San Diego artists fight 'obscenity witch hunt'

By Divina Infusino

By Divina Infusino Arta Writer

ynn Schuette scrutinized the replica of Picasso's "Guernica" hanging on the wall at a downtown restaurant. "Harrumpf." she said as her eyes narrowed. "Maybe we can find something to censor in that."

As director of Sushi, the city's most avant-garde performance gallery, Schuette was only half-joking. The downtown gallery is on the front line of a freedom-of-speech controversy hounding the national arts community, one that is taking place on several fronts.

The most public has been the turmoil at the National Endowment for the Arts, the \$171 million federal arts-funding agency, lifeblood for a multitude of arts endeavors in nearly every community in the country. It has been under terrific pressure over alleged obscene projects it has funded.

Other battles, meanwhile, are being waged in popular music (personified by the raucous, profane band 2 Live Crew) and in Illim

sanified by the raucous, profane band 2 Live Creey and in Illim
(socused on the sexually explicit The Me Up, The Me Down' and "The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover." both of which received X-ratings from the Motion Picture Association of America). Sush has often presented Karen Finley and Holly Hughes, two of four provocative performance artists awarded grants recently by the NEA, only to have them rescinded by agency director John Frohmayer. In her performance, Finley, among other things, smears foodstuff on her nude body and howls angrily at the audience. Frohmmayer's action, some claim, was the result of political heat from Sen. Jesse Helms, R.C., and a coalition of conservative groups leading a charge against the NEA.

If Sushi brings Finley and Hughes back to San Diego (and they've already been booked for later this year), the small arts organization could risk losing NEA funding, according to Schuette. They (Finley and Hughes) are hard-working professionals," she said, "artists of integrity, and I have no intention of not booking them again. The last thing I want to do is self-censor."



Strangling the arts

San Diego's arts community, despite what some have termed "the obscenity witch hunt" afoot in the country. In a series of interviews with The San Diego Union, local artists and arts groups, all of whom receive NEA money, say they will fight any attempt to inhabit their choices of material and their artistic independence.

"I will not do the censor's work," said Arthur Ollman, executive director of the Museum of Photographic Arts in Balboa Park. "Nothing that we've done has been obscene. If something has artistic value, it is not obscene." The museum's current show, "Revelaciones:

The Art of Manuel Alvarez Bravo," contains photos of modity and graphic volence using raphic volence.

"I didn't censor myself before I got an NEA grant, and I don't intend to now," said Deborah Small, a San Diego artist who specializes in socially critical installations and was featured recently at the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art in La Jolla.
"No one is soing to builty me."

Art in La Jolia.

"No one is going to bully me,"
said Des McAnuff, artistic director
of the La Jolia Playhouse. "I refuse
to be pushed around by prudish
thugs." The playhouse's recent
"Life During Wartime" contained
scenes of graphic sexuality.

"It will st affect the artistic decisions of the Centro," said Ernesto Guerrero, ascutive director of Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park, "de would never dictate artistic espression. If our funding might be in Popardy, we would have to deal with that issue when it came along."

came alors,
"We have a commitment to producing the work of new artists,
sometimes conciveratial artists,
and we will also ell-censor," said
Adrian Stewart, managing director
of the San Diego Repertory Theatre and conder of the San Diego
Arts Coalibio. "If we did, we
would be istling a small group of

people determine what we do." The theater's production of "Burn This," which closed yesterday, con-tained frank sexual situations.

Photographs spurred debate

The artworks that provoked the debate — graphic homoerotic photos by the late Robert Mapplethorpe and a photo titled "Piss Christ" by New York artist Andres Serrano, who has since received death threats — are among the works funded by \$1,000 NEA grants during the past three decades. The furor has made Finley, Mapplethorpe and Serrano — once obscure artists operating on the fringes — into topics for debate over the family dinner table and in Congress.

One side argues that tax support allows lawmakers to set limits that go beyond the prohibition against constitutionally defined obscenity. The other side — which includes most artists — says grants shouldn't come with strings.

