

BlakDance National Cultural Policy Submission

BlakDance is the national industry and producing organisation for First Nations dance. We are a self-determined First Nations organisation with a First Nations Board and Cultural Council.

Context

- The First Nations dance sector BlakDance services is dominated by independent choreographers and emerging small to medium dance companies.
- Research shows that limited career pathways, access to skills development and resources are barriers to employment, creation and growth of this segment of the First Nations dance sector. This is compounded by undeveloped distribution channels and limited audience development.
- At BlakDance, we are experiencing an unprecedented increase in demand for artist and sector development services, as well as platforms that centre First Nations choreographies, storytelling and worldviews.
- Our role is all the more vital as First Nations culture and arts has become the main identified priority and funding criteria at all levels of government.

Key Priorities

- **Priority 1: Dancers**
 - First Nations choreographers and companies need access to more trained First Nations dancers. A lack of consistent, professional paid opportunities to sustain dancer careers, has led to attrition and leakage from the sector.
- **Priority 2: First Nations arts workers**
 - We acknowledge the skills shortage across all cultural industries of producers, production managers, designers and other creatives, but emphasise the situation is particularly acute in First Nations performing arts.
 - Achieving the goal of producing more self-determined First Nations stories and cultural works is not possible without increasing the pipeline of skilled First Nations creatives, from early career producers to executive leadership.
- **Priority 3: First Nations companies**
 - Burnout, staff turnover and working beyond reasonable capacity is prevalent across the sector. It is exacerbated in First Nations dance which is characterised by a high proportion of independents and emerging companies without secure funding.
 - Supporting these artists to grow beyond insecure project-based funding to multi-year funded dance companies is an essential pillar in strengthening the ecology for First Nations dance sector. Secure funding guarantees a pipeline of new First Nations dance work, increases professional employment for First Nations dancers and also provides career pathways for First Nations arts workers.

Strategies

Immediately

1. Create a dedicated First Nations Performing Arts Commissioning Fund for First Nations performing artists and orgs.

- A commissioning fund open only to First Nations artists and companies is an essential policy action that would underpin several priorities:
 - Investment needed for First Nations choreographers to make work on non-Indigenous ensemble companies;
 - Opportunities for First Nations dance companies to make works of scale for festivals and touring;
 - First Nations dance productions need a specific funding incentive for regional touring to enable audience development
 - An injection of capital for new First Nations major works helps create a more reliable pipeline of professional employment of First Nations dancers, which is needed to make the growth of emerging companies more sustainable and achievable.
- A dedicated Commissioning Fund of a minimum of \$5M annually is the capital needed to immediately stabilise and strengthen the ecology for First Nations dance.

2. Fund the business case and consultation process to develop a 10 year First Nations Arts Employment and Skills Strategy.

- We need a generational, long view to secure the ongoing sustainability of First Nations performing arts, but it starts with consultation and the development of a costed plan.
- The existing First Nations Performing arts organisation lack the capacity to undertake this work alone. It requires support to research, consult and model the future programs needed to attract, train and sustain arts workers for our sector.

1-3 years

3. Acknowledge and fund cultural processes.

- Adhering to cultural processes, protocols and a self-determined way of working is not a benchmark for First Nations organisations and artists. It is an obligation.
- This is also, increasingly, a contractual or policy requirement of funders.
- Yet there is minimal allowance for it in eligible expenses in grant budgets, in the timeline and sequencing of funding, project management and reporting, and in the staffing and administrative workload it creates.
- As a result First Nations orgs cannot compete on a level playing field against non-Indigenous institutions in project grant rounds. Cultural processes must be formally accounted for, funded, and better managed in the arts policy and funding landscape.

4. Create pathways (including bridging funding) to prepare emerging companies for multi-year funding.

- The precarity of short-term project grants holds independents and emerging companies in a pattern of subsistence. They cannot build up the spare human and financial capital needed to scale.
- Bridging funding and strategic support for business development is needed for independents making the step to multi-year funded organisation.
- Without this, the growth of the First Nations dance sector will be unjustifiably slow at a time when audience and presenter demand for First Nations stories and performance work is increasing exponentially.

5. Pilot a program to regulate, identify and develop regionally based First Nations producers and presenters.

- Culturally authentic touring standards of First Nations performance work rests on stronger relationships between regional presenters and cultural venues and their local First Nations communities.
- Training and developing regionally based First Nations producers and presenters helps create local capacity to support First Nations companies touring shows and stimulates local audiences.

6. Strengthen partnerships between First Nations dance companies and training institutions (NAISDA, WAPA, ACPA, NIDA & tertiary institutions).

- More policy attention is needed to support continuity from training institutions through to sustainable employment in dance companies to avoid leakage and attrition from our sector.