

# **Grantmakers in the Arts**

## **The Source: 2000 Conference**

### **Opening Plenary: Garrison Keillor**

**October 16, 2000, 10:00 a.m.**

I'd like to welcome all of you to Minnesota and thank you for coming. I know that you would rather have gone to Seattle and I sympathize, but here you are, and you may as well make the best of it. This is a beautiful part of America and very richly blessed.

If you were thinking about bestowing any money on Minnesota arts groups, forget about it, we don't need your money, we don't want it. The Lake Superior Canyon Project, which is still in the planning stage, is going to make Minnesota wealthy beyond belief – 31,000 square miles of pure water in Lake Superior – and in the Sun Belt they're paying \$31 per thousand feet – this comes to \$18 trillion dollars. All we need to do is get the pipeline built connecting the Mississippi and the Colorado Rivers so we can store the stuff in the Grand Canyon. When we get that built, we're on easystreet.

You are in dairy farming country right now, though you may not know it. The Twin Cities is a little island, a little bran muffin surrounded by latte, and within half an hour of here driving west and north, you could meet a lot of fine families with German and Scandinavian last names who raise corn and feed it to cattle and thereby are able to send their children to college to become teachers. Teaching and cattle-raising are related fields. The price of corn is too low to make a living from it, \$1.60 a bushel, less than a gallon of gasoline, but you run the corn through a cow and get milk out of it and you can support a family with a fair-sized herd, maybe fifty or eighty head. Someday scientists will find a way to throw genetically

altered enzymes into big vats of silage and make milk that way, but for the time being, it requires a cow.

Dairy farming is a culture. It makes its imprint on people. It's day in, day out work, 365 days a year, so it demands a stable world-view. People with big mood swings or bipolar disorders probably shouldn't do this, or people in the throes of an identity crisis. Dairy-farming doesn't seem to go with personal flamboyance, or with a high level of anger. you don't get anywhere by yelling at a cow or kicking it.

We're stoics. Nigel Kennedy was in town this fall to play with the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, and the musicians like him – they understand he's trying to be true to himself and be his own kind of violin soloist, a punker, a Sex Pistol, sort of Yehudi Menuhin with a pierced tongue – musicians understand this, it's okay, but they were alarmed to come to the concert at Orchestra Hall and see a microphone onstage – Oh no, they thought, he's not going to talk to the audience, is he? – Oh yes, he did. He stood up and said he was glad to be here and this was one motherfucker of an orchestra. And you know? It was okay. It didn't matter. All those Lutherans just sat and smiled back at him. No big deal. Glad it wasn't their child up there saying that, but hey– he's only in his thirties – give the boy time.

We are basically steady easy-going people. A little phlegmatic. Broadway road shows come and play here and the actors feel like they're dying a slow death onstage, there's no reaction from the audience, and then at the curtain they get a standing ovation. This laid back quality irritates the hell out of a lot of people. All over the Twin Cities, ambitious young artists are working on their screenplays, working on video, writing jagged and dark and dangerous fiction, and trying to pass for Latino, trying to escape from Spring Valley and Norwegianness and Uncle Bob and Aunt Gladys and all their phlegmatic relatives, but down deep they're good steady people of calm temperament.

We're not all that friendly to outsiders: we try to be but we don't really mean it. We know that outsiders think of Minnesota in just one way, as the nation's refrigerator, and nothing we can say or do will

ever change this. We console ourselves with the thought that the American people are not that bright. Surveys have shown that about 40% of the American people are unable to say how long it takes the Earth to make one circuit around the sun. Almost half of the American people are about to vote for George W. Bush. These people can't be expected to know about Minnesota.