They note that peer review panels screen NFA or and nominees on

ne other side — which includes most artists — says grants shouldn't come with strings. They note that peer review panels screen NEA grant nominees on the basis of artistic merit. To thelms, depictions of same-sex affection are automatically suspect. The Helms amendment, tacked onto the appropriations bill last fall, bans 'homoeroticism'. The Rev. Donald Wildmon's American Family Association, of Tupelo, Mass., a group that led the protests a garnily Association, of Tupelo, Mass., a group that led the protests a garnily association, of Tupelo, Mass., a group that led the protests a garnily shace in the most of the strings of the s

because it is out of their realm, and so is art."

The conflict over the NEA "is a hysterical overreaction to a hand ful of images out of millions," says Cathleen Sullivan," Harvard law professor and First Amendment specialist. "It's like saying, 'Let's shut down the Pentagon because of

See Arts on Page E-10



Robert Plant To perform here Thursday

Robert Plant

Whole lotta desire to leave past behind

By George Varga Pop Music Critic

pop Music Critic
His innate sense of rhythm notwithstanding, Robert Plant is a
man out of time.
Not with himself, not with his
music, but with a massive number
of rock fans around the world who
would prefer that, rather than
continue to grow and experiment,
he remain firmly grounded in the
nast.

past.

It is there, nearly two decades in the past to be exact, that millions of rock fans savor their fondest memories of Plant, who rose to fame as the quintessential singer in the quintessential rock band of the late 196% and early 70s.

The name of the band is Led

or aime as the quintessential rock band of the late 1800s and early 70s. The name of the band is Led Zeppelin. And, for better and worse, it is a name that will always be synonymous with Plant, who in 1968 joined the fleedings blues-rock quartet formed by ex-Yardbirds guitarist Jimmy Page, veteran studio session bassist John Paul Jones and brash young drum dynamo John Bonham.

Quickly casting off its blues-rock trappings, Led Zeppelin became the prototypical heavymetal band – and one of the figgest pop successes ever – until Bonham's death by "alcoholic misadventure" in 1979 brought the English group crashing to a halt with a loud, ominous thud.

Today, 11 years later, the band that defined heavy-metal 22 years ago with its self-titled debut album still lives – on countless "classic rock" radio stations, home stereo systems and most certainly in the hearts of the countless fans who breathlessly await the frequently rumorder emining members.

"I don't think anything we did was revolutionary." Plant mused of the band he soared to fame with all those years ago. "We just had a ridiculous kind of power, but I don't think we were doing anything other than playing white blues, initially."

Gutsy ballet from Down Under knows no fear



By Anne Marie Welsh

Ars Critic

Ask Maina Glelgud what makes the Australian Ballet different, and she names "gutsiness,
vitality and energy," the same stuff Aussies —
at least the men — are made of.

Dig a little deeper, however, and this company director reveals her theatrical lineage as
great-great niece to legendary British actress
Ellen Terry, niece of Sir John Gleigud, and
daughter of Hungarian actress Zita Gordon.
"The dancers have interpretive skills that go
right through the ranks. Every corps de ballet
member is intent upon the drama," Gleigud
said. "I was flabbergasted with the difference
between them and the English or French companies. In Australia, you could never tell it was
a dancer's first time in a role. I don't know
why, but they are unembarrassed, unafraid of
drama."

What: The Australian Bailet When: 8 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday; mat-hees at 2 hoes at 2 for one County Performing Arts Cen-ter, 600 orm Center Drive, Costa Mesa Tickets: \$14 to \$47 Information (74) 740-2000 of (74) \$56-ARTS.

Before this summer's tour, the Australian Ballet had made only one visit to the United States. The 1976 tour served mostly as a vehicle for the lingering charms of balletina Marcel for the lingering the most of the lingering with the work of the lingering the line with the work of the lingering the line with the l

nies, and the very high cost of touring kept the com-pany away from the United States with now.

When Gielgud, now 45, signed on abe says, there was already a very good repertory in

Australia, including the classics "Swan Lake" and "Giselle," John Cranko's best full-evening works "Romeo and Julief" and "Onegin," as well as others. The great Danish dancer Eric Bruhn staged his "La Spiphide" just before he died three years ago. Then Gielgud made it her business to acquire ballets by Jerome Robbins, George Balanchine, Anthony Tude, Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Glen Tetley and Sir Frederick Asthon.

