

NEA-FUNDED ATHEY OFFENDS CATHOLICS

Scheduled to perform at P.S. 122 in Manhattan this weekend is Ron Athey, an artist who is funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Athey's performance, "Four Scenes in a Harsh Life." has already evoked considerable controversy due to its vulgar nature. In this production. Athey, who is HIV positive. sheds the blood of" a naked man on stage (he has also shed his own blood). Importantly, he uses Catholic symbols to promote his message.

The Village Voice described "Four Scenes in a Harsh Life'" as follows: "After donning latex gloves and rubbing the man with alcohol, Athey began to pinch up folds of skin at the man's waist, back, neck, upper arm, and inserted long needles with feathers at one end: arrows for St. Sebastian. Coating his hands with oil, Athey began to anoint the flock pressed against the stage. Then he turned and removed the arrows from the naked man's body and untied him. Athey lifted the man – who looked weak – then, kneeling, he cradled him in the image of Pieta."

Kathy Halbreich of Minneapolis' Walker Art Center has said that Athey's program should be understood in the context of "the rituals of the church and the body and blood or Christ being used." A press release for Athey has stated that his work is "surrounded by religious iconography" and that when his body is "pierced and covered with his own blood [it] is evocative of Saint Sebastian." Athey is known to use "a crown of thorns" (actually a "halo of needles") to draw blood: he has also stuck hypodermic needles in his arms.

Commenting on the upcoming program was Dr. William A. Donohue, president of the Catholic League:

That Ron Athey wants to offend Christians, and Catholics in particular, is not newsworthy. That he has succeeded with the help of the Federal Government, and with the explicit endorsement of NEA chair, Jane Alexander, is. Taking liberties with the revered icons of anyone's religion is shameful, and it is particularly shameful that the Clinton administration, which has amassed an embarrassing record with Roman Catholics, should fail to separate itself from Athey's blasphemy. Those who boast of compassion and respect for diversity should be the first ones to criticize someone like Athey. Not to do so is suggestive of more than hypocrisy. It suggests contempt of elementary standards of public decency and disrespect for the Catholic religion."

The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights is the nation's largest Catholic civil rights organization. It defends the right of Catholics—lay and clergy alike—to participate in American life without defamation or discrimination.