

National Cultural Policy Submission: Griffin Theatre Company

About Griffin Theatre Company

Griffin is the only theatre company in the country exclusively devoted to the development and staging of new Australian writing. Located in the historic SBW Stables Theatre, nestled in the heart of Kings Cross, Griffin has been Australia's home for the exploration of new stories since 1978.

We are the launch pad for new plays, ideas and writing that other theatres won't take a risk on. We boldly contribute to Australia's unique and powerful storytelling culture. Plays like *Prima Facie*, *Holding the Man* and *City of Gold* all had their world premieres at Griffin before going out to capture the national imagination.

There is nothing more important to the evolution of Australian identity than having stories written for us and told to us, in our own voice, about ideas that matter deeply to us today. Australian plays are our national treasures—they are the wellspring of our identity. Australia's only new writing theatre, Griffin Theatre Company is committed to showcasing distinct and original Australian stories on our stages. The existence of this company is a promise to the artists and audiences of this nation that there will always be a stage to hear the Australian voice.

First Nations

Recognising, respecting and centring First Nations stories is essential at Griffin Theatre Company in our commitment to telling Australian stories. Griffin Theatre Company premiered Meyne Wyatt's renowned *City of Gold* in 2019 before it went on to find audiences at Black Swan State Theatre Company of WA and had another season at Sydney Theatre Company in 2022. Premieres of *Dogged* by Andrea James and Catherine Ryan in 2021 and Dylan van den Berg's *Whitefella Yella Tree* in 2022 have also been at the centre of our programming. We see the act of telling stories and collaborating with First Nations artists as central to acknowledge our past and move forward towards a better future.

We recognise the need for a First Nations First approach, ensuring self-determination, deep respect and listening, long-term investment, cultural understanding and a willingness to face difficult truths in the creation of First Nations work. This work is crucial but also the most difficult to make within the current systems and structures of the arts sector.

Cultural safety and a recognition of its importance to theatre process and practice is essential to an industry which seeks to honour and share the stories of First Nations people. Embedding cultural safety and knowledge across all levels of organisations, companies and project teams is essential for the sector in making exceptional works by exceptional artists into the future. The making of First Nations work requires significantly more time, money and resources than other work we make at Griffin Theatre Company due to: longer lead times; the willingness to change plans and prioritise safety; ensuring community engagement; engaging with local and relevant elders and; addressing the need for the right personnel on each project.

A Place for Every Story

In telling exclusively Australian stories, Griffin aims to reflect the diversity of Australia on our stage. We value the different lived experiences of the artists we engage and seek to bring their stories to an audience to encounter new ideas, new possibilities, new conversations. Last year, Kirsty Marillier's *Orange Thrower*, a coming-of-age story of a young South African-Australian woman in the suburbs of Perth, premiered to critical acclaim before a season at National Theatre of Parramatta and won the 2022 NSW Premier's Literary Award. This year, Merlynn Tong's *Golden Blood* depicted a darkly comic underworld of Singaporean gangs reaching new audiences with its use of five languages and events with the Asian Australian Alliance and the Australian Malaysian Singaporean Association.

Griffin's remit to produce 100% Australian work would be greatly supported and inherently more valued with quotas across the creative industries including content on streaming services. Dedication to Australian stories and content across the board would serve to strengthen not only the quality of individual projects but allow artists to thrive through more opportunities and achieve excellence locally, nationally and internationally.

In developing and producing plays written by culturally and linguistically diverse people, people of colour, non-white people and people of other under-represented groups, Griffin knows cultural safety is essential. For an artist to feel safe, valued and respected within their practice is the only way to sustainably bring works to the stage. Embedding this across all levels of organisations, companies, teams is essential for the ongoing cultural safety of all across the sector in making exceptional works by exceptional artists into the future.

The Centrality of the Artist

Without valuing culture and the arts, and the artists engaged in making it, Australia lacks a deeper knowledge, a more vivid imagination and stronger connections between people and places.

