

18<sup>th</sup> August 2022

Dear Minister Burke,

This is a momentous time for all of us in the arts, with the planning for our first National Arts and Cultural Plan in progress, and particularly for those companies and individuals who make and create for, with and by children and young people. This is an extraordinary community of wildly diverse contexts and intensely similar passion. Theatre and performance for children and young people means ground-breaking art, multi-disciplinary artforms, significant and meaningful social impact, specific and aligned work for very specific audiences. Our artform covers all children and young people in all their contexts across the nation: made for, with and by First Nations young people, Disabled and/or D/deaf young people, young people in the regions or remote areas, LGBTQI+ young people, those who experience disadvantage or marginalisation, kids in detention. We work across all sectors of society - education, health, welfare, justice, mental health, well-being, urban planning, transport and more. We work across a breadth of specific age groups: babies, early childhood, children under 12, teens, young adults and emerging artists.

Polyglot Theatre is one of the leaders in this sector; an established organisation formed in 1978 and a company of international renown that embodies innovation in our approach to our young audiences. Our vision is of a world where all children are powerful: artistically, socially, culturally. Polyglot is also one of the 5 Young People's arts organisations de-funded by Australia Council in 2020 as COVID 19 hit the nation. There is urgent need to prioritise young people - and the companies making theatre with, by and for them - in the formulation of the National Arts and Cultural Plan.

Polyglot Theatre joins with the Australian sector in support of Young People's Engagement with the Arts to make the following recommendations:

- Include 'Young People's Engagement with the Arts' as a priority of the National Cultural Plan, recognising the value of children as a discerning audience and participants in culture - their globally recognised rights as cultural citizens;
- Establish an ongoing, dedicated funding stream for Young People's Engagement with the Arts and invest in companies whose core business is young people's engagement, administered by the Australia Council for the Arts;
- Establish targeted, cross-department streams for funding Young People's Engagement in the Arts with: Health and Mental Health, Employment, Youth Justice, Regional Youth and Education – co-managed by the Australia Council, acknowledging the impact TYA and Youth Arts organisations (like Polyglot) already have across government sectors;
- Establish Young People's Advisory Committees that reflect the diversity of young Australians, managed independently, as ongoing standing committees for the Australia Council for the Arts and the Minister for the Arts;



At Polyglot Theatre we are invested in young people's engagement in the arts; as audiences, as participants and as contributors, at the age they are. Young people come to Polyglot from birth to early teens and through multiple pathways, usually accompanied by their adults who are the gatekeepers to their experience. The company works in theatres and cultural centres around the world with a high level of international touring especially in Asia and North America. Polyglot creates original works created with and by children in specific communities such as disadvantaged schools, specialist education, international communities through disaster recovery and First Nations communities, drawing from their world view and perspective. The company works boldly in public space, offering free engagement in strong arts and performance experiences for all comers – our recognition of the impact possible if access is possible for all.

In theatre and performance for young audiences, the intrinsic value of our work is something we are used to fighting for. Why this should be a battle is a very big question that comes down to how children are perceived in Australia, and whether their rights as cultural citizens are respected. The rights of the child to arts and culture and to self-expression are stated in the Declaration for the Rights of the Child, articles 31 and 13. The DRC has been acknowledged and signed by Australia, along with an agreement that the governments of the time have a responsibility to defend these rights.

**First Nations First:** It was incredibly empowering to hear you saying 'multiculturalism is based on the centrality of First Nations culture: contemporary and traditional.' The acknowledgment of the importance of First Nations approach and modelling has the potential to make Australia first in so many ways. Inter-generational connection is one of the chief learnings we have gained in every First Nations community we have worked in – the links between old and young being central to community health and survival.

*Recommendation:* that focus on First Nations includes children and young people as central to community and cultural health and innovation.

**A place for every story:** opening up where, when and how arts experiences are encountered is vital for a broad reach, wide engagement and diversity of stories that find expression. Claiming public space is a big part of making the child visible and important in the adult view, and for allowing free and welcoming access to arts for all. Kids have an enormous amount to offer and Polyglot's focus is on making their voices and energy clear and resonant wherever they are. This means creating work in city squares, in schools, in parks, in sports clubs, in art galleries, in major cultural centres, in parades, in early years care centres, at festivals, online, in public housing, adventure playgrounds, regional venues, community halls.

*Recommendation:* that there is a focus for support of works outside established arts venues to enable broad access and a greater diversity in Australia's young audiences, including re-establishment of strong arts focus in government schools. Bring in STEAM.

**Centralising the artist:** Polyglot's Generator program cared for and gave employment to 23 freelance artists during Covid lockdowns in Melbourne throughout 2020 and 2021. Each week the company held a zoom session where artists could share, speak, cry, celebrate and exchange creativity. At a time where most were unable to get government support for work lost, the company supported creativity through developments of new work, and gatherings where people were paid to exchange and create. Small companies in Australia were the ones who really understood the impact on our artistic community, especially the freelance artists we rely on. These people are the mainstay of our creative practice and without them the experimentation that means a thriving and internationally significant sector would not be possible. The pathways that we have created between like-minded companies bring emerging artists to theatre and performing arts for young audiences, as do our links and programs with tertiary institutions such as VCA Melbourne University and Deakin University.



*Recommendation:* fund pathway programs for emerging artists and artists from the broader industry to enter the young people's arts sector. Fund the creation of a training course in this art form – there is nowhere in Australia and indeed, most of the world, to train in the young people's arts sector.

**Infrastructure and venues:** Theatre for young audiences across our country depends upon relationships with venues for national touring. More than that, a company like Polyglot has long lasting and deepening relationships with presenters who are more than just a venue for hire or a space to be filled. Presenters that can commit to vision and strategic growth of this audience are incredibly powerful in the health and vitality of arts for young audiences, especially in the regions. Infrastructure is vital for healthy organisations: from core funding for strategic growth to office and rehearsal space. The relationship between buildings and a healthy independent sector is striking – with fewer arts spaces the possibilities in a diverse and eclectic arts community dwindle.

*Recommendation:* dedicated creative arts spaces for children, families and young people, supported by local and state governments to enable experimentation, creative innovation and risk.

**Audience:** Polyglot Theatre, along with so many of our colleagues here in Australia, has impacted children all around the world. Our international profile is significant: pre COVID we reached 18 countries across 5 continents as well as a broad reach here in Australia. Many companies in our sector do this. We have some of the highest levels of touring in the Australian arts sector with particular success in Asia and North America. The arts for young people companies and artists around Australia are deeply invested in the wellbeing and safety of children and young people wherever they are – often through work in regional towns, disadvantaged areas, schools, prisons, communities, services, and hospitals. Our audiences are inevitably with adults as their gatekeepers to any experience and thus is an extraordinary section of the population: disempowered, without money, under the control of others, and yet the under 15s make up one 5th of the entire population.

The 5 pillars of the National Arts and Cultural Plan are especially resonant for children and young people. These directions speak loudly to the work that is going on every day, often invisible, in our cities towns and remote communities, wherever children and young people live. Polyglot Theatre is one of many companies who work collegiately and in collaboration; we talk, share and we help each other; we are invested in the long term and in our audiences as whole humans.

We urge you to recognise the impact of the young people of Australia through National Arts and culture Plan, to enable and imaginative and hopeful future for us all.

Warm regards,

Sue Giles AM  
Artistic Director and co-CEO  
Polyglot Theatre  
President, ASSSITEJ International  
[www.assitejinternational.org](http://www.assitejinternational.org)

Kath Fyffe  
Executive Director  
Polyglot Theatre  
[www.polyglot.org](http://www.polyglot.org)

