

Oral Testimony of  
Anita Stewart, Executive & Artistic Director, Portland Stage, Maine;  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Public Hearing – March 18, 2015

It is an honor and a privilege to speak with you today about the National Endowment for the Arts, whose mission is to advance artistic excellence, innovation and creativity for the benefit of individuals and communities. This agency is, I believe, essential to the health and well-being of our country.

I am the Executive & Artistic Director of Portland Stage, and Portland Stage is a member of Theatre Communications Group, the national organization for the American not-for-profit professional theater. From this vantage point, I believe my experience in Maine is a reflection what is happening in cities and towns across this nation where citizens are connecting with artists and art-making as a result of NEA funding provided by you.

Support from the NEA helps arts organizations like Portland Stage become economic drivers in our communities. In a city with a population of just over 60,000, Portland Stage draws 50,000 individuals to our productions and programs on a yearly basis. We have subscribers and students who regularly travel over 125 miles one-way to attend our productions. This year, we will serve over 13,000 young people through our education programs. Portland Stage spends the majority of its \$2.1 million operating budget to pay artists and staff salaries, on travel and housing for artists, to purchase supplies to build shows, and for building repairs, utilities and property tax. A comprehensive study developed by the city of Portland in 2010 shows that arts and cultural organizations in Portland spent \$26.5 million in salaries, supplies and goods. In addition, this study found that arts attendees spent an average of \$28.25 per person per event in parking, restaurants and shopping as a direct result of their attendance at an event. Those numbers add up so that during fiscal year 2010, the aggregate spending by nonprofit arts and culture organizations and their audiences in the city of Portland totaled \$49.2 million dollars. The dollars that arts organizations raise through ticket sales and donations go directly back into the community.

The arts boost the economy. They create a vibrant cultural center drawing people to the region. But they do more as well. The arts engage, inspire, and transform communities.

I would like to share with you the impact that NEA funding is providing in my community right now. Next week, Portland Stage starts rehearsals for a new play called *Papermaker*, written by Monica Wood and funded, in part, by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. This new play tells the story of a true-blooded American mill owner and his well-educated daughter as they unexpectedly find themselves face-to-face with real-live blue collar families participating in a strike. In this play, Monica deftly weaves "a tale of two Americas." Her fictional Maine town provides a backdrop for

examining relationships between white collar executives and blue collar workers, between parents and children, and between realists and dreamers.

The beauty of *Papermaker* is that it presents both sides of the story of American manufacturing: that of a mill owner struggling against global competition, and that of the mill workers facing the loss of their once-prosperous rural community. This story resonates strongly in Maine, but also can be played back across this country, whether by auto workers in the mid-west, furniture makers in the southern states, or aerospace and technology producers on the west coast. It is the story of our country. And your support for the NEA has made it possible for this story to be heard.

It has been fascinating to watch as current events coincide with this production. Maine mills have had a tough year. Communities throughout the state are reeling as mill after mill declares bankruptcy or closes. Through this production, our audience will engage in issues that are front page news, seeing the human story behind the headlines.

Because *Papermaker* looks at the issues facing mill workers and owners alike, it allows our audience to see two sides of the debate. We see its characters as multidimensional, quirky, complicated human beings. They are people we know and recognize, not stereotypes of what we might think. They, like the issues they struggle with, are not black and white but shades of grey. *Papermaker* offers perspective.

As Maine divides between the urban south and the smaller, more rural communities to the west and north, it is wonderful to be able to share stories that help us better understand and connect to one another. This play has already been a catalyst for the theater to reach out to people and to document their involvement in past strikes, and to hear the stories of those facing current struggles to remain in the middle class. Through works of art such as *Papermaker*, we celebrate our similarities and our differences, and perhaps we, as a community, as a state, as a nation, can begin to find common ground.

Theater provides a place where we can really look at issues, chew on them, debate them, celebrate them, despise them, but in the end, learn something about them. Characters in plays allow us to see the "other." To get inside someone else's skin, to walk a mile (or at least a couple of hours) in their shoes. Great plays show us what it means to be human. As a result, plays like *Papermaker* create room for creative thinking, for collaboration, for innovation—words at the very heart of the mission for the NEA.

I would also like to share with you the power that the support you provide brings to your constituents. Producing a play like *Papermaker* is expensive. You can't automate actors. Sets, lights, and costumes are still a handcrafted art. For this production, the support we receive from the NEA will amount to approximately 5% of our total cost. Yet this support is essential. It leverages private support and lets our community know that this government believes art is important. When we receive NEA funding for a project, we let everyone know. I make curtain speeches before each performance in which I directly thank the NEA for their support. When I tell the audience that their tax dollars

are supporting a production, I frequently hear an audible gasp of approval and always strong applause. By funding productions such as this, you allow the audience to be part of the process. My audience is not a Getty or a Gates, yet they can take pride in being part of the process of creating great art for our nation.

Ancient Athens, the cradle of democracy, understood the value of art, making it possible for all citizens, no matter how wealthy, to attend plays at two major festivals each year. The South African government understood the power of art, making it illegal to present the plays of Athol Fugard, a policy that did not change until after Apartheid ended. It is little wonder that ISIS is currently attacking ancient sculptures in a museum in Mosul, tearing them down and breaking them to bits. They understand the enduring power of art.

The works of Sophocles, Michelangelo, Bach and Shakespeare stand the test of time. It is art that outlives its civilization, art that transcends its time and place. The National Endowment for the Arts allows our citizens to support the next Arthur Miller, the next Susan-Lori Parks. It allows for the creation of the next *Our Town* or *Angels in America*. It allows us to be great.

A great country deserves great art. It deserves an agency whose mission is to keep that art alive. I ask you, as the Congress of the United States of America, to appropriate \$155 million to the National Endowment for the Arts for FY16.