It isn't important to me, I'm 58 years old, I'm happy living here, I am at the point in life when reputation doesn't mean much. But all around the Twin Cities ambitious young people are working on screenplays this morning, making photographs, working at the synthesizer, editing the videotape, writing poems, hoping to convince the world that Minnesota is more than just winter and Lutherans and Holsteins, and God bless them for the attempt, and like most young artists they're very concerned about how they're perceived and they make sure they're dressed in the right clothes that project just the right sense of irony and danger, but I'm sorry, the rest of the country is never going to see Minnesota as a center of the arts. For one thing, it's not. And for another, who cares.

You can look on art as a trophy and a symbol and a class totem and an object of prestige that reflects well on you, or you can accept art as a fertile and satisfying part of a normal life, but you can't do both. They don't go together.

Every artist comes to this spiritual realization sometime: after you struggle hard to get noticed and build some credit and get the crucial opening you need and then the opening after that – then at some point comes the realization that it's not about you, your merit, your brilliance, it's about the work: it's all about the work, the inherent value of the work, the integrity of the attempt, and that includes the others, not just you, and the honor of it isn't so important. It is less important to be a writer; it's more important to get up in the morning and write. Everyone would like to have written books, but not everyone wants to write.

Books are the ultimate trophy art – you can put them up on your mantle – they may get you more respect than you deserve – but eventually you realize that you can either be an author or you can be a writer. An author is a guy who goes to luncheons and gives his

speech about the perils of being a sensitive feeling person in a cruel world, and a writer is someone with a pad of paper on his lap writing sentences and crossing them out.

I've come to your conference to declare that I'd rather be home working.

I do a radio show called A Prairie Home Companion. I've done it for about twenty-five years. It got some very nice notices about fifteen years ago. In the early 80s it had a certain cachet. I had my big realization about eleven years ago during a long sabbatical I took so I could live in Copenhagen and New York and ponder what to do, and it was a gradual realization, but I do remember being on a panel one afternoon at the Museum of Radio & Television in New York and sitting next to Stephen Sondheim and someone in the audience asked him a question that included a compliment about West Side Story and Mr. Sondheim wrinkled his nose and said something about having tried for thirty years to live down West Side Story, and he really meant it. It pissed me off. How dare you disparage something you did that gave such pleasure to so many people? How dare you?

What a sour moment, I thought. Someone who adores you and feels honored to be talking to you and he had to put him down for liking the wrong thing – and then it dawned on me that I was guilty of the same thing, of disparaging my own work in a fit of arrogance and taking the sabbatical so I could get out of radio and do something more noble, like write an unreadable novel, and it was the beginning of a moment of wisdom in my life.

Radio isn't hip or stylish. Radio is basically something you do for shut-ins, for the elderly, for the socially inept and for crazy people and inmates and the clinically shy and people in depression and people too poor to be able to go out on Saturday night.

I realized that my friends – the people I thought I was doing the show for – don't listen to my show, they go birding, they ride their bikes, go to film festivals, read novels, go out dancing, go to dinner parties, radio is background noise to them. My friends are interested in what's new and that's not me. If I aimed my show toward my

friends, it wouldn't be as good a show as it is when it's aimed at misfits and shut-ins – with your friends, you can wink and insinuate and be sarcastic and get away with being a wise-ass – but my audience craves emotional honesty and intimacy, and when I achieve that, or come close to it, I do something better.

I quit for a couple years and then came back to work with more respect for it. And no interest in what anybody else thinks of the show who doesn't listen to it.

Minnesota is a good place to work if it's work that interests you and not the trophy aspect. It's a wonderful place to work. For one thing it has winter, which is a productive time, and also it has these calm stoical audiences that don't spoil a local boy. People here figure if you were any good you'd be in New York.

There is one center of the arts and it's New York, New York, the city so nice they named it twice.

You walk up Broadway from Lincoln Center. Fats Waller grew up in that neighborhood. You pass 72nd, you think of Leonard Bernstein. Edgar Allen Poe on 84th, Isaac Bashevis Singer lived on 86th. Billie Holliday lived on West 87th, Rachmaninoff on 88th, Humphrey Bogart grew up on West 103rd. So did Theolonious Monk. Duke Ellington lived for years on West 106th Avenue. George Gershwin wrote "Rhapsody in Blue" in a back room of an apartment at 501 West 110th. Up around 112th was Zora Neale Hurston and nearby, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. And then you come to Harlem.

