Testimony to the VT House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development
Jay Craven

I want to thank you for inviting me to testify today – about my request for Kingdom County Productions - for partial funding for my next dramatic film, tentatively titled *Lost Nation*, that will be drawn from two books central to the history of Vermont – Christopher Wren's "Those Turbulent Sons of Freedom - Ethan Allen's Green Mountain Boys and the American Revolution" – and Gretchen Gerzina's "Mr and Mrs Prince" about freed slaves, Abijah and Lucy Prince – who settled in Guilford, Vermont during the same time as Ethan Allen, Seth Warner and the others settled near Bennington

Kingdom County Productions has made 12 narrative films, nine of them in Vermont. We have also made ten documentaries – all of them in Vermont. We have filmed in St. Johnsbury, Burlington, Brattleboro, Barnet, Peacham, Chelsea, Vershire, Washington, Marlboro, Barton, Chester, Waterford, Guilford, Rutland, St. Albans, White River, and other towns. Together, KCP has raised and spent some $15.6 million for the production of its Vermont films.

KCP has also toured its finished films to 123 towns in every corner of the state – generating additional local spending – and sparking lively conversations about the characters, history and culture shown in the film.

Our new film would tour also deep into Vermont, throughout New England – and beyond, before going to Vermont PBS, providing free access to it for all Vermonters.

I and Kingdom County Productions would like to shoot this next quintessentially Vermont film in Vermont. But Massachusetts, through its state film incentive program, will provide us with $350,000 – or 25% of our budget - if we shoot it there.

Due to the availability of this Massachusetts film incentive, and the fact that my productions involve collaborations with cost-conscious colleges, we have had to shoot 2 films in Massachusetts – along with half of my most recent film, *Wetware*, which was shot in Brattleboro, Burlington – and Nantucket.

I am requesting $250,000 in state support in order to shoot my new film here. I would bring in an additional $1.2 million dollars - to match this funding, through KCP's production partnership with Sarah Lawrence College. I developed this unique-in-the-nation film intensive at Marlboro College but, sadly, moved it to Sarah Lawrence when Marlboro signaled serious financial distress and asked its senior faculty to take a buy-out.

Most of our budget will be spent in Vermont – for food, housing, transportation, goods and services. Funds will be used to construct sets, rent rooms, transport and pay cast and crew – and much more. We would also employ Vermonters, where

possible, to work on our crew. This will include the positions of director of photography, editor, production coordinator, second unit director and other jobs.

The production as a whole will involve 28 professionals who mentor and collaborate with 40 students who work in substantial roles to produce a fully professional feature film for national release. Student comments from this program are glowing – I'd be happy to provide a sampling.

Our film intensive program includes students from partner schools we've developed over the past few years. Students have come to us from Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, Sarah Lawrence, Skidmore, Hamilton, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, Middlebury, Wesleyan, University of California at Berkeley, and Augsburg in Minneapolis. Nearly all of these schools support their students' full tuition when they go off campus for a semester away from their home school.

Sarah Lawrence will not provide financial aid to film intensive students, given their own finances – and existing financial commitment to the project. And Vermont schools do not provide this traveling tuition support to their students. So, since 2102, I have raised $8750,000 to enable 36 Vermont students from Lyndon, UVM, Marlboro and Champlain Colleges to participate in our program.

To that end, of supporting students, I would ensure that Vermont funds, in addition to enabling and facilitating production, would allow participation by Vermont students. One example: an African-American student sophomore from Barnet has recently applied – and will need this financial support. He graduated from St. Johnsbury Academy with honors and has always dreamed of being a production designer. He is enrolled in the very competitive School of Fine Arts at Boston University, on a substantial scholarship. We want to help him get involved, since he would get a very substantial art department experience on this project – and would also make contacts to assist his development, going forward.

The Role of Mentoring

The mentoring role we play is something we have always done, going back to our earliest productions. A number of young filmmakers have gotten their first experiences in our productions or in the Fledgling Films program we ran for teens from 1998 to 2007. Or the Movies from Marlboro program we ran from 1996-to now – although now based at Sarah Lawrence.

Benh Zeitlin, director of Beasts of the Southern Wild, which was made when he was just 25 years old – and was nominated for four Academy Awards – got his first production experience with us.

So, too, Matt Holloway, who went on to write the first Iron Man movie which was nominated for two Academy Awards.

Production Designer and Vermont native David Wasco designed one of his earliest films with us – Where the Rivers Flow North – and in 2017 he won the Academy Award for designing LaLaLand – after having also designed major films including *Pulp Fiction, Rushmore, The Royal Tenenbaums, Inglorious Bastards and Collateral.*

Ricky Stern and Annie Sundberg were both Dartmouth students when they worked with us on *Where the Rivers Flow North.* But they had never met. They immediately initiated a professional partnership as documentary filmmakers – and have now made 23 films together, including Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work and two recent HBO specials, Reversing Roe and the Ultimate Captain America Marathon, about the Boston Patriot's day bombing.

