

**APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE  
PUBLIC HEARING  
February 19, 2020**

**TESTIMONY OF RUFUS DE RHAM, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
WARNER THEATRE (Torrington)**

In Association with: GARDE ARTS CENTER (New London) & THE BUSHNELL (Hartford) & CONNECTICUT ASSOCIATION FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS CAPA - SHUBERT THEATRE (New Haven) & PALACE THEATER (Waterbury) & STAMFORD CENTER FOR THE ARTS (Stamford)

**H.B. No. 6439: AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE THIRTIETH, 2023 AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR**

The Warner Theatre is grateful for the support of this Committee, the General Assembly, and the Governor for providing key financial support over the past several years. It has allowed the Warner to continue to operate as Northwest Connecticut's largest arts organization and a critical piece of Torrington and Northwest Connecticut's economy and cultural life. Along with the other urban performing arts centers we are recipients of legislative directed funding. The Warner Theatre and Garde Arts Center are identified in the DECD Budget as Performing Theaters, which includes the Warner Theatre allocation of \$87,134.

The Warner Theatre houses an 1,800 seat historic art deco theater, a 300 seat black box theater, an onsite school for the arts, a costume and prop shop, a community theater troupe, and a restaurant space. We present stage plays, film, and touring acts serving between 80,000 and 100,000 patrons a year, 96% being Connecticut residents. The Warner holds regular classes and workshops for children and adults alike, and hosts civic and cultural events for other area organizations including graduations, dance recitals, and award ceremonies.

The Warner's economic impact calculated using Americans for the Arts' study Arts and Economic Prosperity IV, is \$8.1 million and helps to support 121 FTE jobs. This represents a significant return on the State's investment. We are an active partner in the Economic Development of Torrington and Northwest Connecticut, and serve a vitally important role as a convener, educator and presenter for our rural region. We continue with this work providing free weekly workshops to students giving them a much needed social and creative space to express themselves in. We are also providing monthly theatrical content (virtual one act plays and staged readings) for our community. All of this is produced at a loss, but we feel it is important to continue our mission in any way we can during this time.

COVID-19 has decimated our industry, our venues were the first to close on March 13, 2020, and we do not expect to see a return to operations until fall of 2021 making our sector one of the last to reopen. This 18-month closure will continue to have drastic impact on Torrington and the surrounding region's economy and quality of life. Since our closure the six urban performing arts centers have been working together as colleagues, not competitors, to share

best business practices, keep each other informed on the changing landscape due to COVID-19, update one another on potential relief programs as well as share and collate data to better understand the short- and long-term impact of this worldwide pandemic and subsequent protracted business closure. As a working group, we were able to identify the collective positive impact we, as our city's anchor venues, have had on the communities we serve.

In aggregate, in a traditional year of operation, our performing arts centers generate annually:

- 750,000 in attendance, 88% of which are residents of Connecticut
- \$58.5 million of direct local economic spend, and with industry standard economic multiplier the impact approaches \$350 million
- 112 Full Time Jobs, 317 Part Time Jobs, 702 Seasonal Workers, 1905 Volunteers, and 1140 contract workers
- Facilities and services for about 426 regional organizations, schools, and smaller arts nonprofits, as well as businesses and civic organizations.

Since March 2020, with public health foremost in mind, our organizations have closed offices, reduced / eliminated staff, decreased overhead to minimal operating levels, and provided hundreds of thousands of dollars in ticket refunds to patrons, for the numerous events cancelled and/or postponed. Additionally, we have actively pursued private support from donors and sponsors to generate funds to offset the dramatic overhead costs associated with maintaining our historic venues.

Despite our best efforts, as of December 31, 2020, due to the COVID closure, our performing arts centers have collectively lost over almost \$7 million in revenue and 2,165 jobs. We share this dire information to make you aware of the serious nature of this situation, and the overwhelming impact the COVID crisis is having on your arts and cultural institutions, and the communities we serve.

As our collective body the arts centers have shared data and identified projected expenses, it was forecasted that our combined monthly losses, over an 18-month period could exceed \$16 million. Given each institutions ability to raise private dollars, it was also identified that a collective \$6 million of \$16 million could be privately raised, leaving a funding shortfall of \$10 million. In an effort to secure those additional funds, the group actively pursued all avenues of support, including but not limited to Federal dollars, State funding and further private support, all in an effort to stabilize our pandemic related financial situation and stave off this economic crisis and ensure our survival.

At the State level, we are grateful that Governor Lamont has again included our designated line item of funding in the biennial budget. Although these dollars are welcomed and will, as always, be wisely used, the reality is that the current identified level of funding is just not enough.

Due to the COVID crisis, the financial and operational stability of our organizations, hangs in the

balance. The Governor and State legislature can help to ensure our regional performing arts centers are ready to operate when they will be most needed by the State, with a significant increase in designated support. Should increased funding not be made available, the State runs the risks of further losing its decades of investment in our venues while threatening the regional and state economic recovery. The loss of these organizations could decimate the State's economic strength for years to come.

**The Warner Theatre appreciates its current level of funding, yet respectfully asks your support for an increase to bring its funding in line with our sister organizations across the state. In this spirit we are seeking \$300,000 to put us in a position of strength to help our community recover from the pandemic.**

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rufus de Rham', written in a cursive style.

Rufus de Rham (he/him/his) | Executive Director | Warner Theatre