In the Twin Cities we just have some houses in St. Paul where Fitzgerald grew up and Robert Bly's house in Kenwood and Dominick Argento's and August Wilson lived here for awhile and in north Minneapolis you have the boyhood home of Prince, and that's about it.

New York is where the game is played, it's where the artistic stock exchange is, where your value rises or falls, and there is only one USDA stamp in the arts and that is The New York Times, and if the New York Times says you're brilliant and jagged and dark and

enormously troubling and yet luminously lyrical and profoundly and in the deepest sense thrilling, you can take that review down to the central arts office and trade it in for a career and you can print it on your brochures for the next forty years, and long past the time when you get old and tired and confused and jaded, audiences will come and see the big placard in the lobby – "Brilliant and jagged and dark and enormously troubling" – and they will want to see you in that light, in the Midwest they will – and so if you intend to have any sort of career in the arts, you must have a talisman, something with New York on it to hang around your neck, and this will get you through the dark forest and it will open up the funding and it will soften up the audience.

I never would have gotten the opportunity to have a career in radio telling stories about the little town that time forgot had it not been for the fact that I was a writer for The New Yorker magazine. The words The New Yorker magazine carry a lot of weight in Minnesota. The road from Anoka, Minnesota, to St. Paul/Minneapolis goes through New York.

This is an odd fact in the arts, sort of like being a marathon runner with the prize going to the people with the best hair. You learn to deal with it – you learn that the running is something you do for yourself and you learn to pay attention to your hair and get the right gel – but it's distracting.

An artist in Minnesota would like to make his transaction with his audience and constituency in Minnesota. You'd like to be valued for the work itself and the service you provide. But the fact is that if you have some New York references, you're miles ahead.

I say this as someone who loves New York. I have thirty years of wonderful memories of New York and working there and going to see things there and just jangling around town. I have no problem with New York at all.

The problem is trophy art. The importance of the approval of New York, the possession of a New York talisman, takes us away from the love of the work itself, which is the only reason to be engaged in it.

An example of trophy art: the Zenith Philharmonic, a struggling mediocre orchestra that nobody cares about much but nonetheless it's an object of civic pride and cited by the Zenith Chamber of Commerce as evidence that Zenith is not an office park, it's a real city, but the truth is that if the orchestra died, some people would be embarrassed but nobody's life would be changed much. And that's why they die. Because they're not important. They had the misfortune to exist in cities where frankly people would rather own boats and ride around on them. So let them die. It's too bad for the musicians but the loss of mediocrity is no disservice to music.

Another example of trophy art: a performance of Hamlet by the Royal Theater of Stockholm directed by Ingmar Bergman, done in Swedish, and presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music about ten years ago. I was there. It was painful. It was funny. The only reason to go was for the brand name, Bergman. But Shakespeare in Swedish if you don't understand Swedish has no poetry and without poetry it isn't Shakespeare. It's just stage movement and vocal projection and an audience sitting and thinking, "Well, that must be Ophelia, and I wonder if we aren't getting close to where she throws herself in the river. And is that Horatio or Laertes." They sold out the opera house on the strength of Bergman's name and people couldn't wait to get the hell out at the first intermission and go back to Manhattan and tell everyone how great it was. It was just like the Duke and the Dauphin's show in Huckleberry Finn, except it was in Swedish and nobody was naked.

Trophy art: a performance of the St. Matthew Passion at Carnegie Hall, Seiji Ozawa and the Boston Symphony Orchestra and Chorus. Bach's masterpiece and a beautiful performance, but after a couple hours, with Jesus still not crucified yet, you could see big chunks of the audience fleeing for the exits. I guess they didn't know it would take so long. If you walk out on the St. Matthew Passion, friend, you're a philistine, and why were you there to start with? Because you want to say you were there, I guess.

