

National Cultural Policy Submission: La Mama Theatre

This submission to the Cultural Policy is being submitted on behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation, La Mama Theatre (www.lamama.com.au)

About La Mama Theatre:

La Mama: Facilitating fearlessly independent theatre making.

Founded in 1967, La Mama is Australia's most vital, responsive, inclusive and diverse home of independent theatre-making. We believe in the power and possibilities of theatre and art for all people. La Mama is committed to a diversity of artistic approaches, to innovation and to exploring minority as well as general concerns. A vibrant space and prolific production house, La Mama has given initial exposure and support to thousands of playwrights, directors, actors, and technicians as well as poets, musicians, performance artists and experimental filmmakers.

In our fifty-five-year history we have presented more than 3500 new Australian productions and supported tens of thousands of Australian artists, some of which are now household names, many of which have made a significant contribution to the national and international arts scene and all who have developed their craft and benefited from the service we provide.

Across our two venues, each year, La Mama:

- Supports approximately 2,000 artists
- Presents approximately 70 new Australian productions, 30 Explorations (works in development), playreadings, plus programs for secondary students, kids, outreach, touring, music, poetry and cabaret.
- Reaches an audience of approximately 27,800

In 2018 our home of more than fifty years was destroyed by fire. At the end of 2021 after raising \$3.5 million we rebuilt, recreating the original humble theatre, adding a rehearsal hub and office space and making our venue fully accessible and sustainable.

In 2020, we lost our Australian Council funding. We were inundated with concerned responses from artists around the country who credit their career to the opportunities afforded by La Mama, as well as audiences for whom La Mama, with its unparalleled affordability (\$30 Full/\$20 Concession) is the only option to engage in live theatre.

We have been supported by RISE federal funding for 2021 and 2022 but 2023 is expected to be our first year of no federal funding for almost fifty years.

La Mama supports a National Cultural Policy, and we are grateful to the government and Minister Burke for the opportunity to contribute.

In this submission we will speak to the challenges and opportunities for three of the five pillars: A Place for Every Story, The Centrality of the Artist and Strong Institutions. Though we are proud of the work we do in First Nations theatre and Reaching the Audience, we will leave others to contribute here as we are an artist-centred, strong institution who has a place for every story.

A Place for Every Story

La Mama is a place for every story. Within regular, prolific programming as well as through targeted programs, we have always supported a diversity of artists across all ages, cultures, gender identities and sexualities as well as neuro-diverse artists and artists with intellectual and physical disabilities. Without box office imperatives which rely on established audiences, we have always been best placed to lead in giving everyone a voice, developing a broad range of art and artists, and generating equally broad audiences. Much of our diversity can be attributed to our accessible pathways and affordable ticket prices.

It has long been clear that significant work needs to be done to ensure the diversity of our community is reflected on our stages and across all cultural life. There are challenges with addressing this through quotas and KPIs but equally an organic approach doesn't produce necessary change. There is no space for tokenism; holistic approaches have proven successful. We have had many artists, labelled 'diverse' in other arenas, express gratitude for working at La Mama without this label, celebrated simply for being an artist with a story, as part of a community of artists who come from all walks of life, who each bring a unique story. Until this experience is representative across the board, we need a dedicated funded policy for centring those on the margins.

Providing grass-roots opportunities is the beginning. Funding organisations that support youth, development and artmaking for a diversity of artists is essential.

We support initiatives that drive change in leadership including supported training/shadowing placements. We also need initiatives like this in the technical, back-of-house part of the sector.

The Centrality of the Artist

La Mama has been at the forefront of centring artists since 1967. We have seen, over decades, that the independent artist is central to the ecology. These are the people generating work, developing ideas and fuelling the mainstages and mainstream culture. They are the people making our cities and regions come to life. They are the lifeblood and they have always been neglected.

It is the most successful and the most established independent artist that regularly finds themselves between gigs, unsure of their next pay, anxiety-ridden and creatively undernourished. This is not a recipe for creative rigour or excellent artmaking. As a sector, we are constantly at risk of losing these talents, to other industries, and worse, to paralysing mental health decline. We cannot afford for this to happen. We need structures that support artists to have careers as artists, to be stable and comfortable enough to be able to make art.

Centring artists in policy and funding is the key to reinvigorating Australian culture. There needs to be a significant increase in financial support and opportunities for artists to make art.

Re-imagining the financial life of an Australian artist is the most exhilarating prospect of a new cultural policy. The La Mama model (upfront production budget, complete artistic freedom with marketing, ticketing, venue, technical support and 80% of the box office) has proven fruitful over fifty-five years. Artists are by nature resourceful, creative, inspired, generous, dynamic and driven. To thrive, they need financial backing and space, support and structures that enables them to make art. Applying the fundamentals of the La Mama model to ongoing financial security and artistic freedom in everyday life, would be a dream. Our artists, our audiences, our communities and our organisations would flourish.

In line with TNA's submission, La Mama echoes the call for the arts to be recognised as a profession by government and by Centrelink. We support a guaranteed basic income for artists. We also agree with an increase in long-term stable funding programs and fellowships for independent artists. This could be revolutionary.

Also, the pool of funding available for independent artists through the Australia Council's grant program needs significant increase. The amount of work required for very small – and increasingly concerning – success rates, is burdensome, often impossible and over time, demoralising. We need these systems to support artists to make work not to set them up to fail. Too many times, we have seen an excellent project not get up, artists worn out by the processes and constant rejections unable to remain inspired to make the art by the weariness of the failing funding cycle.

Strong Institutions

In the mid 90's La Mama was one of the first small theatre companies in the country to be offered multi-year funding through the Australia Council. We have flourished with this support. In 2020, La Mama was one of the 67 companies who did not receive four-year Australia Council funding, despite ranking in the top percentage of applicants. We rely on this funding and need it to continue our proven model of supporting artists.

We are very concerned that over recent years it is the youth, independent, development, playwriting and grassroots companies that have fallen due to cuts at the Australia Council. These are essential parts of the ecosystem. Without the financial support of foundational organisations such as La Mama (and so many others), the future of the Australian cultural scene is at risk. It does not work to have a system where disproportionate federal funding goes to large and major organisations. It is only a matter of time before these companies collapse as nothing is feeding them.

We call for significant organisational investment into the Australia Council. Specifically for organisations that support the development of new work, youth and independent artmaking. For La Mama, this is urgent.

At a time when the Australian cultural sector has been devastated through the pandemic, with so many artists impacted, vulnerable and unable to access the support of Jobkeeper, we need a structurally sound ecology of strong institutions to recoup and rebuild to ensure we have art and culture for the next generation and beyond. We need to create jobs and rebuild the infrastructure of the arts industry. If we were funded by Australia Council, we would be able to employ adequate staff and pay them properly, leading to retention and development. With this institutional stability, we can support our artists to be stable.

We need a federal funding policy that actively supports the whole cultural ecology with significant increases in the small-to-medium arts sector.

Please attribute this submission to La Mama Theatre.

I give permission for this submission to be published online under the name La Mama theatre.

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