Strong and loyal relationships with dedicated freelance artists are central to Griffin's ability to deliver a year-long subscription season of new Australian plays on our stage. Their commitment to our vision, especially over the past two years, has been exceptional and brought new stories to our stages from playwrights across the country. These stories have interrogated the horror of the legal system for sexual assault survivors, the history of Gunaikurnai country, the fear and dignity surrounding end of life decisions and the dangerous desire that lingers in Green Park, to name a few. The rich and varied worlds that have come to life on the Griffin stage rely on playwrights, actors, designers and directors who work on a freelance basis. This kind of employment can lead to financial precarity, the need for multiple jobs at once, the inability to commit long-term to projects and an ongoing brain-drain to more secure industries.

Griffin centres the artist and their creativity in the way we engage with them on each project. But without greater value across every project and when they are between gigs, there is only so much that can be done by any one employer. A change that recognises artists or arts worker as a specialised profession on government and Centrelink forms would be a small but significant step to recognising their contribution to society. Financial support between gigs for freelance artists and arts workers would mean a more sustainable, healthy and ambitious performing arts landscape.

Griffin advocates for the support of independent artists as well as small to medium companies as a priority in a National Cultural Policy as a means of strengthening all areas of the arts and a stronger ecology for all.

Strong institutions

The strength of institutions is imperative to a sustainable arts sector and the strength of every company within it, including Griffin.

Currently, Griffin is still in survival mode from the devastating effects the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the company over 2020 and 2021. Even today, like others, we are still managing extremely difficult circumstances in keeping artists safe and healthy throughout rehearsals and a season of work with no cancellations (which is increasingly rare). Griffin has no budget to have understudies, back up crew or creatives and yet are still impacted by the day to day shortages of staff and increased costs of project delivery in the current environment. The decrease in audiences due to illness and a diminished desire to gather in indoor spaces in groups is negatively impacting box office figures on top of an increase in production costs.

To recover from the current crisis and thrive within the current environment to weather future challenges, we believe increased funding with an inter-departmental approach with health, international relations, energy and education would benefit all sectors. The future holds even more disruption and disaster associated with climate change and a sharp increase to cost of living which will impact the sustainability of arts and culture, its institutions, arts workers and artists.

With a strong and future-facing National Cultural Policy, we could collectively breathe life into a future of the arts which is sustainable, healthy, safe and brimming with possibility. This might include: working with health to determine shared aspirations for a mentally healthy and cohesive society; working with education to learn more about ourselves and others through the arts; innovative approaches to a greener and more climate conscious world through joint initiatives; as well as excellence in our artistic endeavours to bring joy, wonder and change into our lives.

Reaching the Audience

At Griffin, we are dedicated to delivering exceptional Australian plays to passionate and engaged audiences. Stories are central to our experience as humans. Our understanding of ourselves, each other and society are shaped by the stories we create and share. In an effort to represent the wider Australian population on our stages, we'd love help to find the audiences that reflect that population and the artists we support. Through philanthropic support, we have a program Amplify, which amplifies the voices on our stages to reach an audience who may not have travelled to our theatre in Kings Cross before. This program is the beginning of a bigger project to attract more people across the nation to our theatre which requires time and investment.

We aspire to reach audiences from many different post codes, cultural backgrounds, income brackets and age groups across Sydney, NSW and Australia as we are the national home of new Australian playwriting. As we present stories that embrace and showcase different cultural backgrounds, we want to find the audiences those stories might speak to the loudest, to let them know they are welcome in our theatre and that sometimes they'll see people just like them onstage.

Works such as *Food Court*, *Ganesh Versus The Third Reich* and *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes* made by internationally acclaimed company Back to Back Theatre, *Dorian Gray* by Sydney Theatre Company and *Counting and Cracking* by Belvoir are stories of success locally, nationally and internationally which have no doubt reached record numbers of audience. Looking at these examples there is a clear case for a pool of funding for ambitious works of scale made available to companies and independent artists to reach wider audiences within Australia and internationally.