Thanks to you grantmakers in the arts, we have more trophy art than ever – we have more and more grantmakers taking a direct hand in directing how their money is spent, sitting on boards of arts companies, putting a finger in the soup, and thus we have a thousand

new ventures that look good on paper, programs devoted to encouraging new work by emerging gay/lesbian Native American artists of North Dakota, lots of investment in the fringe – what we seem to be losing is the center.

I admire you for the troubles you endure. I've had less experience than you in giving out money to artists but the experiences I had were all pretty terrible, and my heart goes out to you. Having to read grant applications is a sort of torture I hope to avoid for the rest of my life. I've sat on one State Arts panel and two National Endowment panels and the applications were almost universally unreadable. They were written by people who obviously had concluded that plain concise English would not be to their advantage and so had they mastered an elaborate jargon of artspeak that was pretentious and pseudo-technical and completely opaque – something about an intensive hands-on interactive multicultural experience – that when you got done reading it, it was hard to summarize what was there. I'd like to meet the people who wrote these. I'm curious what they use for a heart. I wonder how they talk if you go to lunch with them. If you were to publish a list of jargon terms and let it be known that any grant containing these words would be thrown out the window, you'd be doing a big favor for the Englishlanguage.

It's a hard job, giving away money. You're players at a casino, and you're hoping to put your chips on somebody who will turn out to be something. You'd rather not, years from now, have your old recipient walk up to you and say, "Remember me? You gave me that quarter-million back in 2000 to produce the big interactive multicultural dairy-farming opera and I hope there's no hard feelings, it was a great learning experience for me, and I have my own Internet company now, and it's worked out so great, that now I have my own foundation, and I wonder if you could recommend an executive director?"

I mentioned some examples of trophy art, let me talk for a moment about art as a fertile part of a normal life.

I am married to a violinist. Her father loves opera, and when she was a little girl, one spring he took her to Northrup Auditorium to see the Metropolitan Opera. They had seats up in the balcony. It was



"Carmen," starring Grace Bumbry. The little girl didn't sit down for three hours. Just stood, watching the stage, listening, taking it all in.

I enjoyed opera before I met her, but after I met her, it became more important to me. Opera is not a trophy to her, or anything symbolic. She is someone who listens to "Madame Butterfly" on the radio and as she hears the soprano sing "Un bel di," she weeps.

Minnesota is a place where you can go see opera once in awhile and a lot of it is pretty good, but New York is where you can see opera almost every day of the week for nine months of the year and choose between competing brands. In Minnesota a whole big part of the audience is really happy to be there, no matter what, and enjoying the fact that the chorus is a lot better than the one at church, and in New York you're surrounded by opera students and would-be singers and the jaded rich and the hardcore opera crowd of heavyset people in dorky clothes who stand around during the intermissions and talk about the performance they saw in 1953 compared to which this one is nothing. Pffffff. And you, who were rather taken with the first act, eavesdrop and you do not envy them their sophistication.

This is real opera. There is no prestige or status in being there, none whatsoever that I'm aware of. There is only the hope that tonight is the night. Going to the opera is like going out with a woman you've hung out with some and know, sort of, and you're hoping tonight you'll make love. Probably you won't, because she's told you she's not that sort of girl and she's told you she doesn't see you that way, that she considers you more of a friend, but you never know.

Extending the analogy, people in New York get to have sex more often than Minnesotans do.

Going to the Met has its moral problems: you pay a big hunk of money to get in, of course, and you sit and look at Tchaikovsky's "The Queen of Spades" and in the second act Catherine the Great makes a brief non-singing appearance well upstage in an immense glittering gown that you take one look at and you think, "Twenty-thousand bucks, minimum," and on your way home, you pass people sleeping in cardboard boxes in the doorway. Resolving this is not easy. But my gosh the things you get to see.

