

# **National Cultural Policy SUBMISSION**

August 2022

Monkey Baa respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of this nation and honours their continued cultural and spiritual connection to the lands, waters and seas. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, on whose land we work, live and share stories.

## **SUBMISSION**

On behalf of Monkey Baa Theatre Company  
Kevin du Preez, Executive Director



August 2022

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## **ABOUT MONKEY BAA**

Monkey Baa makes great theatre for young people and for over 25 years we presented award-winning theatrical experiences that inspire and empower young people across Australia and internationally.

For the past decade, Monkey Baa has made its home at the ARA Darling Quarter Theatre in Sydney and on Gadigal land. This is where we work, play and produce high-quality theatre.

Monkey Baa is one of Australia's widest touring companies with 28 national tours to 135 regional and remote communities, 5 international tours and over 3700 performances reaching over 1.5 million young people.

Nearly a quarter of a century of operation requires resilience and ingenuity. Much has changed since its inception in 1997 – particularly in the past 3 years – but Monkey Baa's appetite for development, transformation and renewal remains the same.

## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments to inform the development of a National Cultural Policy.

The world outside our stage door looks nothing like it did three years ago. Yet the Theatre for Young Audience (TYA) sector's ambition to create exhilarating theatre and creative experiences for young people is stronger than ever.

While impacts of COVID-19 on young people are emerging, the full impact will be complex and not yet fully understood. The next few years will be dynamic and the outcomes for young people might change quickly. Mental wellbeing and social connectedness are and will continue to be a challenge. For instance, 74% of young people reported their mental health had been negatively impacted since the outbreak of the pandemic<sup>1</sup>.

Digital technologies are changing how audiences are engaging with and experience art and culture. During the past 2 years, many arts organisations responded by presenting content online and exploring new ways of engaging digitally. Although there have been some successes with new business models, many are still investigating how digital technology and practices can be embedded in the core business model and what the financial return of these projects will be. Developing digital capabilities is a key priority across the sector with organisations such as the Australia Council delivering new programs to uplift the sector digital skills.

The arts and culture industry has experienced significant setbacks because of COVID, both economical and otherwise. Across all areas of the industry regardless of size or artform, restrictions on gatherings, changes in audience behaviour (voluntary or otherwise), and unemployment have taken a devastating toll on the sector. The full scope and scale of the impact will be difficult to determine.

Governments at all levels have made significant investment in the industry to try and minimise this impact. This support has created a temporary and artificial uplift in government support. Programs such as JobSaver and JobKeeper were the lifeline to many organisations, including Monkey Baa. The question now is how do we rebuild sustainability from diverse sources of support?

The arts landscape will be irrevocably changed post-COVID. At this moment in time, our industry can strengthen itself and look towards the future. A future that is more sustainable and more equitable; a future where the arts are fiercely valued by all society and organisations such as Monkey Baa thrive.

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<sup>1</sup> Headspace 2020, Coping with COVID: the mental health impact on young people accessing headspace services.

## YOUNG PEOPLE AS A PRIORITY FOR THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

### Our recommendation

The development of a National Cultural Policy (NCP) has come at a critical moment for the broader arts sector but specifically for the Youth Arts Sector. Now, more than ever, do we need to support the sustainable development of our sector. This new plan must adopt and include a focus on young people and their engagement with the arts. The new plan provides an opportunity to support recovery and shape the future of the Youth Arts Sector in Australia.

Together with our sector colleagues from Arena Theatre Company, Polyglot Theatre, Shopfront Arts Co-op, St Martin's Youth Theatre and ATYP, Monkey Baa recommend the NCP must:

- Include “Young People's Engagement with the Arts” as a priority of the National Cultural Plan.
- Establish an ongoing, dedicated funding stream for Young People's Engagement with the Arts for companies whose core business is young people's engagement, administered by the Australia Council for the Arts.
- Establish targeted, cross-department streams of funding for Young People's Engagement to work with Health and Mental Health, Employment, Youth Justice, Regional Youth and Education – co-managed by the Australia Council.
- Establish Advisory Boards that represent the diversity of young Australians, managed independently, as ongoing standing committees for the Australia Council for the Arts and the Minister for the Arts.

We also support Theatre Network Australia’s call for the establishment of a Young People and Culture Framework. A Young People and Culture Framework would provide the guiding principles, the structure, and the mechanisms to facilitate impactful cross portfolio collaboration.

- Provide an investment of \$15 million per year for four years from 2023 – 2026 to engage young Australians in arts and cultural activities.
- Include “Young People’s Engagement” as a priority of the Framework with young people’s arts being included into whole of government approaches to learning, wellbeing, mental health, employment, resilience and artistic excellence.
- Re-establish dedicated funding for young people’s arts and investment in companies and artists whose core business is young people’s engagement, sufficient to allow growth and enhanced impact.
- Establish a separate stream of funding for young people’s engagement and participation to be made available to other portfolios including Health and Employment – co-managed by the Australia Council.
- Establish young people’s advisory committees that reflect the diversity of young Australians, as an ongoing standing committee for the Australia Council for the Arts and the Minister for the Arts, ensuring young Australians have a direct voice to the decision makers impacting their lives.

## **Why is this important?**

When a young person connects with theatre it gives them an opportunity to come together with their peers and family, and an experience to extend imaginations, explore the full spectrum of emotions and process ideas together.

Engaging in the arts can offer young people opportunities for meaning-making, while also regulating and expressing their emotions. Going to the theatre, provides a platform for shared understandings that can help establish and develop positive relationships.

Research shows that participation in theatre not only improves academic performance but develops and improves important skills like creativity, emotional intelligence and collaboration.

The TYA sector's work responds to this research and the sector needs to extend our impact by allowing more young people to engage with the power of art. Now is the time to upscale existing arts programs, invest in capacity building and share knowledge across industry.

## **A vision for the TYA sector**

We want young people to have a magnified sense of possibility of who they are and what they can achieve. We want young people to be empowered to navigate, shape and engage with the world around them.

For this to happen young people need to have important skills such as creativity, self-expression, emotional intelligence and collaboration.

They can obtain these skills through understanding their own identity, culture and community. Young people can discover new ways of seeing the world by being exposed to stories and experiences outside of their own life.

Purposeful theatre experiences provide young people with a safe space to explore, play and experience life. Theatre can inspire creativity and spark imagination.

Such experiences can only have this effect through professional theatre made for younger audiences in collaboration with young people.

To make the above possible, we need the NCP to include young people's engagement with the arts as a priority.

## **What are the outcomes for young people?**

By focusing on young people and responding specifically with programs and funding, we hope to see the following outcomes for young people:

- Young people feel connected with others.
- Young people are exposed to new ways of seeing the world and other people's experiences.
- Young people better understand their own identity and society.
- Young people feel more resilient.

- Young people have an opportunity to ‘escape’ the complexities of today’s stresses.
- Young people see their world represented in contemporary society.
- Young people feel safe and can explore new ideas without judgement.
- Young people feel inspired and want to create.

## **YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE PILLARS**

Young people and their engagement with the arts intersects across all the five proposed priorities of the NCP.

We also believe that a Young People and Culture Framework should be a central theme or even its own pillar. This would be a way to achieve some of the multi-portfolio outcomes needed and allow the arts sector to remember how to be ambitious and think long term.

## **CONCLUSION**

We thank the Federal Government for the opportunity to contribute to the development of this very important policy.