

Oral Testimony of
Flordelino Lagundino, Artistic Director, Park Square Theatre, MN
Appropriations Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies
U.S. House of Representatives
Public Hearing - February 26, 2019

Chairman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce, and Members of the Subcommittee, it is both an honor and a privilege to speak to you today in support of the National Endowment for the Arts and its mission to celebrate our nation's diverse cultural heritage. The public interactions that the NEA supports are necessary to our nation as they deepen our understanding of ourselves and our community, cultivate respect for our varied beliefs and values, and open us up to a wider world view. This is the work of the arts and the work that the arts does best.

The experiences of my career have shown me how the arts as a public practice strengthens our society by engaging adults and by enhancing the understanding of the generations of diverse young people who comprise the future of our country and our world. Through my experiences in theater, I have seen people be inspired, change their personal viewpoints, and grow their communities. Personally, theater has enabled me to supplant the image of the Filipino as Little Brown Brother that was found in my history textbooks, with an energized, forward-looking sense of self.

I am the artistic director of Park Square Theatre – the largest producing theater in Saint Paul, and the third largest in the Twin Cities region of Minnesota. We have over three thousand subscribers, and more than 100,000 people attend our shows each year. This theater season we are producing 9 shows for our main stage series and 3 shows as a part of our award-winning education program, which serves over 30,000 students annually.

Park Square Theatre, founded in 1972 by Paul Mathey with 80 seats, grew during 43 years under artistic director Richard Cook, into a 40,000 square foot arts complex with two stages – a 350-seat proscenium theater and a 200-seat thrust theater. Under my leadership we will add a 100-seat flexible black box theater to further solidify Saint Paul and Park Square as vibrant artistic hubs.

In a recent conversation with Mayor Melvin Carter, the first African American mayor of Saint Paul, he identified stories that highlight our differences to be of the utmost importance to building a thriving city. By sharing a multiplicity of perspectives we connect and learn how from our seemingly dissimilar backgrounds we actually have shared struggles and experiences.

The support of the NEA is essential to our artmaking as it enables Park Square to share stories that might not otherwise be heard. This past summer, we received a \$10,000 NEA Challenge America Grant, which funded the world premiere of a *The Korean Drama Addict's Guide to Losing Her Virginity* by Hmong playwright May Lee-Yang. This play is a contemporary comedy about a Hmong Minnesotan woman attempting to find love in order to rid herself of ghosts from the past. We co-produced this play with Theater Mu, an Asian American theater company in the Twin Cities. With the NEA's contribution, we funded talk-back discussions with the artists, produced a series of panel discussions about contemporary Korean and Hmong culture, and offered Pay-As-You-Can tickets for the entire three week run, making performances accessible. The community response for this new play was overwhelming, with the entire run being sold out after the first weekend. The NEA was important to this success by alleviating some of the financial risk involved in producing this new play, and providing platforms for community engagement.

In addition to our main stage adult programming, for over two decades Park Square Theatre has had at the core of its mission the presentation of great literature to teenage audiences in Minnesota and neighboring states. With support from the NEA, these live presentations challenge teens with complex human situations and questions, stoke their intellects, and give them a window into different worlds by making literature human and immediate.

This past Fall, Park Square presented *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that featured Asian American actors in three of the lovers' roles. The response from Asian American students was of amazement and joy that they were able to see representations of themselves as lovers, being strong, vulnerable, impetuous, and very, very silly. They saw the Asian American images on stage reflected back to them as their fullest selves. Of who they are, and of what they could - in the future - be. These stagings engender a sense of belonging in our society and community. Our core value of inclusive casting, allows all our students the important opportunity to see themselves on stage.

The ability to see oneself on stage and to see stories from one's own culture reflected is such a powerful experience, especially for people who are often denied complex representations of their identity. Theater has given me the opportunity to lift up and complicate representations of my ethnic culture and uplift a multiplicity of stories from the communities in which I have lived. I have been fortunate to work for many NEA-supported theaters during my career, all of which were imbued with a sense of community commitment.

At Mixed Blood Theatre in Minneapolis, MN, I acted in Qui Nguyen's *Vietgone*, which upended stereotypes that Asian men can't be sexy, that people who speak English with a foreign accent are ignorant, and that told the story of how the Vietnam War saved the author's parents.

At La Jolla Playhouse, we worked with Theatre Communications Group artist-in-residence Maurice Decaul to create a Veterans Writers Workshop, to give retired service men and women in the La Jolla/San Diego area the opportunity to tell their stories. The act of writing helped them to process their time in service, assisted in their acclimation into civilian life, and built a sense of mission and camaraderie within the group. I am proud to say that that Veterans writer's workshop continues today with a strong core of writers.

At Perseverance Theatre in Juneau, AK, I performed in the NEA-funded musical *The Long Season* by Chay Yew as a Filipino cannery worker fighting for equal pay. This was one of only two times in my career where I have had the opportunity to perform a role that represents my heritage as a Filipino. These types of roles – roles that show underrepresented people with complex inner lives and intelligence – are rare in traditional theater.

The support of the National Endowment for the Arts is fundamental in opening up these many visions of the world. Funding from the NEA should and does make the arts accessible and inclusive to young and old, to rich and poor, to people of many races and cultures, to both urban and rural residents. These opportunities enhance and strengthen communities around our nation. Support of theater as public practice is essential to our existence at Park Square Theatre, the other theaters I've worked with, and the many other theaters that the NEA supports around the country.

I thank this Subcommittee and Congress as a whole for its bipartisan support for the NEA. I respectfully urge you to support the Agency at a level of \$167.5 million in FY2020.