

me as good news. Frohnmayer had always seemed to be one of the bad guys. I hardly viewed him as a moderate, let alone a liberal. Around midnight that Friday, February 21, I received a call from a friend who asked me if I had seen the early edition of Saturday's New York Times. I had not.

"Let me read it to you." He skimmed quickly over the cover story on the Frohnmayer resignation, and went to the jump page inside. There, in a piece by William Honan, he read the missing details that gave sense to the past month, tying the entire picture together into the cumulative drama. Apparently the American Family Association (AFA), based in Tupelo, Mississippi, had got hold of and perused "Live Sex Acts" and "Queer City." Although the former contains fairly explicit photos and writing, it was the gay issue that left a bad taste in their mouths.

One of the best pieces in the issue is a poem by performance artist Sapphire called "Wild Thing." It is a stream-of-consciousness narrative from the perspective of one of the Central Park rapists: "And I'm running/running wild/running free.../My thighs pump/thru the air/like tires/rolling down the highway/big & round..." In one section, the narrator describes getting a blow job by Christ behind the church altar. Sapphire later explained that this was drawn from an anecdote she had heard from one youth who had been molested by a priest as an adolescent. But this explanation wasn't necessary. Inasmuch as the piece demonstrated how violence and distrust made up this narrator's life, the reference to Christ was a crowning symbol. Christ, one of the great ideals of hope and trust, had violated and betrayed the narrator, within the fictional framework.

All New York had been wrung through the Central Park Jogger trial. We listened indignantly to the absurd accusations of so many trying to defend the perpetrators: "She wasn't raped at all," said one. "(Her) own boyfriend did it," said another. We repeatedly felt the legitimate anguish for that tragic faceless victim and righteous fury toward the perpetrators. This poem offered a glimpse at the other side: here were the social/psycho ingredients that, combined, make the act coherent; not pardonable, just consistent.

In any case, Honan went on in his article to explain how the AFA—headed by the Rev. Donald Wildmon—had excerpted the work in flyers and made sure every member of Congress saw it. I later obtained a copy of the mailing, entitled "Shut Down the NEA: A Project of the American Family Association," which was sent in a mass mailing and requested that people donate money to the AFA and send pre-written form postcards to the congressmen and senators so that there would be "No more wasting our tax dollars on blasphemous, anti-Christian, offensive 'art.'" The content of Sapphire's poem was specifically cited. Eventually, the poem had worked its way up to the President's office. Frohnmayer faxed a message to every member of Congress explaining that the "Live Sex Acts" issue had not been funded, and that the beleaguered poem in "Queer City" is a work of serious artistic merit.

This had occurred in mid-January, although no one had told us a thing about it. Michael Albo, who works for the Washington-based Artsave Program at the People for the American Way, a conscientious group that tries to defend Constitutional liberties, sent us a letter weeks earlier but unfortunately had mailed it to our old address. We didn't find out about it until it was too late. He also informed us that a cable TV show called "Family News in Focus," broadcasting from deep within the Bible Belt, had



I'm inclined to think that he alone actually generated more antipathy toward censorship than anything else.

It all might have died at that stage, but what really sent the entire issue hurtling back into the limelight, and pushed Frohnmayer out in the process, was Pat Buchanan. Just as prostitutes are swept from the streets during mayoral elections, Buchanan was promising to make the NEA funding choices into a campaign issue during the upcoming Southern primaries. Bush's forcing of Frohnmayer out of the NEA was his way of trying to defuse a potentially explosive political problem. But it didn't stop Buchanan's commercial attacking "Tongues Tied," a partially NEA-funded PBS gay performance piece, from lashing like a homoneurotic tornado through the Bible Belt.

