

Revenue minister's remarks infuriate arts organizations

Marcel Masse attempts damage control by quelling concerns raised by Otto Jelinek's surprise attack on lesbian and gay theatre group funding

By KATE LAZIER

Reacting to pressure from arts groups across the country, minister of communications Marcel Masse issued a statement last week affirming the federal government's commitment to arm's-length funding for the Canada Council and other federal cultural agencies.

The statement answers speculation that had arisen from federal revenue minister Otto Jelinek's suggestion last month that the government would abandon arm's-length funding policies — the principle that the government should not interfere in the awarding of cultural

C U L T U R E

grants — in the next federal budget, expected in February.

"Nothing in the debate of individual grants by the Canada Council casts the slightest doubt on this (arm's-length) commitment," says Masse. "Such debate, however, is a legitimate and indeed desirable part of the democratic process."

The controversy arose out of statements made by Jelinek, the MP from Oakville-Milton, at a gathering of the Milton chamber of commerce.

"Some of these ridiculous grants

are enough to make me bring up," said Jelinek, a former professional figure skater and longtime right-winger, referring specifically to a \$60,000 Canada Council grant to Toronto-based gay and lesbian theatre company Buddies in Bad Times. Jelinek made special reference to Drag Queens On Trial, a critically acclaimed and popular piece presented by Buddies in 1985. (In fact, only about \$6,000 of government money was devoted to that play's production.)

"Whether the arm's-length funding is considered sacrosanct or not, we're going to tamper with it," said the minister, quoted in the Burlington Spectator on November 24.

In the December 5 edition of the Toronto Star, Jelinek charged that the grants to Buddies and others were "dumb," "stupid" and an abuse of taxpayers' money. "The granting agencies which use taxpayers' money must be accountable," he said, after suggesting that the Canada Council spends money inappropriately and that the government should be more involved in its funding decisions.

Government meddling

But local theatre groups are quick to react to the prospect of government meddling in arts funding.

"When Jelinek talks about accountability," says Sky Gilbert, artistic director of Buddies, "he's really talking about allegiance to himself and his right-wing values."

"While it's great that Masse is now defending arm's-length funding, we still have reason to be angry because no one has apologized for Jelinek's homophobia or aspersions on the gay community. No one has reprimanded him. Yet it is encouraging because, as long as we have arm's length, we have something to protect us."

Jelinek refused repeated requests



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Sky Gilbert, artistic director of *Buddies in Bad Times*, is relieved by recent assurances that arts funding will remain at arm's length, but he is still outraged by Otto Jelinek's unrepentant homophobia.

to comment on Masse's recent statement.

Jini Stolk, executive director of the Toronto Theatre Alliance, points to the council's system of peer juries and its politically appointed board as proof that an adequate system of checks and balances exists within the council.

Members of the cultural community say Jelinek's threats against arm's-length funding might have been dismissed as the rhetoric of a "loose cannon" had it not been for the government's slow response to the issue and the success of like-minded politicians in the U.S. An amendment passed in the States has made erotic gay art ineligible for funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the American equivalent of the Canada Council.

In Canada, it appears that Jelinek's sudden interest in Canada Council policies has been piqued by the National Citizens' Coalition, a right-wing lobby group that opposes all government funding for the arts. In late November, the group sent out a 20-page booklet to

MPs and the media, which outlines what it sees as inappropriate public spending.

The booklet points to nine Canada Council grants and prizes. One is the \$160,000 given to *Buddies* from 1985 to 1989. Others include a \$5,000 translation prize for Jovette Marchessault's book *Lesbian Triptych*, published by the Women's Press, and a \$9,252 prize to translate the seminal feminist theory work, *The Politics of Reproduction*, by Toronto writer Mary O'Brien.

"We picked out those grants that are sort of outrageous," says David Somerville of the coalition. "They're things that people would raise their eyebrows at and would help get the point home."

But Gilbert warns that the dynamic of this moralizing in arts funding will have drastic repercussions on creative expression. "If the Canada Council's arm's-length status is not sacrosanct, then all artists, except maybe conservative writers, are in danger." ●