

## Paper Mache for 2-21-25 by David Read

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts has been in the news a lot lately and for all the wrong reasons I'm afraid. I thought it would be helpful to look at the history of the Center and then review the current state of affairs. Located along the Potomac River with magnificent views, it houses seven theaters within its sprawling expanse. During the twenty years I lived in Washington, DC, I attended many events there including concerts by Big Bad VooDoo Daddy, classical pianist, Lang Lang, the National Symphony Orchestra, children's instrument petting zoos, Broadway musicals, and many more. Despite the sweeping changes he has made, President Trump acknowledges that he has never stepped foot in the Kennedy Center. That means he missed events like the Kennedy Center Honors that recognize individuals in the performing arts for lifetime achievement always attended by the President and First Lady.

The vision for the Center dates to the National Cultural Center Act in 1958 signed by President Eisenhower which set the stage for the development of a national center for the performing arts to showcase American culture. However, the act did not allocate federal funds for the center's construction, requiring that it be built with private donations. Following President Kennedy's tragic assassination in 1963, Congress renamed the project in his honor, transforming it into a living memorial to the late president who believed that "art nourishes the soul of the nation." Fundraising efforts for the Kennedy Center intensified after Jacqueline Kennedy enlisted prominent figures from the world of philanthropy to support the cause. The Kennedy Center was officially dedicated on September 8, 1971, with a grand opening that featured a performance of Leonard Bernstein's *Mass*, commissioned for the occasion.

Since re-assuming office, President Trump dismissed the existing board of trustees and appointing himself as chairman, citing a desire to align the Center with his vision for a "Golden Age in Arts and Culture," whatever that means. This move was partly motivated by his criticism of the Center's programming, including events like drag shows, which he claimed targeted youth and which he criticized as "woke" and "anti-American propaganda." Really? Deborah Rutter, who had served as the Center's president since 2014, was dismissed from her position. The new board includes individuals closely associated with Trump's administration including Susie Wiles: White House Chief of Staff, Usha Vance: Wife of Vice President J.D. Vance, Allison Lutnick: Spouse of Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, Pam Bondi: U.S. Attorney General, Dana Blumberg: Wife of Robert Kraft, owner of the New England Patriots, Lee Greenwood: Singer known for "God Bless the U.S.A.," and Andrea Wynn: Spouse of casino mogul Steve Wynn. Not a particularly arts friendly bunch. Trump's actions reflect a broader agenda to reshape cultural institutions in line with his administration's policies, like other authoritarian leaders who have used cultural platforms to advance political objectives.

I read an interview with departed Center President, Deborah Rutter. She said, "I am a professional arts attendee. I am a believer in the work of the artist. I am not a propagandist. I am not a politician. Art speaks for itself. Art sometimes doesn't make you feel comfortable, but it is telling the story of who we are and all artists, as do all Americans, have the freedom of expression." In fiscal year 2023, the Kennedy Center reported total revenue of \$286 million. Of this, \$45 million came from federal appropriations, or about 16% of its total operating budget. These federal funds are designated specifically for the maintenance, security, and capital restoration of the Center as a national memorial. The remaining 84% of the budget is generated through ticket sales, private donations, rental income, and other revenue sources that support the Center's artistic programming and operations.