"Then I brought in several ballets by (Maurice) Bejart," said the former dancer who had distinguished herself as a guest with Bejart's Ballet of the XXth Century. "Now we have several very talented young Australian choreographers."

The state-subsidized company operates out the Malbourne with eight state.

The state-subsidized company operates out of a new building in Melbourne with eight studies and, as Gielgud puts it, 'huge airy windows I fought for. The production department is located opposite the stage door of the theater. It was all built by the government.'

A majority of the company's 60 dancers are graduates of the company school, a three-year course that gathers students from all over Aus-

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Art

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Music

Asleep at the Wheel - E-3

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■ Cross Currents E-5

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one improper toilet seat on an aircraft."

The American Family Associa-tion mounted a massive letter-writ-ing campaign directed by Wildmon and Pat Robertson's Christian Coaand Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition, inundating Congress with
warnings that a vote for the NEA
would be political suicide. Helms
took up the issue in Congress, and
it led to "an obscenity oath" for all
NEA grant recipients, promising
that the money would not be used
to fund works "including but not
limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual
exploitation of children or individuals engaged in sex acts."
Some well-known NEA grant recipients, such as theatical producer Joseph Papp, returned their
grant money in protest.
Equality troublesome, at least to

auger Joseph rapp, retunited using grant money in protest.

Equally troublesome, at least to arts groups, was Frohamayer's overturning the decision of the NEA's peer group panels, a well-established process of evaluation where artists, critics and those knowledgeable in a given form decide who should get grants. Frohamyer rejected four grants awarded to Finley, Hughes and performance artists Tim Miller and John Fleck. (Prohamayer did not respond to requests for an interview from The San Diego Union.)

In Costa Mesa, the City Council withheld a \$30,000 grant to South Coast Repertory, a respected Tony.

Coast Repertory, a respected Tony Award-winning theatrical compa-ny, after the repertory distributed fliers in its programs supporting fliers in its programs supporting the NEA. Although it eventually re-leased the money to the repertory company, the Costa Mesa City Council has also placed limits on

the types of arts activities that can be produced with city funds. "The federal funding issue is just a red flag," said Alan Levey, man-aging director of the La Jolla Play-house. "Really what's being chal-lenged is our freedom of speech, the willingness to tolerate diverse points of view."

points of view."

The arts and entertainment world has rallied, applying its own pressure and lobby — with some effect. Mayors David Dinkins in New York City, Norman B. Rice in Seattle and Tom Bradley in Los Angeles demanded that Prohmayer reinstate the four grants he overturned, be has not done so. There has been a counter campaign of letter-writing, Capitol Hill Appearances by stars such as Kevin Kline and Kathleen Turner, and newspaper ads sponsored by such groups as People for the American Way and the American Arts Alliance, a consortium of arts organizations.

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organizations.

Last month, the NEA softened its obscenity clause to be identical to the U.S. Supreme Court definition of obscenity, which requires that the average person will perceive the work obscene "when taken as a whole," as determined by "contemporary community standards."

The bill to extend the NEA's life for another five years has been delayed until September as a part of a "cooling-off period." An increase in funding has been proposed for next year.

next year. "Make no mistake," said Sam

Woodhouse, producing director of the San Diego Repertory Theatre, whose credits include directing "Burn This." "We are making art in

a climate of fear. The battle has just begun. The debate has yet to fully take place."

"This environment has artists and arts organizations in a very difficult position," said paird Avalos, a San Diego sculptor and visual artist who has created socially provocative work about bories uses and the providence of the pr

ongoing censorship."
"I'm going to do to entrost to
ensure that the recent events won't
affect our artistic decigons," said
Hugh Davies, director at the San
Diego Museum of Contemporary
Art in La Jolia. "If anything, there
may be reaction in the other direction. You might see an emphasis on
programming considered controversial."

