

Submission to the next National Cultural Policy

Richard Higgins, co-creator of The Listies

We thank the Minister for calling for submissions to support a new policy. It is an open secret in the arts that the sector is in dire need of support by federal government policy, and that arts workers are now operating in a state of austerity. In a time of rising costs on all sides, in the children's theatre sector, where our company practises, scarcity is the norm.

The effects in our sector are hard to miss: artists burnt out, companies ceasing to make new work and only doing recognisable or international IP, companies shrinking, highly commercial products ruling the stages, remount after remount, companies closing, and perhaps most worrying of all, no young artists coming into the sector.

We weathered Covid, which came hot on the tails of [REDACTED] rampage, only to find ourselves in a state of absolute austerity.

Pillar 2 – A Place for Every Story

This doesn't help Australia's children.

As the 2025 *State of Australia's Children* report (UNICEF Australia & ARACY) makes clear, "Australia's child wellbeing performance is not keeping pace with comparable nations.... available indicators show that our outcomes are below what would be expected given the country's wealth and resources."

We believe that quality cultural experiences are key to a child's healthy development, and we are not alone. In fact, Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees every child the right to "rest, play, culture and take part in cultural and creative activities." We are failing that obligation by policy, not by accident. Australia has around 5 federally funded companies that specialise in work for children. Denmark has over 240.

Melbourne has no children's festival despite producing the top Edinburgh Festival shows for young people.

The ABS states that children make up 20% of our population, yet look at any festival program, list of grant recipients or mainstage program launch and you will not see 20% of the work made for them.

It seems some stories are more equal than others.

Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist

We are a company with 18 years' experience. We tour the country 4–6 months a year, playing hundreds of shows to thousands of children. We have made work with Sydney Theatre Company and presented at Sydney, Brisbane, Darwin and Melbourne Festivals. We've won two Edinburgh Fringe Awards for Best Kids Show (2025, 2023), the Golden Gibbo at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, and Best Kids Show at Melbourne Fringe, Perth Fringe and the Sydney Theatre Awards. We have toured the UK, Ireland, New Zealand, Korea and Malaysia. This year we will tour to the USA and China. We have made three TV shows for ABC TV and have a successful podcast with over half a million downloads.

And yet, in the past year, we have been unable to secure any funding to make our next show from Creative Australia, the City of Melbourne or Creative Victoria. Playing Australia was not awarded for our last tour, so dates in remote areas, including Katherine, were cancelled.

It's official: it's easier for kids to see us in Edinburgh than in Alice Springs.

We used to be able to get both Playing Australia and creative development funding fairly routinely. This is no longer the case. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We have no administrative support and largely produce ourselves. Suffering from burnout, we took five months off, unpaid, at the start of this year. This is not a thriving sector putting the artist at the centre.

If a company with our track record is struggling, the problem is not us; it's structural. Between 2007 and 2022, average ticket prices for theatre for young audiences in Australia rose by just 18% (from \$28.58 to \$33.83), while adult theatre ticket prices rose by 135% (from \$44.87 to \$91.13) (Live Performance Australia, *Ticket Attendance and Revenue Report 2022*, prepared by Ernst & Young). Family audiences cannot absorb the same price increases that prop up adult

theatre, yet production costs are identical. The economic model is broken, and no amount of resilience inside the sector will fix it without serious policy intervention.

Looking forward

Revive named the right pillars. The next Policy needs to fund them like it means it.

We want to see, at the very least:

- ring-fenced investment in children's theatre proportionate to the audience it serves;
- restoration of Playing Australia to a level that meaningfully supports regional and remote touring;
- structural administrative and producing support for established independent companies.

Stop investing in cultural buildings and start rebuilding the sector that is supposed to perform inside them.