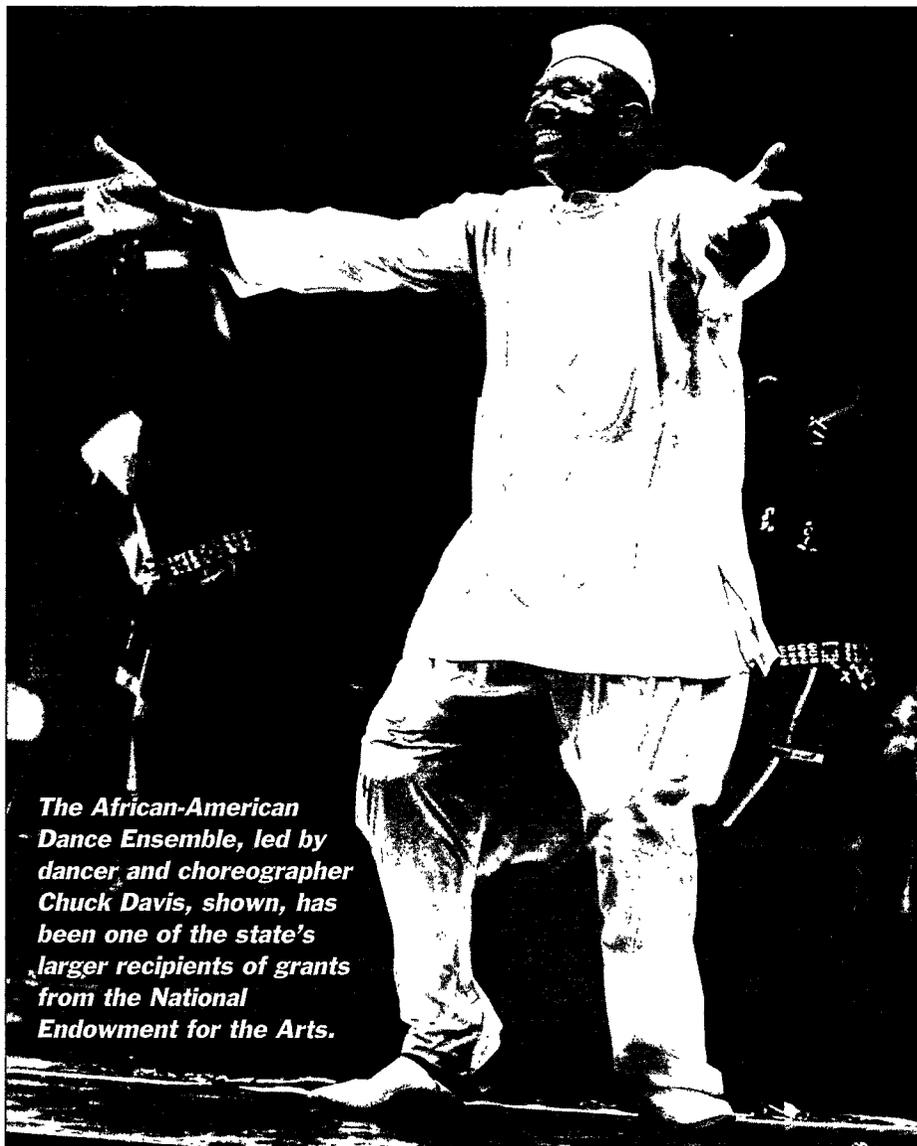
—RODNEY TRAPP, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
AFRICAN-AMERICAN DANCE ENSEMBLE, DURHAM

expected for FY 1996. Moreover, Trapp says, the NEA has reduced funding to many of the local arts groups that used to book the ensemble using endowment grants.

“We got a double whammy, in effect,” Trapp says. “The downside is we’re now going to have to be more aggressive and look for work more in the large, metropolitan areas. So the smaller communities are going to suffer. We have to go where we can find work.”

The African-American Dance Ensemble has been at the forefront of efforts to promote more

awareness and appreciation of minority cultures in the United States. Davis is a long-time student of African culture who makes annual trips to the continent to study its music, dance, art and folklore. The ensemble’s artists wear traditional African costumes during their performances, which feature musicians who play African percussion instruments and dancers who perform adaptations of tribal dances. In addition to performing, members of the ensemble hold workshops and demonstrations on African culture in communities across the state — often in small



**The African-American Dance Ensemble, led by dancer and choreographer Chuck Davis, shown, has been one of the state’s larger recipients of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.**

*Kevin Keister, for the African-American Dance Ensemble*



**"To Market," oil on panel by artist Ellis Wilson (c. 1954)**

school systems that otherwise wouldn't be exposed to such cultural events.

"This is what is being supported by the NEA," Trapp says. "The NEA is allowing us to subsidize our fees so that school systems can have us in and augment their educational programs. When you take that away, you hurt young people. . . . We know the important role that the arts play in a community, and we know the impact that the cutbacks will have."

