

CAST

CONSORTIUM OF AUSTRALIAN STATE THEATRES

CAST is an alliance of Australia's largest state-funded theatre companies including Bell Shakespeare, Belvoir, Black Swan State Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre, State Theatre Company South Australia, Sydney Theatre Company.

Summary

- CAST is highly supportive of the Federal Government's renewal of a National Cultural Policy as a clear set of priorities to guide the rejuvenation of Australia's arts and culture sector.
- We begin by acknowledging the substantial erosion of the theatre industry in Australia at all levels in recent years, and the hardship experienced by so many companies and artists, who are our peers and colleagues. We wish to be leaders in a flourishing, dynamic and collaborative theatre ecology.
- We agree that the five pillars of the Creative Australia National Cultural Policy (2013) are a sound basis on which to quickly establish a new, functioning National Cultural Policy.
- The Australia Council should remain the primary vehicle for the activation of the new policy and the pursuit of its goals, operating independently of government and driven by peer assessment and industry engagement.
- The Council has preserved many of the mechanisms by which the industry can be quickly re-energised with the allocation of increased funding that is recognised as necessary across artforms and across the country. *We advocate that funding to the Australia Council is doubled as a matter of priority.*
- That commitment would be a visionary (and affordable) statement of ambition for the cultural life of the country and enable consideration of further innovative and substantial reform to the sector over the long-term.

The following are common challenges and opportunities for CAST companies related to the five pillars around which the policy is being formed:

First Nations

CAST companies can foreground First Nations stories as central to Australia's cultural identity through consistent and prominent programming of First Nations artist-led productions.

This should involve investment in large scale and ambitious work by experienced First Nations artists and as well as in the creative development of new work and the professional development of emerging First Nations artists. We endorse calls by First Nations performing arts companies for a commissioning fund for First Nations work as well as sustained investment in professional and artistic development programs.

We believe there are opportunities for CAST companies to work more closely with government portfolios including Indigenous or Aboriginal Affairs, Education, Health, and Tourism, as well as community organisations, to extend the reach and impact of First Nations-led work.

We recognise the importance of self-determination for First Nations artists over their work and believe there are multiple ways to empower and embed this:

- A skills and workforce capacity building plan, as has been called for by First Nations performing arts companies; including consideration of the full range of professional opportunities and career pathways offered within CAST company structures and, importantly, in leadership positions. We believe the development of First Nations producers should be a key consideration of workforce development.
- Funding to ensure cultural processes that respect the Cultural and Intellectual Property of First Nations artists and communities. Establishing and working with trust and respect is key to producing work of ambition that connects communities across the nation.
- The development of a peak body or service organisation for First Nations arts, envisaged by the Australia Council's 2020 plan and being further developed, including through the forthcoming Purrumpa First Nations arts and culture gathering in 2022.

CAST companies practice in a European-derived artform, and the embrace of First Nations storytelling practices through sharing, listening and learning, opens radical possibilities to the evolution of our artform and our culture.

A Place for Every Story

We believe the CAST company infrastructure represents the closest thing to a national level playing field for storytelling, in that, in nearly every state of the country a local story can be told with professional production values on the mainstage for a mass audience. An overall increase in funding to CAST companies will enable us to make greater investment in, and take greater risk on, new Australian work from all corners of the country.

CAST companies can no longer provide script assessment services and are rarely in a position to receive unsolicited scripts through general submission. This is a problem for playwrights, especially those without established relationships with our companies. Re-investment in Australian Plays Transform, and the programs through which CAST companies can identify and develop and identify promising writers and scripts is essential to reestablishing a pathway for the production of new work from the broadest range of writers, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, from regional areas, writers with lived experience of

disability and first-time writers. These are the works that can transform our sense of ourselves and build understanding across generations and communities.

Established artists also deserve a place for their stories. We know that some Australian playwrights enjoy greater success and more productions and recognition internationally than they do at home. CAST companies should celebrate these artists and present their work. We need more resources to do that, while also developing the most promising and unexpected stories from wherever they appear in our states.

Regional engagement from CAST companies is an important part of encouraging storytelling from people in those areas, whether through pitching plays to our or other companies, or generating their own local activity. This activity is at risk of continual decline without increased investment in touring (Playing Australia) and regional programs more broadly.

There is an opportunity for diverse artists and arts workers to take up more roles in CAST companies than is currently the case. While our companies are aware of, and actively working to change this, there is an opportunity through investment to create sustainable long-term career pathways for diverse artists and arts workers.

The opportunities for audience development through diverse storytelling is critical to investment in cultural policy. CAST companies are seeking to continually increase the diversity of our audiences by representing a range of communities and people on stage, but there are opportunities to amplify and accelerate this process through investment in new-work development.