Newport native, Michael Tyburski came to us when he was 14 years old – and worked in our teen program for years. He proudly called us recently to say that his film, Sound of Silence, starring Peter Sarsgard, was accepted at the Sundance Film Festival where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize.

Vermonters Nate Beaman, Brad Heck, Willow O'Feral, Jeff Farber, Michael Fisher, Jon Andrews, Patrick Kennedy, Josh Melrod – who work as professional Vermont filmmakers – and Jamie Yerkes, who went on to establish the very successful School of Cinema and the Performing Arts – that continues to operate every summer at Burke Mountain and in Burlington – plus New York and Los Angeles - all of these folks got early first experiences with us – on our films.

We take this role of mentoring young filmmakers very seriously – and we have been approached by nearly a dozen Vermont students and young filmmakers who want to participate on this new uniquely Vermont project.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

We also take seriously the economic impact that our films have had – and can have. As I mentioned, we would spend most of our budget here—ideally in the Northeast Kingdom. We would provide a boom for this, frankly, struggling town where restaurants come and go too frequently. When we shot *Where the Rivers Flow North* in the Kingdom – and rented lots of rooms and ate lots of meals locally – and hired local carpenters and caterers.

But in St. Johnsbury - there were five local motels then - that are gone today. Only two motels currently exist in St. J. Many restaurants have also come and gone.

It is also worth noting that two films that we did not produce were attracted to shoot in the Northeast Kingdom – based on their awareness that we had made films there and could help them wrangle crew, cast and locations. We substantially helped both films, *Ethan Frome*, with Liam Neeson, Patricia Arquette and Joan Allen – and *Spitfire Grill*, with Ellen Burstyn and others. These films spent more than five million dollars, between them.

I believe in the creative economy – and act in other ways to use film and the arts to support the St. Johnsbury economy – and culture. KCP produces an ambitious performing arts series that attracts 11,000 people to St. J and Lyndonville – from 238 towns last year – and averaging people people from 96 towns per show.

I also founded Catamount Arts in 1975 – and ran it for 16 years, before starting Kingdom County Productions. At its peak, Catamount was generating more than $1 million in annual sales and presenting 65 live performances a year, with artists ranging from Miles Davis, Johnny Cash and Bob Dylan to the Merce Cunningham Dance Company and American Repertory Theater.

While at Catamount I also co-founded Circus Smirkus with Rob Mermin and produced Don Suneri's GRACE Project for older indigenous artists, for 12 years. In 2009 I produced the 13-day $2 million Burlington International Waterfront Festival that Tom Torti from the Lake Champlain Chamber said generated more than $7 million in local spending.

Today, in addition to directing KCP, with Bess O'Brien, and producing the KCP Presents performance series, I curate the Woodstock Film Series for the Billings Farm and Museum and co-produce the annual Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival for first and second time filmmakers – that includes a monthly MIddlebury film series, five day end of August festival, featuring more than 100 films and special guests - and an annual tour of our award-winning films to 8 Vermont towns.

At Middlebury New Filmmakers Festival we have also recently launched a special award for Vermont filmmakers and two annual $10,000 film fellowships for emerging filmmakers.

All told, this work we've done has spent more than $40,000,000 during all these years – and generated many ancillary financial and community benefits.

ATTRACTION OF VERMONT

KCP's films draw positive attention to Vermont – as a beautiful place – and an exciting place with a rich culture that includes an indigenous film industry that makes films about Vermont – that attract national and international attention. This is worth considering, alongside this question of return-on-investment, in strictly financial terms, because we believe that there is real value that comes from having this indigenous film culture, where Vermont and New England audiences, in particular, see stories rooted in their own place.

For our planned film, Lost Nation, we are exploring a multi-cultural view of Vermont's early history that will include people of color. How many people know the story of Lucy Prince, for example, our nation's first African American poet, who, after being freed from slavery moved and settled in Guilford, Vermont – at the same time as the early land struggles of the Green Mountain Boys. And who knows of her

long trek to make her ground-breaking appeal for her civil rights to Governor Chittenden and the early legislators?

These indigenous films contribute to our special sense of place – and who we are – of a connectedness to place and each other that is so unique to Vermont. And it signals to others that this is the kind of place that sets a priority in ensuring that its own stories are told.

This distinctly Vermont films that we're planning will provide these cultural benefits to adults, students attending Vermont schools – and visitors – and we expect that the film will be useful for years to come.

Just to underscore -- Vermont is rare in this way – to have enjoyed the benefits of a native film industry that has included films by Nora Jacobson, Bess O'Brien, Dave Giancola and others continue that get made and play widely. And films like John O'Brien's *A Man with a Plan, Where the Rivers Flow North and Disappearances,* with Kris Kristofferson – that actually outgrossed films like *Men in Black* – in Vermont. This was unique in the United States – though it is not true today, due to a decline in production.

