

Submitting this on behalf of A) a not-for-profit arts organisation and B) As an artist.

### Are we there yet?

How do you write a vision for the future of your art form, when you are still trying to operate during the third year of a global pandemic? When you can barely stop to breathe let alone dream? Such is the challenge placed before us now, with the call for submissions for a new national cultural policy.

The call is certainly welcome. We need a vision for the future of the Australian arts sector. We need a path forwards. We need to dream. But the timing challenges serious thought or interrogation. We are all in the middle of just surviving.

At the end of 2020 as we all thought we were coming out of Covid and heading into a post-pandemic life, many of us talked about 'building back better', we dreamt about how we could make sure when we return, we did things differently, we would build a new more inclusive, more engaged, more collaborative sector.

But the reality has been now 2 1/2 years of non-stop flying by the seat of our pants.

We are far from back to normal.

So we need to think about what we need, now. What's our 3-to-6-month vision for the sector. And then what's our five-year dreaming.

After the last few years, just getting a single show up anywhere has been a triumph against all odds worth celebrating. It's difficult to imagine a scenario where we can actually consider asking for that pony we've been dreaming about for years now. And more, can we consider asking for the pony AND the hay to feed it?

### My Background

I have been Director of Critical Stages Touring since 2014, an organisation that sits at the intersection of supporting opportunities for independent artists and access for regional audiences. We're a small team of 7 (or 4.0 full-time equivalent) bringing outstanding new live performance to primarily regional audiences right around Australia. We tour to over 100 different locations around Australia, from a small hall in Kangaroo Island, to the Playhouse at the Sydney Opera House. This year we have toured a dozen different productions. All in all we will support around 50 weeks of touring this year, directly supporting 115 artists. Right now, we also have a performance in Edinburgh as part of the Australia in UK festival and will be touring to festivals in New Zealand later in the year.

In addition to the artists and arts workers we directly engaged, our regional touring indirectly creates jobs for arts workers and makes significant economic impact in every town we visit. Our tours also provide opportunities and employment for venue and technical staff, front of house teams and generate economic activity in the local community both from audiences attending as well as our touring party visiting the region.

Most importantly, this work supports the aim of ensuring access to high quality arts experiences across regional Australia for audiences young and old. And with that, comes benefits across health, being, community and education

### **The sector needs a boost right now.**

The first most important thing to note for the arts sector is the pandemic is not over. Far from it. Support from government has run dry, however touring is no easier yet, with the risk of artists contracting covid and show cancellations still very real, as well as audience patterns unpredictable and unreliable. Add to that cost-of-living pressures, increase of fuel costs, shortages in the labor market, and shortage in material supply chains and we are in a time of great uncertainty for the sector. As a further consequence, programming is looking increasingly risk-averse and presentation of new work is being held back in favour of the tried and tested. It means we are also in a precarious situation as we all attempt to plan ahead for next year and beyond.

We need a boost to audiences, such as a federal roll-out of the successful 'Dine and Discover' vouchers trialed in NSW throughout 2021, but specifically for the arts sector.

And we need a boost to artists and arts companies. Not just a one-off cash splash, but ongoing support to sustain us through this challenging period, so we can better support the artists and communities that rely on us.

Many artists and arts leaders, and I include myself in this, after 2 1/2 years of constant daily crises are close to burn-out. We need the government to recognise this as an urgent need and offer immediate support to the sector or we will see more losses of experience and expertise over the coming months.

### **What can this look like?**

#### **Strong institutions.**

Our cherished arts institutions are under-resourced, with reserves rapidly diminishing, and operating in an impossible environment.

For our arts companies to remain strong and active, to be able to plan with certainty, to commission new work, and support the development of a sustainable sector, we urgently need an increase in funding to the Australia Council for the Arts, specifically directed to investment in the small to medium sector. Too many outstanding arts companies have lost federal funding over the past 10 years due to cuts in federal funding to the Australia Council.

Increased investment in companies nurturing young audiences and young artists is also vital, and at present this sector is dangerously under-resourced. This crucial area is at the intersection of arts, education, and wellbeing and delivers a clear public good deserving of support. Without this support, how are we nurturing both the audiences and artists of the future?

Increased support for regional arts organisations is urgently needed, to ensure access, training and opportunities are offered where they are needed most after many years of under-investment. This includes

supporting regional performing arts centres, so that they can better support their communities, and support diverse contemporary arts programming. Many of these centres are still picking up the pieces from the last few years, since as predominantly local council run venues, they received little or no federal government support during the lockdowns.

