

22.8.22

National Cultural Policy submission
BELL SHAKESPEARE

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Government's new National Cultural Policy which Bell Shakespeare strongly supports. I am pleased to articulate our responses to the five key pillars of the policy and the opportunities and challenges they present for the live performance sector and in particular, Bell Shakespeare.

As a member of the Consortium of Australian State Theatre Companies (CAST) and of Live Performance Australia (LPA), Bell Shakespeare also endorses those submissions.

PREAMBLE

Bell Shakespeare performs Shakespeare's work in theatres, schools, and communities across Australia supported by Commonwealth and NSW Governments through the Partnership Framework. We are also in receipt of specific support from the Commonwealth Government to deliver discrete programs in education settings for students and teachers.

Bell Shakespeare provides direct employment opportunities for more than 150 individual artists, administrators, and arts workers annually and many more indirectly in the delivery of our national touring and education programs. We create pathways and opportunities for emerging practitioners and for young people, and support students and teachers with our in-school performance-based programs. Our high-quality teaching resources, professional development opportunities and creative pathway programs include scholarships and work experience programs.

The company strives to ensure cultural representation in all our work and perhaps most especially in education settings where arguably we reach the most diverse audiences. In a 'normal' year our face-to-face audience reach is between 135,000 – 150,000 people across more than 90% of federal electorates. We are proud of the impact we have made on the lives of many Australians and believe Shakespeare's plays speak to all people irrespective of cultural background, ethnicity, location, age, or socio-economic status. They speak to what it is to be human.

Bell Shakespeare invests in the creation and presentation of distinctly Australian Shakespeare productions which are appreciated by national and international audiences. We are continually exploring what these works mean to us as Australians and at this time. We also use Shakespeare's works as the point of inspiration to create new works. This has included cross artform work through our creative development arm, Mind's Eye, including the visual art exhibition *The Art of Shakespeare*; Shakespeare Unbound (a digital collaboration with the ABC); stage productions *Just Macbeth!* by Andy Griffiths (also published in book and audiobook form), *Hecate* (an all-Noongar language adaptation of *Macbeth*), and later this year new Australian musical, *The Lovers* based on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the further creative development of *Method in Madness* in partnership with Accessible Arts. Our commitment is to reinvention and exploration.

FIRST NATIONS

- Bell Shakespeare believes in the timelessness of traditional stories and their resonance in our contemporary world. We strongly advocate for First Nations voices in all arts and cultural practice as a critical part of our cultural identity.
- Policy settings must consider how we can best support First Nations artists with respect to skills and capacity building, inclusive workplaces, practices and protocols, and cultural safety, and perhaps especially as a touring company.
- Prioritising and valuing First Nations stories and cultural practices and embedding performing arts disciplines more broadly into our education curriculums and training institutions will help drive First Nations participation and reaffirm the opportunities that may be realised through a career in the arts and cultural sector.

A PLACE FOR EVERY STORY

- Bell Shakespeare's focus is predominantly the work of one writer. Our productions and many programs, both large and small, take these stories and hold them up as a reflection of our contemporary world, our country, and our place globally. Shakespeare's repository of work lends itself to reinvention and his works have provided inspiration to artists across the world for centuries. This includes through music, visual arts, dance, film, song and so on.
- Our national program of activity means we connect with people across Australia, creating formal and informal networks in the process. Our many programs for young people, in community, and in education settings, support creative aspiration, creativity and self-expression.
- The development of new works and new stories requires time, sensitivity, extended periods of creative development, and increased investment.
- Investment in digital infrastructure and the development of a national performing arts digital strategy will also support additional ways of storytelling and story sharing.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST

- Bell Shakespeare was established by an actor/director with a specific focus on one artist – a writer. Artists sit at the heart of the company culture.
- Our artists, together with production specific staff, comprise over 75% of our annual workforce however they are predominantly engaged on fixed term contracts. This professional and highly specialised workforce are our most vulnerable workers, a fact that has been brought into even sharper relief across the past several years.

- Policy must ensure that the current and emerging creative arts workforce is valued for their unique contribution, economic or otherwise.
- The increased focus on mental health and wellbeing together with intimacy training requirements, cultural safety, and emotional impact audits of productions and touring schedules, all require ongoing focus and resourcing.
- The longer-term impacts of the past several years will likely be significant, with confidence at a low point, a severe shortage of skilled staff, and sector attrition high due to burn out.

STRONG INSTITUTIONS

- Bell Shakespeare is 32 years old, has a committed board of directors, robust governance processes, highly skilled staff, and national stakeholders who place considerable value on the work of the company.
- As a theatre company presenting works of scale, and like our colleague theatre companies, our cast sizes have reduced over time due to cost/revenue considerations. As Australia's national Shakespeare company, we are as small as we can get.
- Conversely heavy reliance on contributed revenue, the diminution of corporate support over the past 10+ years, and government investment dropping in real terms, means our administrative teams have necessarily increased to ensure we can realise contributed revenue targets year on year.
- Strong institutions of all sizes tangibly demonstrate the viability of a career path in the arts. Multi-year funding provides organisational certainty and sector confidence.
- Government policy that incentivises business to support arts and cultural organisations might be considered.
- Government policy that supports training pathways, especially in production and technical related disciplines, will help bolster company strength and capacity.

REACHING THE AUDIENCE

- Bell Shakespeare's national reach is unique relative to other Australian theatre companies of comparable size. We have been delivering an extensive national theatre program for over 25 years and touring into schools since the company was established in 1990.
- The challenges specific to touring have increased substantially in the past several years. Mental health and wellbeing and 'touring well' are considerable areas of focus as is a commitment and focus on green/sustainable touring.

- Covid-19 has introduced a further level of complexity in relation to effective risk management strategies to ensure the safety and wellbeing of our people and our audiences. As we continue to navigate 'living with Covid', policy that delivers performance insurance for both producer and presenter needs to be considered.
- We recognise the important role arts can play in building strong communities and supporting social cohesion. As we consider longer term national touring and the likely impacts of climate related disruption, thought must be given to environmentally appropriate touring practices to minimise carbon emissions as well as the intersection of digital technologies to support audience engagement and participation.
- Complementary digital content created especially for specific platforms can support better access and mitigate unforeseen incidents or cancellations. This is an area worthy of future policy development with respect to industrial agreements in relation to live performance capture and creation.

Without question, the impact of Covid-19 will reverberate across all aspects of our society and our sector for many years to come. It is extremely welcome that government is developing a national cultural policy that acknowledges and values artistic practice and recognises the intrinsic and economic value that arts and culture brings to our lives.

Arts participation supports social cohesion, mental health and well-being, and a sense of connectedness. We need that now more than ever.

Gill Perkins
Executive Director