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NEA chairman visits Omaha

By Paula Lavigne
Senior Reporter

"Community and culture help give individuals a sense of who they are."

JANE ALEXANDER
NEA chairman

OMAHA — The arts in America need more support to flourish and to impact society, according to National Endowment for the Arts chairman Jane Alexander.

"We (the NEA) invest in your artistic expression and excellence and what that will mean to your community," Alexander said Thursday in a speech at the Omaha Community Playhouse.

Her appearance was sponsored by United Arts Omaha and the Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce in honor of their joint campaign "Say Yes to the Arts."

"I say yes to Omaha and to Nebraska," she said.

Alexander's ties to Nebraska spanned three generations.

"My grandfather, Daniel Quigley, settled here in Nebraska, in the town of North Platte," she said. "Daniel Quigley was a doctor, and at one time, personal physician to Buffalo Bill Cody."

Alexander said her family worked with the Union Pacific Railroad, one of the event's sponsors.

"For the past year, I have been crossing America, like the railroads cross our country, and I have come to listen to the American story and to the needs of this community," she said.

She said President Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary Clinton, had made a commitment to the arts across the country. She cited the sculpture exhibit at the White House curated by George Neupert, director of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery.

Clinton's GOALS 2000 and his

introduction of a cultural dimension to national policy were positive moves toward arts support, she said.

"The river that runs through the conversations I've had with the American people is the need to renew the connection between the arts and the life of the community," she said.

Alexander said she set aside two goals for the NEA's future. She said she wanted to turn around the public image of the NEA and see "that the best art reaches the most people."

She also said she hoped the NEA would encourage Congress to support a climate of art, culture, inquiry and expression. Congress cut this year's NEA budget by 2 percent to \$167.4 million. The NEA has awarded more than 100,000 grants in the past 29 years.

"It's estimated that every dollar we give generates about \$11 to \$26 in any given community," she said. "That's a record other agencies just can't match."

NEA funding goes toward several arts organizations in Lincoln and Omaha, including the Lied Center for Performing Arts, the Omaha Magic Theater, Opera Omaha and the Nebraska Chamber Orchestra.

"Chances are that you have right now in your pockets the 65 cents that

each of you pays in taxes yearly for arts — the price of a cup of coffee," she said.

Alexander said she wanted to engage people in the cultural life of their community through these organizations.

"The neighborhoods are where change happens. If all politics is local, all change is local too," she said. "One person does make a difference."

She said the arts were a way to bring people in a community together.

"... We come together in our houses of worship, at sporting events, and at arts events to attend a festival, experience a play, hear the communal voice of a poet, a singer, a painter," she said.

"Community and culture help give individuals a sense of who they are. They help us find our authentic voice and guide the life of the spirit."

Schools are the first place to start this community renewal, she said.

"Children love to dream and to create responses to the world around them as they grow and shape their own identity," she said.

"Art is a great tool for developing our intellectual, emotional and aesthetic tastes and capacities, yet some see it as a frill among our diffuse educational priorities," Alexander said.

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Dr. Rashi Fein, Professor of Economics of Medicine in the Department of Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School will be speaking November 29, 1994, 3:30 p.m. at the Nebraska Union Ballroom.

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Gail Wilensky is a Senior Fellow at Project HOPE, an international health foundation, where she analyzes and develops policies relating to health reform and ongoing changes in the medical market place. In this capacity, she testifies frequently before Congressional committees, acts as an informal advisor to members of Congress and other elected officials, and speaks before numerous business and consumer groups.

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BOOK Reviews

"The Norton Book of Ghost Stories"
Edited by Brad Leithauser
W.W. Norton
Grade: B+

It's not too difficult to get a horror or mystery novel, but it's almost impossible to find a definitive collection of classic and contemporary ghost stories.

Until now.

"The Norton Book of Ghost Stories" is a new anthology that includes 28 of the eeriest hard-to-find tales from the past 130 years. Authors include Henry James, M.R. James and Oliver Onions, as well as writers not so well-known for writing ghost stories, such as Muriel Spark, Shirley Jackson, Edith Wharton and V.S. Pritchett.

Everything one could want in a book of ghost stories is here: haunted houses, towers, forests and everything in between.

