

Anita Stewart
Portland/ Portland Stage

LD 1566 is a bill that has the capacity to change lives by reviving industries that have been hard hit by the pandemic—it can create jobs that in turn create experiences that bring our community together.

I run Portland Stage, a non profit theater in downtown Portland. We are one of the few places that was able to keep people employed producing shows and running education programs for school students and community members this year. We did it by cobbling resources together—work share, PPP funds, foundation and community donations were combined with keeping everything tiny, and approaching the year with the mind set that the work we were creating would not pay for itself. As great as the response has been to what we had done this year, it is not a sustainable model.

Before the pandemic, the entertainment industry was as economically important to the state as lobsters and lighthouses. Every \$1 spent on cultural tourism resulted in \$46 spent in the local economy. Venues like mine supported neighboring businesses like restaurants, hotels and retail. Across the state the cultural sector provided upward of 17,000 jobs. We have been part of what makes Maine a truly great place to live, and we can be part of making Maine even better in the future.

As I think about how to attract audiences to come back to the theater, I recognize that we need to bridge the gap. We need to be able to produce work that is big, bold and exciting before knowing if the audience is ready to return. Researchers tell us that it will take time for us to get back to the numbers we had pre-pandemic, but I know we won't build back if we don't create plays that engage our community, shows that spark the imagination, and to do that takes people and people take money. LD 1566 would offer the upfront resources to a theater like mine as we move forward to reengage.

This past year with such limited opportunities to see live work, I recognize now more than ever the power of theater to connect people together. As we laugh or cry or bear witness to a story being told by others it is a way to reach across the footlights, across the aisle, to go beyond ourselves. It is a way to build community. LD1566 will help us get to that future. I urge you to support this important legislation.