## Reaching the Audience

If we are to reach new audiences, we need to increase investment in regional touring. A one off \$5 million increase in investment into regional touring was provided by the federal government in 2021, and this was a huge boost to regional touring when support was urgently needed. However, this was only provided for one year. This boost in support needs to be sustained and ongoing.

Critical Stages Touring has been fortunate to receive multi-year touring funding through Playing Australia since 2018. This ongoing, long-term support has been vital to the success of our organisation in reaching new audiences around Australia, has allowed us to leverage further support from foundations and from local government, and has ensured we can continue to engage new audiences. However, the amount available through multi-year funding will actually, absurdly, go down for us in 2023 by 12%. Not only is the grant not indexed but it has been reduced due to insufficient funding for regional touring. This is at a time, when inflation is going through the roof, and costs are going up.

The state and federal government also needs to work together to coordinate and harmonise its touring processes. National touring is already a hugely complex task, made far more complex by a myriad of differing processes, timelines and lack of coordination between state and federal funding bodies.

Digital access is here to stay and will continue to be a part of arts engagement for Australian audiences. This is a positive development, enhancing access to arts experiences for many people who are unable to access live performing arts experiences. The Australia Council for the Arts have offered limited opportunities for up-skilling and training to the sector to assist in the 'digital pivot', which have been highly beneficial, but sustained support is vital and in most cases it is about not just training but resources and funding to be able to create high quality digital adaptations that are truly accessible.

The impact of climate change has already been clear for several years on the arts sector, with regional arts institutions suffering from unprecedented fire and floods over recent years. And this impact is only going to get worse over coming years.

So that we are not contributing further to this crisis, we need to invest in Greening the arts, and this is especially true for touring organisations such as ours. We need acknowledge that to reach audiences around our vast continent, this means we are typically engaging in significant travel that is not going to be sustainable or compatible with a net zero future. We have committed to Greener Touring, but like many of my colleagues in the small to medium sector, we need support to properly evaluate our emissions, re-orient our touring model, and ensure we are successfully navigating our path to net zero. This will mean not just less flights but thinking differently about our whole model of touring. Its an urgent investment in personnel and expertise for the future sustainability of the arts sector, and our planet.

## **Centrality of the Artist**

Great art does not just appear. It takes an artist with time and space. Sometimes it can take many years to create great art. And that takes investment.

We need to recognise that the arts are nothing without artists, and that the ability of artists to create, to perform and to work has been severely hampered over recent years. Long-term sustained support for outstanding artists to create, develop and make art is essential. It should not just be arts leaders and artists embedded in institutions who are supported in this way, although this is also vital, but our independent artists, our writers, musicians, composers, directors, designers, choreographers and more.

A living wage for artists, as currently exists in France and is being trialed in Ireland, would be a great start for the government to recognise, value and invest in Australia's artistic community

Support for arts training institutions is vitally needed, with opportunities rapidly diminishing around the country, especially across regional Australia.

We also need Centrelink and all employment agencies to recognise the arts as a valid career path. Too often I have to identify myself as working in the media, when arts and cultural organisations are not recognised as valid employment options. Even the ATO does not recognise my career choice.

## **A Place for Every Story**

We need the art on our stages, in our books, on our radios and in our institutions to reflect the full diversity of Australian society and culture. And that takes investment in many artists from diverse backgrounds. It takes investment in a wide variety of arts institutions from right around Australia. It takes support for training. It takes organisations willing and able to take risks and to take time to develop and nurture their audiences and their communities.

This is vital for the future of all our art-forms. For if they don't represent the full diversity of Australian culture, if the doors of our institutions are not open and accessible to all Australians, if the art we make does not resonate with our audiences, then it ceases to be relevant.

Audience development, art-form development, innovation and accessibility are all absolute priorities for the sector, to ensure we are able to tell diverse stories for diverse audiences right around Australia.

## **First Nations**

Finally, and most importantly, our art, our artists and our art institutions need to respect and celebrate our First Nations cultures. We need to champion the world's oldest living culture, for all its richness and diversity. We need to invest in our country's outstanding First Nations artists. We need to increase and sustain investment in our First Nations arts organisations, support First Nations artists, and arts leaders to have central roles across diverse art forms, diverse arts organisations. This will take investment in training, investment in artists, investment in current and future First Nations artistic leaders and it will mean ensuring our major artistic institutions and organisations engage deeply and meaningfully with First Nations artists and celebrate their work year-round.

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