

Testimony in Support of County Executive's FY21 Cost Sharing Community Grants and Capital Improvements Program (CIP) Grants for Arts & Humanities Organizations
Submitted by: Susan Finkelstein

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of the County Executive's recommended Community Grant and Capital Improvements Program-Arts & Humanities Grant allocation of \$248,367 to Olney Theatre Center (OTC), supporting the *Staging the Future* capital campaign.

As a Montgomery County resident, my husband and I have attended performances at Olney Theatre Center for over 40 years. I am also proud to serve in a volunteer capacity as Board Chair for this outstanding theatre. As the Board Chair, I have the responsibility and pleasure of overseeing the many ways in which OTC enriches the lives of Montgomery County residents and visitors. Through its award-winning productions and presentations, OTC fosters joy, empathy, and meaningful conversations on both timeless and contemporary challenges to intergenerational audiences. Its range of educational programs for the very young to lifelong learners unleash the creativity of participants and support key skills for success in the 21st century. These impactful programs inspire 120,000 theatregoers and students each year.

Moreover, OTC is an important community partner. It is a home for peer arts organizations, independent artists, nonprofits, and businesses in need of creative spaces. OTC's partnerships also ensure its programming reaches thousands who face barriers to the arts, including low-income families, youth and adults with disabilities, incarcerated individuals, and others.

As a Board member, I am also familiar with OTC's aging and, in some cases, nearly obsolete facilities, including the original 1938 Theatre, the Mulitz-Gudelsky Theatre Lab, and the lack of adequate rehearsal and classroom spaces. These facilities no longer meet the needs of OTC's growing audiences, educational programs, or community partners. OTC's acclaimed productions and presentations are attracting new and increasingly diverse theatregoers, with a 30% increase in total audience since 2015. Educational programs are at capacity and can only operate in sporadic weeks throughout the year due to limited space. Additionally, OTC is forced to turn away dozens of partnership requests from nonprofits, peer arts organizations, and businesses each year due to limited or inadequate facilities.

With record-breaking attendance and programming pushing the theatre to its limits, we have embarked on a \$25 million capital campaign - *Staging the Future* - to improve artistic and educational capacity and engage our growing community. Thanks to previous support from the County, Phase 1 of *Staging the Future* is fully funded and renovations will begin in late April 2020. This Phase focuses on improvements to the undersized Mulitz-Gudelsky Theater Lab and parking lot infrastructure to improve safety and the visitor experience.

Community Grant and CIP support in FY21 will advance Phase 2 of *Staging the Future*. Phase 2 will renovate the nearly obsolete original 1938 Theatre into a flexible venue for innovative performance and community needs. In the years ahead, the 1938 Theatre will serve as a home for nonprofit events and fundraisers, civic debates, community meetings, performances and concerts, business retreats, and more. With few flexible venues in the Olney area, the theatre will be a vital community resource.

Staging the Future will also enhance community amenities by constructing new educational spaces for youth and adults. Improved and interconnected outdoor gathering spaces will support festivals, concerts, readings, civic events, and other activities that foster a connected and vibrant Montgomery County. Renovated artist amenities will support innovative new works and attract leading artists from across the world to Montgomery County.

With support from the County Council in FY21, Olney Theatre Center will build on its 82-year history of enriching the lives of Montgomery County residents as well as visitors. *Staging the Future* will not only improve OTC's artistic capabilities, but also allow the theatre to enhance its service as a cultural and civic hub for the community for generations to come. I ask you to support the County Executive's recommendation of \$248,367 in support of *Staging the Future*.

Thank you for your consideration.

Susan Finkelstein
Board Chair
Olney Theatre Center