

Monday 22 August, 2022

via email: culturalpolicy@arts.gov.au

Re: consultation process for a new National Cultural Policy

Please find a submission from Lexi Sekules, Producer and Director, Mill Theatre, Dairy Road, Canberra ACT. The submission addresses three key issues relevant to Australia's theatre industry.

1. The Edifice Complex: Infrastructure funding is not arts funding.

There is a growing imbalance between capital expenditure on infrastructure (ie buildings) and recurrent spending (ie the programs, grants, wages needed to mount and support actual cultural activity) in relation to government spending on arts and culture.

The most recent example is the ACT Arts, Culture and Creative Policy 2022-26 which allocates nearly \$40 million of an approximate \$46 million pool to building projects. This is a further example of the finding by the arts and culture think tank A New Approach in its first report that total recurrent expenditure per capita as a proportion of total arts funding by all levels of government in Australia has been falling in recent years.

For every facility provided funding, concurrent and ongoing program funding must also be provided. Otherwise the allocation is for infrastructure funding and administrators, not arts funding for artists. Decision makers must allocate and stipulate funding to make infrastructure sing once built. The alternative is an increasing preponderance of hollow concrete blocks and cities barren of the life a busy cultural scene brings to it.

2. RISE Again: Maintaining the reach of RISE funding.

To meet the aspirations of the Five Pillars, it will be necessary for the new cultural policy to include elements of the RISE funding model.

The RISE funding was a singular model in response to the Covid crisis but it had the following two benefits which would strengthen a new cultural policy if they were retained in some form.

1. Firstly, a principal benefit was the opening up of Commonwealth Government funding to a new and competitive process.
2. Secondly, in the process, the Commonwealth Arts bureaucracy – specifically the Australia Council and the Office of the Arts – was forced to become familiar with the small and independent sector which is the engine room of creativity and innovation.

Traditionally, Commonwealth Funding has been restricted largely to the 30 odd National Performing Arts Partnership Framework companies (formerly the Majors, now expanded to 38 companies after significant reform in 2019). Leading theatre figures including the playwright David Williamson and director and cultural policy academic Professor Julian Meyrick have long advocated a different and more far-reaching model.

The new policy provides an opportunity to diversify the traditional funding model.

This submission calls for such diversification to be achieved by retaining the spirit and intent of RISE but in a different form.

The unfettered right to Government funding enjoyed by the Framework or multi-year AusCo funded companies inhibits both the growth of Australian culture and the access to it by all but a small and privileged audience. The industry is greater than the groups already funded by the Australia Council.

Under the pre-existing arts/ cultural arrangements, one of Australia's leading state-based metropolitan theatre companies was able to avoid mounting an Australian play for season after season as detailed by David Williamson in his recent book Home Truths.

For decades it has been a feature of cultural life in Australia that organisations enjoying a government monopoly, such as a radio or TV licence, are required to meet legislated local content requirements. Without these requirements, neither the Australian music industry nor the Australian film industry would have flourished so extensively and successfully.

In relation to theatre and drama, the policy under review should introduce regulatory requirements on Framework companies as part of their funding, and introduce mechanisms to hold companies to account. This would represent significant reform.

The new Commonwealth cultural policy will fail in its objectives unless it can address these issues. The benchmark for success will be the extent to which it addresses past deficiencies and opens up opportunities to Australia's rich vein of creativity and innovation beyond the exclusive few.

3. New and innovative theatre: No pathway to the main stage.

There is currently no established pathway for Australia's small and independent theatres to transfer new and innovative productions to the larger receiving houses. This is essential for industry growth. Our theatre industry cannot grow without a healthy transfer system such as the Off-Broadway to Broadway model.

Under the new National Cultural Policy, a requirement should be built into the funding of the 38 National Performing Arts Framework companies ensuring they undertake co-productions of successful independent Australian work by the small and independent theatre sector.

As stated in Point 2 above, Framework companies enjoy levels of government funding and security not shared by the small and independent sector. They should have an obligation to provide a pathway for the best work from the small and independent sector to be remounted to reach a wider and more diverse audience.

There is a phenomenon only in Australia that a great show runs for the same duration as a flop. Transfers such as the recently announced commercial tour of The Picture of Dorian Gray should be incentivised and made commonplace. The below case studies provide examples of Framework companies not supporting this notion.

Case Studies

1: View from the Bridge

Between 2017 and 2019 there were three productions of Arthur Miller's A View from the Bridge, all by the same director.

The small Sydney theatre company, Red Line Productions, which is currently in-house at the Old Fitz Theatre, had an extremely successful run in 2017. The show won several Sydney Theatre Awards and had a sell-out season.

Melbourne Theatre Company approached the director for his version of the production to be a part of their 2019 season but would not buy the show from Red Line Productions. This is not a regular occurrence in other countries. The show was essentially copied to another state without any of the fluidity and growth which normally occurs during show remounts and transfers. Each state then does a watered down version of the same thing. Remounting and transferring good work ensures the natural filters are in place to make sure the quality remains. This did not happen for this production.

Later in 2019, the Ensemble Theatre in Sydney picked up the Red Line production and toured the show around NSW in a format and method which allows the small producer to operate on a bigger scale, thanks to the support of the mid-scale producer.

2: Of Mice and Men

Sydney independent theatre company, Sport for Jove, mounted a highly regarded production and stage adaptation of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men in 2015. The show won multiple awards and the original producers themselves took it on a successful tour to Canberra. Then Artistic Director of Sydney Theatre Company, Jonathan Church, offered to remount the Sport for Jove show and transfer it to STC's Wharf Theatre.

Jonathan Church came to Australia from the United Kingdom where successful small to medium work is frequently remounted. Unfortunately Jonathan did not stay with STC and returned to the United Kingdom. The idea of remounting this show was quickly dropped. It is a natural progression, inside a healthy theatre ecology, for good work to transfer to larger venues and reach more audiences.

Government funded organisations should not be the source of problems, they should be contributing to solutions.

Yours Sincerely,



Lexi Sekuless

