



22 August 2022

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION

This submission is made on behalf of the board and management of Legs On The Wall, a not-for-profit arts company based in Lilyfield, NSW, supported by the NSW Government through Create NSW, and a recipient of recent project funding from the Australian Government through the Australia Council. We also receive regular support from Inner West Council. We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the formation of a new National Cultural Policy and commend the attention being paid to a revitalised policy by the Federal Government.

Legs On The Wall is a flagship physical theatre company touring nationally and internationally. We create provocative original works, always engaging heightened physicality and finding new ways to kick against gravity. Our recent climate-focussed work **THAW** – performed on a colossal melting ice sculpture suspended from a crane – is an iconic example of how we strive to tell socially and culturally relevant stories, pushing the boundaries of expectation. Founded in Sydney in 1984, we approach our fortieth anniversary conscious of a proud legacy and restlessly renewing our mission; making meaning in a rapidly changing world through the art of transformative physical theatre.

Legs are statement-makers who are also accustomed to rolling our sleeves up and, as such, this submission makes some observations on matters of principle, but also practical suggestions for programs and reform for consideration. We have synthesised articulating the challenges, opportunities and importance of the five pillars of the new cultural policy to our practice, in a holistic response to each area of focus:

FIRST NATIONS

First Nations cultures naturally and rightly must hold a foundational place in any cultural policy or understanding of contemporary Australian identity. There is vibrancy and vitality in the world's oldest continuing cultures, which many Australians should have a greater understanding of and pride in. More can be done to bring First Nations stories and creativity to wider audiences, and celebrate the distinct and compelling perspectives of First Nations practitioners, in First Nations led and centred works, and also - without limits - in what could be called mainstream Australian cultural output. More can be done to build opportunities in behind-the-scenes roles in the arts where First Nations people are under-represented.

Legs are continuing in our strategy of producing First Nations led works with the development of **First Women** [working title] to be created by Vicki Van Hout in 2022-23, following great success with the Helpmann Award nominated and widely-acclaimed work **Man With The Iron Neck**, written by Ursula Yovich, based on an original work by Josh Bond. Legs are also at the forefront of training the next generation of First Nations performing artists through our longstanding education partnership with the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA). Legs seeks First Nations voices for leadership and consultation. Our team continue to liaise with former board member Kirk Page, and have recently appointed Yolande Brown to our Board of Directors.

For consideration:

- a National strategy or campaign to build the literacy of all Australians regarding First Nations cultures, knowledge, stories, and creative practices, which would in turn build audiences and, it might be hoped, contribute to social outcomes in equity and deeper shared understandings.
- Federally supported scholarships to National Training Organisations in the Performing Arts.
- Federally supported paid internships in arts administration, marketing and other culture-shaping roles, creating pathways for the cultural tastemakers of the future.

A PLACE FOR EVERY STORY

Legs have a longstanding record of championing diversity. One of the landmark works in our historical repertoire, **Homeland**, highlighted the perspectives and courage of refugees and migrants. That tradition is undiminished; Legs continues to train and cast artists of diverse backgrounds, and our practice of telling stories through physicality and spectacle breaks down language barriers. We also champion the work of artists with disabilities, in our own projects and through subsidised venue hire. Legs have recently been selected by Create NSW to offer a Createability mentorship. LGBTIQ storytelling also features strongly in our repertoire. Notably our current epic collaboration with Queensland's Dead Puppet Society - **Holding Achilles** - reclaims the story of Achilles and Patroclus as heroic lovers questioning the injustices of the Trojan War. We consider the importance of championing new voices constantly.

Audiences seek diversity in our culture today out of a desire to see that culture reflect and represent all who call this continent home, and from the excitement of encountering stories previously unknown to us as individuals.

As with considerations related to First Nations creative practice under the first pillar of the new cultural policy, more can be done to bolster artists and cultural output from under-represented communities, and to ensure pathways to creative and administrative leadership roles.

For consideration:

- More opportunities for funded development of cultural output from artists of diverse backgrounds.
- Federally supported scholarships to National Training Organisations in the Performing Arts.
- Federally supported paid internships in arts administration, marketing and other culture-shaping roles, creating pathways for the cultural tastemakers of the future.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST

As part of the artist's role in society, the artist stands apart from society. The artist is simultaneously essential and vulnerable, paradoxically alternating the roles of leader and rebel. Artists are workers, but the ways in which artists work are not always simpatico with systems and protections that other workers enjoy, and artists are often in the position of needing to defend their work and its unique features from ignorance or - at times - hostile views. This was laid bare in recent years. Where some companies, including Legs, were the grateful recipients of pandemic-related grant programs such as JobKeeper, it's widely acknowledged that many individual arts workers and venues were not as fortunately positioned.

Legs offers artists free opportunities to train and socialise through our Open Training program, and development opportunities such as secondments to our productions and our Leg Up mentorship program. These programs have frequently introduced us to artists who have gone on to play key roles in our creative projects, and lead our workshops, gaining employment through Legs and elsewhere. All of these programs have been substantially impacted by COVID-19 and the inherent risk of infection that bringing artists together carries. We are reviving these activities gradually - out of impulse and in recognition that opportunities to train and learn are diminishing.

The Arts and Humanities in our education systems are not championed as they should be. Any conversation of STEM models of education leaves the Arts to one side. There has also been a decades-long decline in tertiary arts education and training institutions, consequential of funding cuts (the intensive and resource-heavy nature of such training has seen creative and performing arts units face disproportionate impacts) and the denigration of artistic practice as insufficiently academic. The loss or diminishment of vital programs with exemplary track records in developing world-renowned artists has serious consequences for the future of our creative industries and must be addressed.

