

## **National Cultural Policy Submission**

**Melbourne Theatre Company**

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

Melbourne Theatre Company is the longest running professional theatre company in Australia and a subsequent model for all other state theatre companies. Started in 1953 as the Union Theatre Repertory Company, part of Melbourne University, it has since produced over 750 productions worldwide and become the largest producing house in Victoria and one of the largest theatre companies in Australia and the English speaking world.

It was here at Melbourne Theatre Company, in 1954 the work *The Summer of the 17th Doll* was developed and premiered. This landmark play heralded a new era for Australian theatre - our voice, our culture sat centre stage. The play went on to tour Broadway and the West End. Australian audiences started to see and more importantly, want their own stories told, helping to make sense of their place and time.

Since then Melbourne Theatre Company has been an engine room for our writers, our directors and our artists. Presenting work by Australia's most accomplished and powerful voices such as David Williamson, Joanna Murray Smith, Anchuli Felicia King, Benjamin Law and Nakkiah Lui in order to fulfil our key vision as a company: to share remarkable stories that enable people to better understand the world around them.

Melbourne Theatre Company welcomes a new cultural policy. A policy that will shape the society we aspire to be - knowledgeable, creative, empathetic, inclusive, innovative and fearless. Each of the Five Pillars proposed points to the need for significant investment in fostering, commissioning and developing our writers and theatre makers.

Firstly, as outlined in the first pillar, for a cultural policy and indeed for theatre in Australia to truly be successful it must first embrace and champion the stories of our First Peoples- the world's oldest living culture. The performing arts is in a unique position to play a significant role in showcasing these stories. This will require specific investment and

infrastructure to ensure it is achieved with utmost respect and observation of cultural protocols.

As outlined in the second pillar, the stories of all Australians must be foregrounded on our stages and representative of cultural background, ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity and disability. For this reason, Melbourne Theatre Company calls on the new cultural policy to make significant investment in new writing and new works developed through the state theatre companies. Major theatre companies must be as important to any persons' cultural education as a museum or art gallery. The more thoroughly companies are able to represent the experience of Australians, the greater the capacity to increase attendance and provide an inarguable reason for the theatre to be central to life and culture in Australia.

Aligned with pillar three, in order to chronicle and amplify these stories and our many voices we must invest in our writers and theatre makers- the people who will shape and tell stories of today through the many lens that now make up Australia. For this reason, Melbourne Theatre Company proposes a new commissioning and development fund for new work. This fund will underwrite 10 commissions and developments per year for each major theatre company for the next 8 years. These works will be shared amongst major companies, filmed for digital distribution and toured to celebrate our voice. Like any industry - the key to success is Research and Development but it is something we are often unable to adequately fund and impacts the quality of the work we are able to create and therefore its reach. This fund will create a pool of works that will add to the Australian canon and become a pipeline for TV and film. Many great Australian films and TV series started on the stage - The Sapphires, The Drovers Wife, Cloudstreet, Don's Party are but a few examples.

A programme such as this would ensure that pillars four and five were also supported. We know that our theatre companies will only remain sustainable and strong through renewal and investment - in our artists and our audiences. In terms of audience engagement, this is partly a question of access as restricted by ticket price. We also call upon the government to provide greater infrastructure funding for theatre companies so that pressures on box office

will allow more accessible ticket prices, thus making it possible to diversify audiences. We know this is one of the greatest barriers to theatre attendance and a necessary step to adequately and constructively addressing all five pillars proposed in the new cultural policy.

We commend the renewed emphasis on a National Cultural Policy and greater investment in the arts and cultural sector of Australia. We know this support is key to ensuring a bright future for the world renowned art created in Australia and showcased around the world.

We welcome the opportunity to speak further about this and indeed to see how this policy unfolds.