

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION – MUDLARK THEATRE INC

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the new National Cultural Policy. Below, please find our contact information and our responses to the five Pillars.

Mudlark Theatre Inc

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We are happy for this submission to be made public.

RESPONSE TO THE FIVE PILLARS

First Nations

Mudlark's purpose is to tell Tasmanian stories and we could not do this without telling the stories of our First Nations people. Over the coming years we intend to expand this area of our artistic practice, including the commissioning, development and premiere of a new work by palawa playwright Nathan Maynard which will explore his experiences growing up in Northern Tasmania.

Our main challenge in this area is with governance. We have struggled to attract First Nations people and artists to our board and as a result we have inadequate representation. We have solved this in the short term by employing paid cultural advisers. There are a limited pool of First Nations people working in the arts, particularly the performing arts in Tasmania, so in order to have access to non-tokenistic representation we would like to see capacity building for emerging and early career First Nations artists and arts workers.

A Place for Every Story

This pillar is directly in alignment with Mudlark's purpose. For 18 years we have been telling the stories of Tasmanians in places that are relevant to them. We get regular feedback from audiences that indicate they felt 'seen' as a result of the work we produce. For us, this is perhaps the most exciting pillar because bringing these stories to

the stage is an expensive undertaking that is sometimes not easily marketable beyond the community it is targeted towards.

The concept that all citizens can shape the cultural landscape of their country is exciting to us. Place, community representation and diversity are key factors in being able to create and deliver work that really embodies this concept. To do so it is essential to devise strategies, processes and funding to authentically engage and empower sectors of our community whose stories are not currently being heard, represented or celebrated

When you look at the tangible and intangible the impact of projects that really embrace their place, the diversity of their people and the voices that are there to be shared, the benefits always go well beyond the actual experience of the art. Instead they help to foster a sense of belonging, connectedness, value and the thriving of the community itself.

Our challenge is in the measuring of these benefits. Success is usually measured by numbers in boxes, bums on seats or feedback surveys completed. It's hard to measure things like community connectedness, confidence and hope. And often, this makes it difficult to really articulate the value of a project on a funding submission or acquittal which can mean that these types of projects can struggle to attract funding.

The Centrality of the Artist

At Mudlark our key value is to put the artist at the centre of what we do. It's an approach that has served us well over our 18-year history and ensured we have maintained the integrity of the creative works we produce and the relationships with our artists. We don't believe art should be presented at the expense of the people creating it, and are pleased to see that health, wellbeing and working conditions for artists will be prioritised.

We believe the biggest challenge in this area will be the culture change that is required in the sector to really put artists at the centre. It needs to become culturally unacceptable and unrealistic for producers and companies to take advantage of artists through poor pay and working conditions (because there is always someone who will do it for less money, or for 'exposure'). This problem exists everywhere but is particularly prevalent in regional areas where companies are underfunded, there are limited professional opportunities for artists and there is often a blurred line between the professional and amateur sectors.

One of the main challenges artists in face, particularly in regional areas, is uncertainty of income. The ongoing process of applying for grants and the regular rejections that result from these applications can chew up the majority of the time of artists and the companies that support them. This drains resources and vital time that should be spent on generating ideas, creative development and actually creating art. Mudlark would like to see a guaranteed weekly income scheme for eligible artists considered under the new Cultural Strategy – similar to what is currently being trialled in Ireland.

In addition, we would like to see strategies for generating ongoing support for artists throughout their careers, particularly mid-late career, where the reality of the financial impact of working contract-to-contract becomes more pronounced. The cost of raising families, small superannuation balances and the burnout from constantly chasing the next grant or contract often forces these artists out of the industry, leaking valuable skills, experience and leadership in the process.

We believe setting a standard for the pay and working conditions of artists and adequately resourcing regional companies and artists to be able to focus on art making and be sustainable over the long term will be an important step in achieving true centrality of the artist.

Strong institutions

Mudlark and the other professional creative institutions in our region provide a backbone to support the creative sector. As well as employing artists, we provide professional pathways, development opportunities, resources and gathering places to support collaboration and the practice of independent artists.

The biggest challenge facing Mudlark (and many other regional creative institutions) in this area is constant uncertainty around funding. For the many regional organisations that miss out on multi-year funding from either State and Federal Government, it becomes a constant cycle of survival, with little opportunity for forward planning, innovation and succession planning. This leaves organisations vulnerable. The next poor box office return, or COVID related production impact could have a devastating impact and mean the loss of a key cultural resource and leadership in the region.

We also believe there is a need for additional funding that supports the establishment and maintenance of artistic hubs that can house companies and artists. Many arts centres like Assembly 197 in Launceston, of which Mudlark is a partner, are self-generating, and in many cases self-funding. The value of these hubs however goes far beyond dollars. Assembly 197 has inspired a culture of connectivity, collaboration, collegiality and creativity across multiple art forms and disciplines, which is seeing the generation of new projects, ideas and effective community engagement. With additional government support, venues like Assembly 197 would have the capacity and security to truly thrive as empowered spaces for artists and companies to create, collaborate and build a robust artistic community.

Reaching the audience

As a place-based regional company, Mudlark's audience is the people of Tasmania. We create work that will help us know who we are, and who we want to become as a community.

Our challenge in this area is to reach this audience in a way that is valuable and meaningful to them when there is ever increasing competition from other forms of entertainment. Building a strong brand and helping audiences understand the value of

the work we are presenting in comparison to the other forms of entertainment they could consume is a resource-heavy undertaking.

As a small regional company, this type of marketing, brand building and audience development has been largely out of our reach. It requires large amounts of face-time in the community and we only have a part-time staff who are already at their limit with program delivery. We have to find money and human resources to do this from within individual project budgets which means our efforts lack consistency and are always tied with a promotion to sell tickets.

It would be a great benefit to us to be able to access resources to support audience development outside of program delivery to allow us to spend time in the community for the purpose of developing relationships before we ask people to trust our product, and to develop a consistent and recognisable brand that really articulates who we are.

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important discussion. If you would like further information on any of the feedback we have given, please contact Jane Forrest at [REDACTED]

Yours Sincerely,

A large black rectangular redaction box covering the signature area.

Jane Forrest, Chair, Mudlark Theatre Inc
On behalf of the board and staff of Mudlark.