For consideration:

- Income support recognising artistic training and practice as work, perhaps through an Artist Basic Income program, or a provision of income between sporadic opportunities.

- A comprehensive review into Arts Education and Skills training, and pathways to artistic training and development, also taking into consideration income support for emerging artists from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- A custom-built performing arts training facility at the University of Western Sydney Nepean now sits effectively idle after a highly successful tertiary training program - Theatre Nepean - was closed some years ago. It would be worth reviving a program and reviewing how such a successful program was created, managed, and later dismantled. Other examples exist.

STRONG INSTITUTIONS

Small to Medium arts companies could be seen as the small vertebrae in the institutional spine of the Nation's cultural sector - nimble, flexible, vital, but incredibly vulnerable. Operational funding is critical to maintaining vibrancy in the small to medium sector, and yet, companies currently receiving multi-year funding at a federal level represent 23% of those expressing interest in the most recent application process. While 28 new companies were successful in this round, 49 companies which had been receiving ongoing federal support were unsuccessful. This followed the loss of ongoing federal support for 62 organisations in 2016 (Legs was one among many companies that were not funded) as a consequence of dramatic cuts to Australia Council funding. There is now an opportunity to correct this alarming downward trend and effective devaluation of the Arts.

Looking deeper than the question of funding levels and allocations within existing frameworks, questions might be asked regarding short-term four-year cycles of operational funding, and whether these offer sufficient certainty for long term planning. While accountability is essential, there are inefficiencies in the continual cycle of re-application, and great anxiety attends a process which can have existential consequences, not necessarily related to any change in a company's quality or quantity of output or performance. It is worth considering whether the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework might be expanded, and - if not - how some of the beneficial features of this program might be applied to other operational funding programs.

We speak in the arts at times about needing “permission to fail”, which has some truth, but might do better to reflect on how we might find the space to succeed. Too many of our companies are expected to live hand to mouth existences; understaffed, under-resourced and under-valued.

Beyond the development and production of our own projects, Legs plays a role in sustaining established and emerging artists in our sector through venue hire, and especially through our stewardship of the Red Box, purpose built by the NSW government and opened in 2002 in recognition of the vibrancy and unique needs of Physical Theatre. As a matter of policy we prioritise creative practice in our venue hire operations and in this way continue to act as a base of creativity for Physical Theatre, for other producers of live art, and for other art forms and media production.

For consideration:

- Expand four-year funding to eight-year cycles in a system not dissimilar to Federal Senate elections: place approximately half of the companies currently receiving this funding on an additional term now, and make the next round of multi-year funding an eight-year term. There would still be an opportunity to apply every four years.
- Indexation of operational funding, allowing companies to respond to market shifts and offer appropriate wage increases between funding rounds.
- Consider how companies might be better encouraged to find efficiencies, establish appropriate reserves, and make savings, especially given a deeper understanding of the importance of preparing for unanticipated circumstances.

REACHING THE AUDIENCE

Artists are adept at connecting with audiences. We live or die by the mysterious connection that is provoked by transformative forms of expression. In an age where economies and societies are realigning themselves, exciting and disruptive technological advances are being made and wealth is increasingly concentrated, some artforms are ascendent, some are newly threatened, and artforms on the margins - the unconventional

boundary-riding arts that can't readily establish a brand - are increasingly endangered. Cultural policy need not pick or choose artforms at the expense of others, but it is worth reflecting over where support can best allow more precarious but no less fascinating artforms to flourish.

While we frequently work in theatres, a number of Legs' iconic reputation-making works, such as **THAW**, are designed for the free and open appreciation of a mass audience. Increasingly this includes via digital methods, as well as for local audiences. The **THAW Cam** live stream (achieved in partnership with Sydney Festival and the Sydney Opera House) was a global success, and the performance won the attention of news sites worldwide. In boasting of these achievements, Legs are not forgetful of our remit to build audiences locally, frequently partnering with Inner West Council to create performances, conduct workshops, and play a leadership role in the community we have called home since the company's inception. Regional engagement and touring is another area of focus, and our strategy to develop **First Women** in a regional centre will infuse the work, connect our company to more communities, and free our home base in Lilyfield for other artistic work. We are strengthening our strategies for digital engagement, and have noted the escalation in adoption of digital platforms through the years of the pandemic, but also see ourselves as defenders of the magnetism and social power of live performance that simply cannot be transferred in the same way via a broadcast.

For consideration:

- Programs to foster the enjoyment of live performance for more Australians and from an early age, enhancing access and provoking Australians to put their screens to one side from time to time. The NSW Government's Discover Voucher program, and other similar programs are worth drawing lessons from.
- Greater integration of Australia's unique and exemplary cultural industries in international tourism strategies and campaigns.
- Restoration of local content quotas for Australian content on our screens, which might also consider guidance or quotas for a proportion of First Nations content.

IN CONCLUSION

After some years of uncertainty and thwarted activity, our cultural sector is poised to further re-energise and inspire the community and the wider world. It's important work: the nation of tomorrow will be built by the cultural leadership of today. We again commend and support the work of all those involved in shaping the new Cultural Policy which will offer direction, guidance and support for the years ahead, and would be pleased to be involved in ongoing opportunities to provide insights and ideas.

LEGS ON THE WALL

Simone Whetton
Chair

Joshua Thomson
Artistic Director

Legs On The Wall gives permission for this submission to be published online.

Please publish this submission under **Legs On The Wall**

Please attribute this submission, if referenced, to **Legs On The Wall**

For further information please contact

James Beach
Manager
Legs On The Wall
admin@legsonthewall.com.au
02 9560 9479