

Interested Party Testimony for Arts Funding
Senate Finance Committee
Gina Vernaci, President and CEO, Playhouse Square
February 18, 2021

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, my name is Gina Vernaci. I am President and CEO of Playhouse Square, the not-for-profit performing arts center in Cleveland. I am most appreciative of the opportunity to be here today to speak to you.

Playhouse Square is the largest performing arts center in the United States outside of New York. Prior to the pandemic, we drew more than one million visitors to downtown Cleveland annually, generating more than \$43 million in annual economic impact for Northeast Ohio and employing 750 people. Area restaurants, hotels and parking facilities relied on our audiences for revenue.

COVID-19 halted all of that on March 12, 2020. We have canceled or postponed more than 1100 performances. Eight restaurants within one block of our theaters are closed. Nearby hotels are operating at only 18% of capacity. Our revenue is down 99% over the past 11 months and, based on the current state of the pandemic and vaccination rates, we anticipate being unable to generate revenue of any significance for another seven to ten months.

We have enacted significant cost-cutting measures including reducing our workforce by 68%, but we remain committed to our not-for-profit mission despite the pandemic's impact on our resources. We continue to offer sensory-friendly and educational programming, reaching far beyond our buildings, city and county borders to help teachers and families.

Every Cleveland Metropolitan School District school serving grades kindergarten through eight is registered for the streaming performances and educational resources we are providing to the district free of charge. Nearly 1800 classrooms across 12 Northern Ohio counties are accessing the performances and resources for a nominal fee. These counties include Cuyahoga, Erie, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, Trumbull and Wayne. And through our relationship with Disney, we were able to offer a free virtual field trip of Newsies the Broadway Musical for 173 classrooms. Totally we are serving 78,000 students virtually through these programs.

In summary, we are doing everything we can to survive this prolonged closure without sacrificing service to our community and beyond.

We are confident that we will recover quickly once Broadway begins touring again. As The Broadway League Vice Chair for the Road – a term representing the 200+ markets hosting Broadway tours across the country, I am at the forefront of planning the industry's revival. I can assure you that producers are eager to bring their shows back to Ohio and when they do, Playhouse Square will play an important role in Northeast Ohio's recovery.

As Playhouse Square's five historic theaters begin to turn 100 this month, I am reminded that they were built in the wake of the last pandemic. People lined up around the block for their openings, eager to experience live entertainment and the thrill of being part of an audience after being denied for so long.

We and our fellow performing arts organizations want to be ready to provide that source of joy and jobs when it is safe to do so again.

Between now and then lie months of struggle with a near total loss of revenue.

Today I implore you to grant greater financial assistance to Playhouse Square and the iconic arts and culture institutions in Ohio. We are grateful for what we have received, but it does not begin to surmount our losses.

Specifically, we are asking you to increase the appropriation to the Ohio Arts Council and to include the arts and culture industry in any one-time economic relief that you may also enact.

The performing arts industry was among the first to close down and it will be one of the last to reopen. Let's make sure Ohio can enjoy the economic impact and community-building power of the arts when these dark days are behind us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for the honor to speak to you today. I am available for any questions that you may have.