Last season, there was a production of "The Marriage of Figaro" that took your breath away, it was so perfect, with Barbara Bonney and Bo Skovhus, and then a few weeks later, I went to "Der Rosenkavalier," which I'd never seen before, with Susan Graham and Renee Fleming, and we got seats in the very back of the top balcony – when I stood up, I could touch the ceiling – and it moved me so much at the very back of the house, it shook me, it was three hours that passed like a dream. And at the end, I knew that in my life I'll probably get to see this opera a few more times, and that each time, with any luck, it'll be even better, and even if I see an inferior production, still, like a modest wine, it will benefit from the great wine you had first.

I have friends in opera and some of them you may have given grants to, to support new work, and that's fine, and a lot of the new work was undertaken in rebellion against the old warhorses of opera and the conventions of the 19th Century and the new work was intended to breathe new life into opera and armed with all of the arrogance that artists must necessarily summon up in order to take on the world, my friends created new operas with your help that today, a scant two decades later, are dead as a doornail – were dead on arrival, if you ask me – they're just a few lines in a resume now, but "Der Rosenkavalier" and "Carmen" and "The Marriage of Figaro" are a part of people's lives, they go on and on and on, night after night, somewhere, and theaters keep emptying out big crowds of people who after those three hours feel their senses heightened, the world looks different to them, they are strengthened and ennobled. And that is what real art does: it ennobles. As simple as that.

**Cuthbert:** Thank you so much!

We have a few minutes for questions, and I will just wander around with this mike, if people want to raise their hand.

**Keillor:** I'm not sure I want a microphone to come near these people after I've said what I just said! [laughter] But go ahead.

**Q:** I take great exception to what you said

**Keillor:** Yes, sir? Ma'am?

**Q:** about people writing new opera. I totally agree with you about the classics. But how would we progress? After all, Impressionism and Cubism didn't kill the old masters. And I don't think that – at least in the way that you expressed it – just because you had the experience of some crummy modern opera. But think of all the crummy old operas from the 17th century and 18th century!  
[laughter] [applause]

**Keillor:** Very good! I don't think you were asking me a question, were you? [laughter]

**Q:** (Are you) able to defend your position.

**Keillor:** But you are misstating my position. I am not opposed to your giving money to new operas; you should put your money on anything that you like. But do look in the past and see all the dead bodies. And my position simply is that what matters is art – not as a trophy, not as a symbol, nothing else – what matters is the work itself and how it comes across to an audience. And failure is failure and we do have to recognize it.

**Q:** (question unintelligible)

**Keillor:** No, no, no, no, no. No, I'm not talking about all of the new operas; I'm talking about my friends'. [laughter] I am just talking about people I know.

Yes, yes sir?

**Q:** (question unintelligible)

**Keillor:** Now, now! No, no – get right to your point, get to the hard thing that you need to say! [laughter]

**Q:** One thing that I have always wanted and still want to say and that is, how much of your speech was written ahead of time, and how much was ad-lib?

**Keillor:** I wrote my speech for you. Here, it's right here. I thought I needed to say what I wanted to say and I didn't want to just stand up

here and forget what I was about to say. But when I do the show, I don't need to write this down because I know how to talk while trying to think of what to say. [laughter] It's a black art.

But I did want to say something to you in a limited period of time. I actually want to say quite a few things. [pause] Alright, well, that takes care of it then! [laughter]

Yes?

**Q:** (question unintelligible)

**Keillor:** Do you have a tape cassette right now that you are about to offer me? [laughter] No, you don't. Okay. Alright. I mean I would be happy to listen to it if you did.