Centrality of the Artist

CAST companies have a prime role in the employment of Australian theatre artists and now, in the post-COVID environment, there is a huge opportunity for CAST companies to help rebuild the creative workforce and hopefully stop the drain of talent from the industry.

We are already the main source of commissions for playwrights in Australia, but with greater investment we can extend that work to more playwrights and a more diverse range of playwrights. Equally, adequate levels of funding will enable more investment in new devised or non-text-based work, which often requires higher levels of investment in creative development.

This, in turn, has flow-on impacts to our employment of directors and other creatives. There is an opportunity to up-skill creatives in new technologies that add value to their work in the theatre and improve their overall employment in the sector. We can provide vital development opportunities for mid-career designers, through residency opportunities which provide hands-on experience working inside larger companies on works of scale. We know there is an acute shortage of experienced set and costume designers, sound and AV designers.

We must begin to rebuild cast sizes, which have diminished over time.

CAST companies have historically been the bastion of providing industrially determined, professional conditions for theatre artists and arts workers in Australia and it is important we maintain that role. What has come into stark relief through the COVID pandemic is the casualised and insecure nature of our workforce, and it is imperative that the Federal Government include the arts sector in its overarching agenda to improve security and conditions for workers.

There is sometimes criticism of the size of the companies we maintain. The companies represent infrastructure in service of artists which, if it were lost, would not be easily replaced. What we need is not smaller or diminished CAST companies, what we need is the resources to redress the imbalance between artists and others within our companies.

The safety of artists is paramount in the work of CAST companies, and emotional and psychological safety has rightfully become a high priority in our rehearsal rooms and on our stages. Greater resourcing is now required to enable our companies to carry out the emotional safety audits, intimacy training, cultural consultation and other training that comes with providing a safe workplace.

Strong Institutions

CAST companies have been eroded significantly over time. Though there is a perception that CAST companies have been quarantined, or protected from, funding cuts, we have in fact been asked to do more with less over a long period of time. The idea of Strong Institutions has been put in opposition to a strong, vibrant and multi-faceted ecology; in fact, they are a bedrock for that very thing.

This is especially true in smaller states where shrinking small to medium sectors have placed greater responsibility on the state theatre companies to serve all artists and audiences across the sector. Our companies are in 'survival' mode instead of enjoying the opportunity to pursue our visions and missions with zeal and have profound impacts on Australia's cultural life. The ultimate impact of that is on artists and audiences.

By strengthening CAST companies as pillar institutions of a vibrant ecology, our cultural identity is celebrated and discussed, and our cultural memory is sustained.

CAST companies upkeep a consistent workforce that moves across the sector.

We support the small to medium sector through co-productions or the lending of resources and expertise and long-term audience development.

Our education programs build the audiences for theatre companies and inspire the next generation of artists, across the sector. Increasingly, the erosion of arts education at a secondary level means that programs run by CAST companies can be the only access to drama education for senior students. Access to quality, consistent arts education is essential to attracting the next generation of artists and arts workers to enter the industry.

We also recognise the deep need for strong training institutions and the ability to collaborate with them fully; we have historically relied on them and cannot do without the talent they produce.

We endorse consideration of insurance schemes that enable reasonable risk by CAST companies on ambitious Australian work.

Reaching the Audience

CAST companies nationally present the very best of new Australian works, the latest international plays and classics to at least 1 million people annually, and our digital reach is vast. These companies have been, and will remain, engine rooms for artists and writers to make sense of our contemporary world and lead us to a collective sense of belonging through our audience engagement.

Early engagement and true representation are key to new audiences and sustaining the companies for the future. Research conducted by Melbourne Theatre Company outlined that 80% of audiences (subscribers and non-subscribers) started their life-long love of the arts before the age of 20.

There is an opportunity to reinvest in audience development programs that enable young people to engage with the theatre and sustain that interest through their lifetimes.

We call for more support for touring of large-scale works domestically and internationally by CAST companies to extend the investment we already make in each production and reach more audiences as a result. As well as increasing funding to Playing Australia and broadening access to that fund to CAST productions, consideration should be given to a comparable international touring and collaboration fund to which CAST companies are eligible.

There is an opportunity to turbo-charge Australia's cultural diplomacy through creative exchange. CAST companies should be empowered and enabled to make meaningful and high value collaborations with companies in the Asia Pacific and elsewhere internationally.

CAST companies are rightly required to make theatre broadly accessible to the community, by offering generous concessions to different sections of the community and offering access programs for those who require them. An overall improvement in our resourcing will ensure we can continue to offer broad accessibility across the community.

Digital recordings of shows are a strong option for increasing accessibility, however the costs for high quality filmed versions of plays are still very high, with no prospect for financial recoupment in the near term. More resources and established IR expectations will allow us to hugely broaden our reach; this can include service provision to regional and rural areas; aged care and disability centres, schools and to patrons who are unwell or unable to attend the theatre.

August 2022