But our Vermont films send a message of Vermont to the larger world. Our 1992 film, *Where the Rivers Flow North*, starring Rip Torn, Tantoo Cardinal and Michael J. Fox played 252 U.S. cities and towns – and 53 countries – and sold videos to 43,000 video stores across the country. It played Sundance and many other festivals – and, for years, on Showtime, Disney Channel, Starz, Sundance Channel and syndicated TV outlets across the country. Also on multiple airlines. It generated press coverage in The New York Times, The Washington Post, LA Times, Chicago Tribune, The Today Show, NPR's All Things Considered and Fresh Air – and many others.

Our film, *Disappearances*, was selected by the American Film Institute to travel the world for 2 years, representing the United States – and it sold more than 300,000 DVD's and millions of downloads and even more international and television screenings. Everywhere these films go – they say, "Vermont."

The films communicated something particular – even mythic - about Vermont – including its spectacular natural environment. It attracted people to want to know more. And they continue to reach millions of people for the many years that follow production.

REGARDING ECONOMIC IMPACT

The State of Massachusetts, which spends an average of about $60-$80 million annually in film incentive spending, measures economic impact that includes "Economic "Multipliers." According to their annual report:

"The gross production spending amounts do not take into account "multiplier" impacts of the initial "direct" spending. As money is spent on productions, these direct purchases stimulate "indirect" economic activity of vendors, and payments to such vendors' employees increase personal income and spending of Massachusetts residents, resulting in additional "induced" economic activity. These positive multiplier impacts are simulated using a dynamic model of the Massachusetts economy constructed by Regional Economic Models Inc. ("REMI"), and must be taken into account."

Added to this, we will tour the finished film to play more than 60 towns in every corner of the state – stimulating consideration of Vermont early history and culture – and generating an additional estimated $120,000 in tickets sales. In additions to scores of additional dates outside of Vermont. Plus DVD and TV and streaming and international sales. Plus extensive educational use.

According to Americans for the Arts methodologies for calculating economic impact, the film's Vermont release would have an overall impact of $711,000 –especially for the ancillary expenditures made - to restaurants, gas stations, bed and breakfasts baby sitters and more.

Added to this, among the students who participate, many will return for one reason or another. They will form an attachment to the state, as we have seen in our previous films and, frankly, on Nantucket as well. Indeed, our director of photography, editor, second unit director and assistant director are all former students of mine – in Vermont - who have worked on my projects – and then settled here permanently.

LOOKING FORWARD

I am here today to ask your support, so that we can shoot this new film about early Vermont – here, instead of Massachusetts. We would use the money for that purpose – and would likely base the film in and around St. Johnsbury. We'd film as far north as Lake Willoughby and as far west as Craftsbury, where Sterling College has expressed interest in working with us to create authentic reproductions of early homes and barns – along with gardens and draught animals. We would love to do this – and to draw attention to the fabulous work going on a Sterling. We will also make a behind the scenes documentary that will capture the unique community based experience of bringing this film to life.

Beyond the production of this new film – I have thoughts about ways we can continue to advance indigenous media production in Vermont. I believe that this will be my final narrative film, at least on this scale. This work has taken me away from the Northeast Kingdom – as I've taught in Marlboro and now, New York.

But I want to expand my work here – to play more of a producing role, where I can help emerging artists make films – and ensure that existing films get seen.

To that end, we are discussing at KCP the possibility of creating a new silo – a *Vermont Movie Museum* – that would collect Vermont's filmed resources and ensure their maximum exposure, in schools and community settings throughout the region.

We imagine a permanent location and screening room, as well, perhaps at Catamount Arts in St. Johnsbury, where visitors could experience some of Vermont's rich cinema culture, ranging from films by Nora Jacobson, John O'Brien, Dave Giancola and others – to Alfred Hitchcock and D.W. Griffith who also made important films here.

We believe this could become a tourist attraction as part of St. Johnsbury's unique cultural district, including the Faribanks Museum and St. Johnsbury Ateheneum – where special media events and discussions would also take place – beyond just Vermont films, though that would be our emphasis.

One example: we are bringing the Israel Symphony Orchestra to Lyndonville next February for a powerful tribute to American Jewish composers, Leonard Bernstein and George Gershwin. We will also screen and discuss *An American in Paris, West Side Story* and American Masters documentaries on Gershwin and Bernstein.

The new film silo would also work to stimulate indigenous media production – through a variety of partnerships with schools, colleges, public radio and television and other arts organizations. We know that our five films based on Howard Frank Mosher's uniquely Vermont stories are not being widely used in the schools. We will work to change that – and generate imaginative curricula that will ensure that these distinctive Vermont resources connect to a new generation.

Kingdom County Productions has a long history of delivering results – and stimulating economic, cultural, educational – and community enriching benefits for Vermont and Vermont towns. We imagine staging a fully transparent film production for this new picture, replete with community discussion groups and script readings, demonstrations and workshops on costume and production design – film screenings of pictures related to our film – and much more.

We are committed to the idea of community and culture – and to re-vitalizing our downtowns. We will do everything in our power to make the legislature proud of this production – and all that it can do to re-imagine and re-invigorate media production in Vermont.

I'd be happy to take your questions