

United States House of Representatives, Committee on Small Business

The Power, Peril, and Promise of the Creative Economy

January 19, 2022

Nataki Garrett, Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Chairwoman Velazquez, Ranking Member Leutkemeyer and members of the House Committee on Small Business, thank you for inviting me to appear before you today. My name is Nataki Garrett and I am the Artistic Director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. I am honored to be with you and share how the arts sector has been affected by COVID-19, to highlight our economic and social impact, and to offer ways Congress can support the recovery of the creative economy.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival, or OSF for short, has for 86 years, since its founding in 1935 grown into one of the leaders of modern American theater and one of the largest economic drivers of the Southern Oregon economy. OSF is one of the last remaining rotating repertory theater companies in the Country. In a typical year we welcome over 400,000 people from all over the world visit our three theaters including the oldest Elizabethan theater in the US. Our patrons spend more than one hundred million dollars annually as a direct result of attending theatre events at OSF. Ashland, our town of 20,000 people, has the same density of restaurants and hotels per resident as New York and Paris. With the economic multiplier effect, it is estimated that OSF generates more than a quarter billion dollars of economic activity in the Southern Oregon region annually. We are responsible for a full 20% of overall economic activity in the Rogue River Valley. Simply put, the arts are a powerful economic engine that drives our region and enriches our lives.

When COVID-19 hit in March 2020, OSF had just opened our season, my first as Artistic Director. Within six days we went from celebrating the kickoff of a \$44 million slate of productions to having to shut everything down and pivot into a fight for our survival. We had already spent about half of our total annual budget to get shows ready for the stage, and we had taken in more than \$6 million in ticket revenue that had to be refunded.

Over the next few weeks, 90% of Oregon Shakespeare Festival's nearly 500-person workforce was laid off, 829 performances of our 11 scheduled productions were shuttered, and 2,300 community engagement and education events were canceled. We provided what assistance we could to the artists who had uprooted their lives to come spend a 9-month season at OSF, but we knew that our best wasn't going to be enough. Our community was thrown into an

economic freefall, and there wasn't a business in the area that didn't feel the adverse effect of OSF shuttering its season.

In addition, in September of the same year the Alameda fire swept through the region and destroyed more than 2300 homes and businesses, including the homes of many of the remaining few OSF employees. We as a community again leapt into action to help our neighbors. OSF set up a food bank and provided emergency housing and any other support we could muster. We dedicated a significant part of our annual Gala fundraiser, originally conceived to help us survive the pandemic, to helping our neighbors survive a year of unimaginable loss. Through it all, I was stunned and humbled by the perseverance of our staff and patrons and artists.

I'm still haunted by the choices I had to make to try to ensure OSF's survival. Having to prioritize retaining administrative staff who could help bring in grant and donor revenue and maintain our facilities at the expense of the artists who are at the center of our work. Imagine having to choose between the hundreds of crew members, craft artisans, carpentry masters, actors, playwrights, directors, and other artists or choose those who drive and maintain the operations of the organization. The entire creative economy was forced to make that awful choice because of the pandemic and because we seldom recognize the sacrifice that the artist continues to endure.

I went to work every day and put on a brave face as I watched the situation become more and more desperate for OSF and our friends and neighbors throughout the state. Behind the mask I was afraid. Afraid OSF wouldn't make it. Afraid that our fall would take out most of the businesses around us. Afraid that our failure to survive the nearly unsurvivable would reverberate through all of the arts industries for a generation. Afraid that I would be the last Artistic Director at OSF, and the one who had to turn out the lights for the very last time. Our future balanced on a sword-edge, and we all felt it. It was without a doubt one of the darkest times in my professional life.

The reality is that without the sacrifices of the artists, and without the infusion of state and federal dollars, along with the generosity of our donors and audience members we would not be in existence, and I would not be testifying before you today. I would like to extend my appreciation for the assistance this committee provided to the performing arts industry through the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant program and other forms of COVID relief that have helped us weather the pandemic.

During many sleepless nights over the past two years, I think about the hundreds of thousands of artists around this country who drive so much of our economy but themselves live in poverty. How can we keep building our businesses, winning awards, and taking bows on the backs of people who are constantly struggling to survive and to and create? How can we continue viewing an industry that makes up more of our GDP than Agriculture and Mining combined as a luxury or a frivolity and the purview of the elite? How can we look the more than 5.2 million arts and culture workers in this country in the eye and not take the simple, common-

sense steps to make their lives more secure and our economy more robust all at once? How can we continue cutting arts programs in schools when we know that students who participate in arts education are more likely to go to college and less likely to go to jail?

The challenges we face in the arts did not start and will not end with the pandemic. COVID-19 further exacerbated existing struggles that have long threatened the creative economy. We do not need a band-aid, we need long-term solutions that will help sustain the arts in communities across the country.

At OSF we have a tradition. Following the curtain call of our last outdoor play each season, everyone in the company, not just actors but administrative staff, custodians, and every one of the people who work so hard to bring our art to life, each carry a candle and silently enter the darkened 1200 seat Elizabethan theater to the strains of *Greensleeves*. A veteran company member speaks Prospero's speech from Act IV Scene 1 of Shakespeare's "*The Tempest*." The Bard's words begin with, "Our revels now are ended..." and fill the silent space like a prayer...a promise, 1200 audience members from all walks of life, all religions, all affiliations, all races, all experiences hang on every line. When the speech is done, the candles are blown out and the entire company silently and reverently exits the theater followed by the audience. It marks the ending of a season of hard work and beautiful artmaking, and the promise that the house lights will be kindled once more in the spring when we begin the whole glorious dance again. It is a moment of power and profound vulnerability and is one of the highlights of our artistic year. In 2020, I was afraid that those candles had gone out forever. But I am here to tell you that what is built endures, and what is loved endures, and as artistic director, I am committed to ensuring that those candles burn bright and those words are spoken for years to come.

You have the power, here and now, to ensure that the flickering candle of the creative economy can burn brightly. Right now, bills such as *The Creative Economy Revitalization Act*, *The Performing Arts Parity Act*, and the *Arts Education for All Act*, bipartisan bills that positively impact the economies of red states and blue states alike and enjoy broad public support, are waiting for Congress to act. You can help so many people and be heroes in your own communities by showing that you understand the value of the economic engine that is the Arts in this country. And it's not a radical act. It's not an act of faith or hope. It's not partisan and it's not controversial. It's recognizing a simple fact that the example of OSF and countless other arts organizations have proven over and over again. It's recognizing that the arts and artists drive local economies and at the same time lift people out of darkness.

Thank you for this time, thank you for what you will do next, and I look forward to your questions.