

Keillor praises 'embarrassing' art

Knight-Ridder News Service

WASHINGTON — For two hours Thursday, art, music and theater directors repeatedly used a baseball analogy to defend the National Endowment for the Arts before a Senate subcommittee that will decide its future.

They compared federal funding of the 20 or so projects later labeled as "obscene" or "inappropriate" to fielding errors committed by an all-star player who hit 85,000 home runs, the approximate number of projects funded by the National Endowment for the Arts.

But Garrison Keillor, the best-selling author and radio star, quickly reversed the analogy in his five-minute testimony in support of the 25-year-old program, which awarded \$147 million in grants last year.

"The endowment has made the mistake of embarrassing itself on 20 occasions, and I wish it would do so more often," Keillor said.

"I don't regard those 20 'controversial' pieces as errors. I wish there were more — 30 or 50 at least," he said. "The lesser number is testimony to how timid and repressed the arts are."

Other experts who testified Thursday later said they agreed with Keillor, but lacked Keillor's laid-back ability to make the mes-



Keillor

sage palatable to the Senate subcommittee on education, arts and humanities.

Indeed, the senators appeared to appreciate Keillor's message, which was echoed throughout the hearing: reauthorize the program as it has been since its inception in 1965, without restrictions as to who receives the grants. Legislation establishing the NEA expires this year.

President Bush has already supported reauthorizing the program without new restrictions.

In 1974, Keillor received an NEA grant for "A Prairie Home Companion," his immensely popular public radio program that ran for 13 years until he left the show and his home state of Minnesota in 1987.

"When you have success, attention and glorious offers almost suffocate you," said Keillor. "But the endowment is there before anyone knows you. That's the beauty of it ..."

"The National Endowment has decided to take risks by backing unknown people who may leap up and embarrass you," he said.

Lately, the program has been embarrassed by such federally funded projects as a show in New York featuring an erotic dancer and photographic exhibits that included photographs of a Christ-like figure shooting heroin and another of a crucifix in a jar of urine. A 1989 exhibit of photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, many of them homoerotic, also outraged conservative members of Congress.