Some conservatives, however, applaud the cutbacks that have led to fewer NEA grants for arts groups such as the African-American Dance Ensemble. NEA grants not only pay for art that many people do not appreciate, opponents say, but are an unnecessary frill when the federal government faces annual budget deficits in the

hundreds of millions of dollars. The *Times-News* of Burlington, N.C., expressed that view in a recent editorial: "When it comes to ending government subsidies for the arts, the sooner the better. Government funding violates the rights of the taxpayer while corrupting the integrity of the artist. It forces people to pay for art for which [they] have no use, or worse, art that violates their basic moral sensibilities. It also turns artists into vassals of the state, making them subject to the whims of the political process. No artist on the government dole can ever consider themselves free."<sup>1</sup>

Trapp says the African-American Dance Ensemble doesn't need NEA grants to survive, but to subsidize performances in communities that couldn't otherwise afford such cultural at-

tractions. The ensemble generates the bulk of its budget from ticket sales and other earned income, but it also gets substantial support from public and private sources. Money from admissions and other earned income account for nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of the group's \$580,000 budget for 1996. Government grants make up nearly one-fourth (24 percent) of the group's budget, while donations from foundations, individuals, and other private sources account for the remaining 12 percent. The group receives government support from the National Endowment for the Arts, N.C. Arts Council, N.C. Department of Cultural Resources, and the City of Durham.

"We have used the NEA money as leverage money," Trapp says. "It is relatively small, maybe a little more than 3.5 percent of our total budget. But it leverages so much more, because we are then able to put that money toward grant applications to foundations and the state Arts Council."

Performing arts groups like the African-American Dance Ensemble have been among the hardest hit by cutbacks in NEA grants in North Carolina in recent years. Other groups that had large drops in NEA funding from FY 1990 to FY 1995 include: the N.C. Black Repertory Company in Winston-Salem, down \$64,500; the American Dance Festival in Durham, down \$42,000; the N.C. Dance Theater in Charlotte, down \$22,000; the N.C. Symphony Society, down \$25,000; and the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra Society, down \$10,000.

"We've had to drop whole programs," says Stephanie Reinhart, who co-directs the American Dance Festival with her husband, Charles. "We dropped our dance critics conference and our young choreographers and composers project."

The American Dance Festival, an international event that features dance workshops and performances, has been able to maintain its overall annual budget at about \$2.5 million by obtaining more private donations and generating more income from its operations. The festival received NEA grants totaling \$41,300 for FY 1996, which accounts for less than 2 percent of its current budget but is \$58,400 less than the NEA grants it received for FY 1991.

Charles Reinhart, co-director of the ADF, says he is concerned that the cutbacks in the

*"When it comes to ending government subsidies for the arts, the sooner the better. Government funding violates the rights of the taxpayer while corrupting the integrity of the artist."*

—EDITORIAL, *TIMES-NEWS*,  
BURLINGTON, NC

National Endowment for the Arts could have a chilling effect on performing arts groups. Reinhart says the NEA cutbacks, together with recent political attacks on the arts, have imposed a sort of censorship on arts groups by pressuring them to avoid controversial topics.

"Why are the arts being attacked?" Reinhart asks. "That's the real issue here. . . . You just have to wonder how many organizations are doing things that are safer in order to draw bigger audiences — and are therefore being more popular, more commercial."

"To me, it's not a question of whether government support for the arts is important or not. It's how do we as a civilization value the arts . . . In some countries, like France, government support for the arts would never come up as a political issue. They see it — both in political and cultural terms — as in 'Look how vital the arts are to our country.'"

Some of the larger art museums in the state also have been hurt by the cutbacks in grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. One of those affected is the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art, a Winston-Salem based institution that promotes work by contemporary artists around the country. SECCA, which has been one of the largest recipients of NEA grants in the state since 1990, received no money from the endowment for FY 1995 — after receiving a total of \$297,000 in NEA grants over the five previous years.

SECCA has received some unwanted attention over the past few years because of a con-

troversial exhibition it funded in part with an NEA grant. In 1988-89, the museum produced a traveling exhibition of works by contemporary artists — including Andres Serrano, whose work included “Piss Christ,” a photograph of a crucifix immersed in a jar of urine. That exhibit has become one of rallying points for conservatives who say the federal government has no business funding the arts. Yet SECCA administrators say they see no direct connection between their loss of NEA funding and the Serrano exhibit.

“No, I don’t,” says Ginny Rutter, public relations and marketing coordinator for SECCA. “I really think it was due more to the severe cut-backs in NEA funding. Because we continued to receive money afterwards from the NEA, with significant funding for our artist-in-the-community series. Also, this [the loss of funding in 1995] was almost 10 years after the controversy over Andres Serrano.”<sup>2</sup>

SECCA also recently found out that it has been awarded a \$15,000 grant from the NEA grant for FY 1996, she says. That grant is being used to commission a public art sculpture in Winston Lake Park by Maya Lin, the artist who designed the Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial in Washington, D.C. Lin’s design for the Vietnam memorial was attacked by veterans’ groups when it was first proposed, but the memorial now is one of the most popular attractions in the nation’s capital.

“Artists will always do controversial work, no matter what,” Rutter says, “because they mirror the strengths and weaknesses of today’s society.”

— Tom Mather

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Unsigned editorial, “End of art subsidy? Quicker the better!” *Times-News*, Burlington, N.C., July 27, 1996, p. A4.

<sup>2</sup> The traveling exhibition that included Andres Serrano’s works was shown in Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Richmond, Va., but it never came to North Carolina.

***“Blue Dancer,”***  
**bronze by sculptor Alexander Archipenko**  
**(1913)**

*“Artists will always do controversial work, no matter what, because they mirror the strengths and weaknesses of today’s society.”*

—GINNY RUTTER  
PUBLIC RELATIONS COORDINATOR  
SOUTHEASTERN CENTER FOR  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
WINSTON-SALEM