None of the stories are blood-and-guts horror — just pure cold spots, shadows and ghostly screams.

Elizabeth Taylor's creepy story, "Poor Girl," is a tale of a haunted governess, a theme similar to Henry James's book "The Turn of the Screw," and it is one of the most interesting tales in the collection.

Close behind in its terror is "The Tooth," a tale by Shirley Jackson taken from the book "The Lottery."

Even romance finds a place in this book, in Hector Hugh Munroe's tale "The Open Window."

From the bone-rattling pace of M.R. James's "Count Mangus" to Edith Wharton's subtle scares in "The Looking Glass," the anthology includes stories for all tastes.

Editor Brad Leithauser said in the introduction that the stories he chose represented their authors well. He decided not to include ghost stories by more famous writers like Charles Dickens and the Brontës, whose works are much easier to access than many of these stories.

"The Norton Book of Ghost Stories" is a fantastic book for anyone who loves a good scare or just

appreciates great writing.

Read it, but plan on keeping a light on when you go to bed, because it is not a matter of whether you believe in ghosts — as Leithauser wrote in his introduction:

"... the universe is unsettling whether it is inhabited by spirits or whether we — lone walkers on a bitter night — are alone in the windy darkness."

— Steven Spurling

"Taltos"
Anne Rice
Alfred A. Knopf
Grade: C+

The mysterious Mayfair witches concoct their special brew of romance, evil and intrigue in Anne Rice's latest novel, "Taltos," but their powers are running short.

"Taltos" is a continuation of the Mayfair witches' saga that began with "The Witching Hour" and continued with "Lasher."

Known for her captivating writing in "The Vampire Chronicles," Rice tries to polish her witch series with the same finesse, but leaves the readers in a puzzling melodrama.

"Taltos" picks up where "Lasher" left off. Lasher, the destructive spirit, is no more. The powerful Rowan Mayfair is rendered sterile and the Mayfair legacy is passed on to her worldly cousin, 13-year-old Mona Mayfair. Michael Curry, Rowan's husband, awaits his wife's recovery.

"Taltos" also introduces Ash, or Ashlar, as another true Taltos — an archaic supernatural being defined by his incredible height and whitened hair. A Taltos can be bred by a witch.

Ash poses as a modern corporate giant. He has a jumbled past involving the Mayfair clan and the powerful Talamasca — the supernatural investigative institution.

Ash is Rice's attempt to create another vampire Lestat. Ash falls short of this tragic character because his powers are too relative.

"Taltos" does entice the audience with its descriptive narrative of New Orleans, Scotland and Lon-

don, but it is a limited audience. Unlike "The Vampire Chronicles," the witch novels must be read in chronological order with notes in hand — lest one forget Uncle Julien and the other million Mayfairs brought up in vague reference.

Unless the readers are devoted Rice readers, they will have a hard time picking up "Taltos." For Rice followers, "Taltos" still provides stimulating reading; however, it starts to fall into a continual soap opera format, losing its opportunity to expose new philosophy and intrigue.

Rice created a fascinating set of new characters, mainly Mary Jane Mayfair, Mona's eccentric country cousin. Mary Jane's powers compare to Mona's and the two form a formidable union.

Her characters, with their intricate morals and superobjectives, fill in former roles. The Talamasca's Aaron Lightner is replaced by Yuri, his apprentice. Ash takes the spotlight from Lasher, and Mona overcomes Rowan.

Rice manages to weave an intricate plot, taking her characters into new facets of their personalities and idiosyncracies. The Talamasca, once the pristine and studios order founded on solid tradition and ethics, undergoes a revolution of corruption and disillusion.

Once known for her sexual romance novellas, Rice abstains from these glorified escapades in "Taltos." Only a few scenes sprinkle the pages, which is too bad because they were always quite enrapturing.

As an excellent writer, Rice is incapable of producing an inherently bad work, but it seems as if she's headed on a path to purely commercial-driven entertainment writing — the "Stephen King syndrome."

It would be nice if "Taltos" could be as enlightening as "The Vampire Lestat," but it falls short of Rice's entrancing skill for description and narrative. "Lasher" simply begged for a sequel, and Rice complied.

— Paula Lavigne