

Dear Lawmakers,

My name is Michael Harrington. For five years I was the director and curator of the Wandering Reel Traveling Film Festival, which hand delivered programs of thought-provoking short films to venues all around the Pacific Northwest. When the pandemic struck, I was forced to make the tough decision to suspend the festival indefinitely, in part, because the venues we depended on would not be allowed to operate as usual, if at all. Indeed, many of our favorite host theaters, like the Bijou Theatre in Lincoln City, shut down for many months, reopened briefly only to be shut down again. As a resident of Salem, I have seen our own independent theater struggle this past year, putting public health and safety over meager profit and keeping its doors closed for the vast majority of the pandemic. Film festivals such as mine, that depend on independent theaters in order to present our films to the public, have lost our outlet. As a filmmaker and community member, I have lost one of my most cherished past times. I turn to movies in both times of joy and times of sorrow for comfort and relief and for celebration. Independent theaters such as Salem Cinema offer the public art films, independent films, foreign language films and short films. They offer a cultural experience that you do not find at the larger chain theaters. They offer a communal experience you do not find on Netflix or cable tv. Cinema has always been a place where people come together to share something magical and important, often uplifting and life changing. This experience has all but disappeared the past 12 months. And if we don't act now, boldly and swiftly, we may lose many of these cultural gems forever. In fact, we may lose the cinematic experience all together.

The pandemic has accelerated the way we consume movies, a transition to more streaming and television. But we can preserve the sacred experience of going to the movies. We can do it right here in Oregon by offering grants to small theaters like Salem Cinema and The Bijou Theatre to help climb out of the debt this pandemic has inflicted and bridging the uncertain gap between now, when so many movie-goers are still weary of returning to the theater and capacity is still limited, and a day in the not too distant future when movie theaters can reopen fully and welcome audiences back to experience the full magic that is the cinema. Movie theaters have been left out of much of the economic support given to small businesses, live venues in particular. Some say they are not essential, but I say that preserving businesses that bring joy and laughter to so many is as essential as anything else. In fact, we need movies now more than ever. And we need the type of films that small, independent theaters provide.

Cordially,

Michael Harrington
Director, Wandering Reel Traveling Film Festival
Salem, OR