Now, in the wake of all this damage, the pertinent question is: in which storm shelter is America hiding? Bush himself has stated, "It's weird out there." In a March 23 speech to the National Press Club, Frohnmayer warned of "a pervasive strain of anti-intellectualism in American life." Will this be reflected by the election (or reelection) of another tinsel candidate? Or, hurt after a solid recession, recovering from a hollow Gulf victory, and discouraged with voodoo Republicanism, is America headed in another, leftward direction? Is Buchanan a Republican decoy to make Bush appear moderate?

Jesse Helms won't be making any statements on the Senate floor until September; the PLES controversy could be new and exciting artillery for the "obscenity amendment" he has been trying to enforce on the NEA. In any case, an advisor from People for the American Way cautioned me that this is not yet over. In November, I fear we might learn that we are headed rightward toward Buchanan, possibly making the '80s look like a period of moderation.

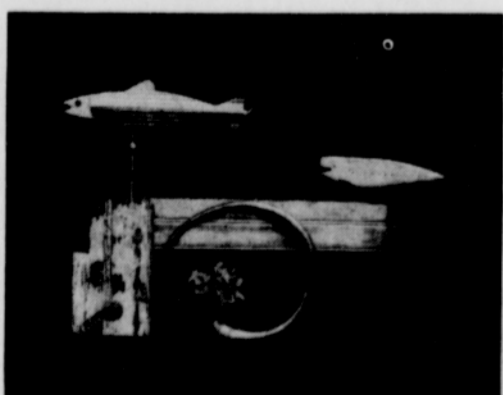
At a time when Russia is headed toward a new-found democracy, America just might be spinning toward a new period of intolerance. The purges in the early 1930s that killed thousands of artists and thinkers in Soviet society has had no equivalent in American history, nor would I suggest that this is the advent of one. Yet Buchanan's attack on the NEA does come with some precedence. In history, different governmental figures who have intervened in the arts have consolidated powers and reputations in the process. Commissar Andrei Zhdanov of Leningrad was able to initiate a movement against "the cosmopolitanism trend" in the Soviet literature of the late '40s, attacking poet Anna Akhmatova, among others. Akhmatova survived. Her work has now been accorded its proper place in world literature. Zhdanov's reputation, however, was washed away with anti-Stalinist waves. Here is where I would place Buchanan: a petty opportunist whose name will be long forgotten after those he injured have endured. Is this whistling in the dark age? Is it a wish on my part? It's a prayer.

Arthur Nersesian is a Manhattan native and a long-time resident of the East Village. He is managing editor of Portable Lower East Side, and author of a book of poetry, "Tompkins Square & Other Ill-Fated Riots." His poetry was featured in the Jan-Feb 1990 NCTE.

Agnes Field is an Astoria artist, and a friend of Nersesian. She illustrated and designed the NCTE feature of his poetry.

Ricciardi
GALLERY
108 TENTH STREET

Dick Libby
fish whimsy
mixed media wall sculptures



Brenda Mickelson
paintings on paper, pottery, and
furniture

Art Espresso
ASTORIA
503/325-5450

CLATSOP COMMUNITY COLLEGE
ARTS ON STAGE 1991-92
&
COLUMBIA RIVER BICENTENNIAL CELEBRATION

presents

Words by
W.S. Gilbert
Music by
Arthur Sullivan

"the pure and holy spirit of nonsense"
"a bombastic success"
"calculated, deadpan, delirious fun"



OR
"The Lass Who Loved a Sailor"

Astoria High School
May 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16 8 pm
Matinees May 10 & 17 2 pm

Tickets: \$6 students & seniors - \$8 general admission
Tickets available at CCC Library, Books, Etc., and at door

The world's first erotic metaphysical novel

EQUATOR

THE STORY AND THE LETTERS

V. O. BLUM

Published by Times Eagle Books

"Feeling brave? I dare you to read EQUATOR."

Ecstasy
Volume 1, Issue 1
Winter 1991

"Just may become an underground classic."

The Book Reader
September 1989

Rushed to you UPS from
Diesel: A Bookstore
5820 Shell Mound
Emeryville, CA 94608

California readers, \$10; elsewhere in the U.S., \$11