Said Jean Isaacs, artistic direc-tor of 3's Company, a San Diego dance company, "As for the artists, I think all of this will tend to radi-calize them more, conservative trends do that."

trends do that."
"One might think that the (NEA) situation wouldn't effect an organization like the San Diego Symphony. The situation is rightening to any institution that houses 80 artists. It's not that far-feched that someone could come along and make a case that what we do to obscene. They could object to the performance of a week by a homoserval composer."
"What happenes when have

"What happens when you have the like of Jesse Helms as the ar-biter of what's good and bad is that you will prevent artists from doing

One side argues that tax support allows lawmakers to set limits

... The other side says grants shouldn't come with strings.

what they are supposed to do," said Dr. Warren Kessler, president of the San Diego Symphony board. "Artists are supposed to express themselves"

"Artists are supposed to express themselves."
"Our concern is the artistic future of this country," said Tom Hall, managing director of the Old Globe Theater. "If the NEA submits to pressure, then even the Globe would be affected. Who knows how far it could go? That's why we are fighting this so hard."
"We're going to do exactly what we've always done," said Steven Brezzo, director of the San Diego Museum of Art. "About 50 percent of our paintings could offend people. We are going to continue to educate people about art and look to the NEA to help us."
"There are always things we

ucate people about art and look to the NEA to help us."

"There are always things we may do that could be considered obscene by someone," said Ian Campbell, director general of the San Diego Opera. "If you do, for instance, a production of 'Salome' where the lady ends up naked, Pat Robertson would find that offensive, even though it is art. Never assume that art will not offend. Even the greatest art will offend. The question is, who decides?"
"Art is not just a repository for old ideas. The battlefield is new ideas," said Jack O'Brien, artistic director of the Old Globe. "What's controversial now may be old hat

in 10 months. To limit the artists vision is a devastating thing to put on the imagination.'

Obscenity a political issue

Some in the arts say the furor over obscenity is reaching a fever pitch because it is an issue politicans can easily latch on to "The right wing doesn't have the communists to fight anymore," said Beeb Salzer, a professor of fine arts at San Diego State University who is completing a research. who is completing a research project on government funding for the arts. "It's no coincidence that most of

"It's no coincidence that most of the groups involved in this censor-ship campaign have been pro-life people," said Davies of the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. "They've seemed to have lost on that issue. So they're looking for

on that issue. So they're looking for another common enemy,"
"We've got a population that doesn't read, doesn't understand the world scope, doesn't have the time or patience for the issues," said Ollman. "No one understands the savings and loan crisis. This is much extern."

the savings and loan crisis. This is much easier."

"The right is full of anxiety about the new demographics in this country," said Elizabeth Sisco, a San Diego photographer and instaliation artist. "They are trying to maintain a white-culture power base. They are after a purification of American culture that can be compared to the Third Reich, when 12,000 artworks were desecrated because they depicted inferior racial types. Obscenity has become the communism of the '90s. It's the given that holds the right together."

glue that holds the right together."
"The conservative right sees this as a golden opportunity to dismantle a liberal institution," McAnuff

"This issue is an open micro-

"This issue is an open microphone where anyone can get up and proclaim themselves a hero." O'Brien said. "The arts are a safe target. Obscently in the arts is a diversionary tactic, while corruption goes unnoticed. In 20 years, historians will look back and say, "What was all that about?"

As for the short-term effects of the controversy, Schuette said. "It is fostering healthy dialogue. But in the long run, I'm afraid it will daunt new artists' creativity and that the upcoming Karen Finleys and Holly Hughes won't have a place to present their work.

"The fact is that we need to see work with adult thems. Adults

"The fact is that we need to see work with adult themes. Adults have issues to confront, and it's legitimate to work those out in art." Said Sisco, "People will realize we can't take our liberties for granted, that we have to keep exercising them in a daily way or else we will end up like the lone soldier in Tianamen Square crying, Give us our freedom back." The artists are just the sacrifical lambs in all this. The issue int about whether federal dollars should be used for the arts, because every day our tax dollars are being spent on things that we find morally reprehensible. "Instead," Sisco said, "this is a crisis facing our democracy. Can

crisis facing our democracy. Can the government support the demo-cratic process of choice? Can the leadership embrace the diversity of American life?"

Cox News Service reports are included in this article.

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