

THEATRE WORKS

Theatre Works Submission National Cultural Policy

Not For Profit Organisation

About Theatre Works

Theatre Works (TW) is one of Australia's longest-running independent theatres, constantly reinvigorating & reimagining the sector by providing a hotbed for artist and audience development.

Theatre Works champions artists & work that embrace difference & celebrate risk, working to provide a supportive public platform for marginalised conversations & voices. This vision guides our foremost aim: To be the Australian epicentre of independent theatre and independent theatre makers by investing in, empowering and supporting artists of all experience, identity, background and aspiration to make ambitious works that reflect, redefine or reimagine contemporary Australia and contemporary Australian theatrical practice

We believe in theatre and a sector that is a true representation of the diverse world in which we live. We actively seek to create opportunities and pathways for marginalised communities through the creation of the She Writes collective (development for female-identifying playwrights), the First Stories Festival (development for and by First Nations artists), our annual Midsumma Festival Hub (by/for/about LGBTQIA+), and our children and youth programming that sits alongside our already diverse curated main-stage program.

Access & inclusion drive our creative programming & audience development focus. We actively attract broad audiences from our local community, across Melbourne & beyond. We're in a continual process of reassessing our venue, programming & approach to embrace neuro-atypical audiences, people living with disability, mental illness, financial or social disadvantage. This also includes women, young people, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander, LGBTQIA+ & other community members.

TW do not program specific content, form or explorations, we believe in investing in artists, audiences and our artform in order to galvanise our future - we do so through a variety of development pathways and community building initiatives. Our investment in the future is three pronged, artists and artistic development, opportunities for underrepresented voices and subsequent audiences.

First Nations

Theatres have historically been dangerous and colonial spaces for First Nations artists. Not just the institutions but the forms themselves are extensions of colonial practice. In contemporary Australia, through every facet of the theatre industry it is white, colonial and modernist definitions of theatre and theatre making methodologies that are held up as excellence. In order for our sector to become safe for First Nations artists we need to do three key things:

1. Invest money in training and development programs for emerging First Nations Artists, Producers, Administrators, Reviewers, and dramaturgs. Our current systems do not support any way of thinking or working that is not Anglo-centric modernist storytelling methodologies and feedback/critiquing systems. We must unpack these and redefine these in order for us to have a safe cultural space for First Nations artists.
2. Organisations must be funding to hire and work specifically with First Nations peoples within their organisations. We must make it possible to have First Nations people at the decision-making table. At present we do not have enough skilled First Nations peoples in the sector to fill those positions (hence the previous point).
3. Redefine and decolonise our key indicators of success and excellence. Much of our definitions around what works and what is good is based on academic rhetoric entrenched in colonial, patriarchal, heteronormative, capitalist and modernist beliefs. Culturally and anthropologically, we have moved through or are moving through many of those beliefs but within the Theatre sector we have not adjusted our performance criteria.

The Centrality of the Artist

At present there is simply not enough money available to fund the artists, the artists are the reason for this conversation, the reason for the sector and the reason the funding exists. We must fund them proportionately more than we are funding the organisations. Organisations cannot and should not exist without the supported and funded work of the artists. How can we justify paying for buildings and box office staff when we in the S2M sector can't pay the artists on the stage, how is it fair or ethical for us? Artists need the freedom and support to dream, take risks and sometimes fail. That is how theatre evolves - that is how we as a community and a

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humanity evolve. Through seeing new ideas and ways of feeling, thinking, moving played out in front of us.

We must also find ways to fund ambitious works - works that take time or a lot of people. Art is not always small or cheap. Artists need ways to access funding before they know exactly why it should be funded. Artists much like scientists begin their work with a hypothesis or a genesis that needs to be tested and tried on the floor before it takes a form that is more easily sold and funded.

There should be a discussion about recognising artists as high performance exponents who do extraordinary things despite the poverty of funding but whose endeavours are cherished by many and exploited by those who wish to bathe in their shadows - this has to be reviewed and decisions made to recognise the pathways to high performance are similar to those we nurture in other fields, in particular sports where we endeavour and expect as a society to see funding structures that provide clear pathways for young talent to be nurtured and emerge from youth right through to adult life.

A similar approach in the arts should be a core part of a new cultural policy perspective.

Strong Institutions

In order for the Theatre sector to thrive, to grow and to progress, small to medium (S2M) organisations and independent artists must receive a significant increase to the funding available to them. At present our industry is held together and furthered by the unpaid labour of the small to medium sector and independent artists. S2M organisations are under resourced and underfunding leaving little to no trickle down finances to support the artists making the work that they program. We currently have the system backwards. Key Organisations and State Theatre Companies receive the bulk of the monies available with no obligation to pay that money onto the artists doing the bulk of the work. Beyond that, State Theatre Companies are those with the most financial security and the greatest freedom to take artistic risk and to build new audiences and yet they are the most risk averse in the sector and do little to no market research or audience development to ensure future audiences. Furthermore, State Theatre Companies explore little to no creation methodologies beyond that of the 'well-made play' system. Theatre and Theatre Making is a diverse practice, not all great works are made in the author down model, in fact, one could argue the opposite, many of the greatest theatrical works of the 20th century by the

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likes of Peter Brook, Ariane Mnoushkin, Julie Taymor, Anne Bogart and Jan Fabre were not made in this model but devised and developed with ensembles and devising techniques. In order for the sector to thrive we must have diverse and strong institution that service the whole sector and not just niche pockets. Including that of Anglo-centric playwriting with modern dramaturgical paradigms that serve predominantly white rich audiences. Since most of the companies with the most funding continue to do the same thing they have been doing for the last 100 years, the heavy lifting in terms of; the development of form, the cultivation of independent companies and artists, the investment in new audiences, the market research, the training and professional development of emerging artists, the creation of programs for emerging artists of the global majority, POC, First Nations practitioners, the fostering of new producers and sharing of business acumen falls to S2M companies to provide, all while delivery programs on the smell of an oily rag. In order for our institutions to be stronger we must fund MORE independent and S2M orgs properly, they need the money to pay the staff in order to support the artists that are taking our arts ecology so strongly into the future while those with the most funding are keeping us firmly anchored in the past if the Key Organisations and Major Theatre Companies cannot serve the greater sector they should be held accountable and/or be given quota's on their engagement within the sector.

Generations of funding cuts especially on a federal level have favoured large, established companies, and punished the small to medium sector. A robust National Cultural Policy will acknowledge that art and culture are an ecosystem, and that the vast majority of opportunities for participation happen at the local level, via small to medium arts organisations, and direct resources to these levels appropriately. Any restoration or increase in funding must restore the balance, as well as directing core funds to those who need it most — our independent artists and writers.

This cultural policy has the opportunity to redefine the future of arts funding and the obvious answer is an injection of financial investment by the federal government however there is no amount of money that will fix a broken funding system especially one that has been progressively deconstructed by a government that did not value the arts. You can only get the policies and pillars right by hearing the voices from the fringe and the independent sector and artists.

S2M organisations like Theatre Works have the responsibility for being the voice of so many marginalised and independent artists that just do not have the capacity to fill out this form or make a submission especially after two years of being the forgotten workers in a broken system.

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I living wage is possible with vision and investment and would go a long way to empowering independence across the sector

An increase in Australia Council four-year funding S2M funding would go a long way to building opportunities for independent artists

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