

Olney Theatre Center Testimony for Open to All Act – HB 572/SB 486

Olney Theatre Center enthusiastically supports the Open to All Act – HB 572/SB 486. I'm writing to share my perspective from one of Maryland's state theaters about the positive effects we saw in shifting our bathroom signage in 2018 and why this bill will keep Maryland business moving forward in all aspects from hiring staff to attracting tourists.

Arts organizations have always had to wrestle with the financial challenges of providing access and lowering barriers to our work while functioning within a capitalist system, but shifting the branding of our restrooms was not one of these challenges. This change was inexpensive. It didn't require labor of our staff (in fact it made them more efficient and more comfortable, which I expand upon below). This means that the benefits *far* outweigh the effort to make this change.

To begin with, this shift benefited the patrons our theater was already serving. We program work that encourages intergenerational attendance and because of our relationships with retirement communities like Leisure World we also serve many elderly audience members. The simple act of changing our restroom sign to allow all genders made sure that caretakers of young and old alike were able to fulfill their needs while in our space. It eliminates any awkwardness of going into the "wrong" restroom and let's the needs of the person caretaking or being taken care of to come first. This is particularly important when we have disabled audience members at our shows, whether that's a sensory friendly show made especially for those who need adjusted environmental stimulus or our winter musical where families have one of the only chances of the year to attend a show all together.

Our staff has also benefited from these simple changes. We've seen an increase in applications to work for us from those in the trans and non-binary communities due to a clear feeling of safety and inclusion in our space, and we've been able to retain those in that community already on staff because they felt their needs were seen and heard by their employer. It provides access for everyone to have a bathroom closer to them instead of walking across our campus to the one bathroom that they feel comfortable in. This makes bathroom breaks more efficient in addition to safer. This also applies to anyone who is nursing or caretaking to be able to work without these barriers. Because of the freelance life so many of our artists live, there isn't always the option for a long maternity or paternity leave. The second best thing an employer can provide is the ability to be a caretaker and an artist simultaneously and easily.

Finally, we are working constantly to expand our programming to a wider audience, and when that begins to happen we need to be ready for anyone to walk through our doors without doubt about their access options. Our recent production of *Beauty and the Beast*, for example, drew national attention with a Black, plus-sized, non-binary actor playing Belle and an actor with a prosthetic leg as the Beast. There were people from communities of color, people from the trans community, and other disabled folks eager to see this representation finally on stage who came to our theater for the first time (and therefore likely to the many businesses around us - restaurants and grocery stores and more!). If we aren't ready for these new audience members, our work is for naught. We will only see them once. If we are a clearly safe state with clearly safe places of business, though, they may return for other shows (or, in a bigger sense, other products).

Beyond these many benefits to businesses, the primary reason for the importance of this bill is in acknowledging the existence and humanity of the many members of Maryland's trans, non-binary, gender non-conforming communities. They are already at a disadvantage when it comes to barriers to access, healthcare, and housing, but beyond that they are at larger risk for violence simply going about their everyday needs (like using a bathroom). This risk is even higher for Black and Brown communities under these gender non-conforming umbrellas. It may be an ongoing process to combat this issue through our arts work in changing hearts and minds, but changing restroom signage was something that took no time at all and protects members of our community that we've been fighting to get into our spaces for a long time now. Every business should want such a simple and clear first step to expanding their patron base, and every human should want to take such a simple action to make sure their neighbors and fellow citizens are seen and valued. All of the marketing in the world can't bring business to a space that feels unsafe for the customer, but the word-of-mouth that comes from them being actively included and seen as a full member of the economy and community here in Maryland should be seen as a key part of remaining "open for business." We can't be open as people or as places without being open to *everyone*.