I don't regard our show as reflecting popular culture at all. I think it's way out of the mainstream. When you say popular culture to me, popular culture to me means the marketed culture, a culture that is marketed to immense audiences through tremendous investment in advertising. We don't advertise, we don't spend any money on it. To me you are talking about Disney, you are talking about Warner Brothers, you are talking about Time Warner – that's popular culture. Our show is made of artists, people with individual visions. They don't have a big organization behind them, they have their own idea of what to do. And most of it does not make for a great career. It has a little tiny niche somewhere, and they are dogged in pursuing their vision. We find them for our show because they come to us and they send us tape cassettes. Any time you do a show that books musicians, you will immediately have a lot of mail. And so we go through that and we hear from other musicians and you listen to a lot of stuff and here's one thing that you just can't get enough of. And who can explain? Who can explain what that is? It just hooks up, that's all. The light comes on. Auditioning is a long, hard, arduous, dreary process. But when you hear it, you really do hear it. [noise] Like that.

Yes?

**Q:** (question unintelligible)

**Keillor:** Somebody did support Bisset. I don't know enough about the history of opera to know who might have, but I believe that Bisset came after – well after the long, long after – the age of patronage. I believe that Bisset was a box office guy. And I believe that Carmen was a huge, huge hit. Verdi was a huge, huge hit in his own day and ever afterward. I mean, your analogy may very well be. The point that you're trying to make, I'm sure, is a good point, but I don't think that I would choose Bisset to make it. [laughter]

What? What? What? What?

**Q:** (question unintelligible)

**Keillor:** Pardon me?

**Q:** Mozart?

**Keillor:** Mozart? Well, I mean Mozart, you know, had to get along on the gifts of a lot of not very bright people, and conniving people. The Archbishop was no great hero. But I would say that Mozart. To Mozart, the help of his family, the support of his family, was probably the most important support in his life. I think families are the great funding agency for the arts, the initial funding agency. And for Mozart, I think that was true.

Yes?

**Q:** (question unintelligible) [laughter]

**Keillor:** Professional wrestling as an emerging arts form. Um, it's very hot now, but I would get in on it quick if I were you. [laughter] If you are thinking of funding a professional wrestling opera, I would want to have that on stage, I think, in about a year or two, because I think the long-term future is not great.

Alright. Yes, in the back?

**Q:** If you were a grantmaker, how would you select whom to fund?

**Keillor:** Select whom to fund?

I would do it in the same way that I assume you do it: hopefully, blindly, looking for whatever clues that you can. [laughter] But I really mean it about grant applications. I could not believe The last time I served on an NEA panel, could not believe what dreadful, dreadful documents these were. The people who wrote these things need to be re-educated. They need to be sent out to work on dairy farms for two years. [laughter] Just like the cultural revolution, they need to be sent out and common sense spoken to them, because they are awful, they're just awful. And it is a terrible thing to waste the time of people who – for good motives and noble motives – spend time working on committees with very little credit and who are seeking to do good, and who are met with this blizzard of nonsense. [laughter] [applause]

Yes?

**Q:** (question unintelligible)

**Keillor:** Do I think grant money helps individual writers with their craft? I can imagine situations in which it would, yes, I can. I can imagine it. And I wouldn't want to stand up here and poo-poo it. But I don't I can't, in all honesty, believe that it's crucial or that a person couldn't recover from the rejection. I just can't I just can't imagine. Writers have to go through so many worse things than rejection by a grantmaker, it seems to me. And the worst thing to go through is to sit and work year after year when you are young and you have a tremendous ego – you *have* to in order to do this. But there are moments of terrible revelation when you look at your stuff and it isn't that good, it just isn't. I'm sorry, it's just not. You want it to be but it's not. How do you last through this? How do you come through the swamp? And you come to a point in your life where you think: Am I willing to waste my life doing this? That's the crucial question for, I think, any artist. Am I willing to waste my life doing something that maybe doesn't really add up or mean much? You know, in comparison to just going off and doing something and earning a lot of money, am I willing to waste my life? That's the question every artist has to answer. And it's not a grantmaking agency that's going to waste your life for you.

My goodness! People got quiet all of a sudden. [laughter] Well!

You are excused, thank you. [applause]

© 2001 Grantmakers in the Arts