

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION

Submitted on behalf of West Australian Opera
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WAO RESPONSE TO NCP UPDATE

West Australian Opera (WAO) appreciates the benefits brought by the first National Cultural Policy (NCP) **Revive**.

This well thought through national policy and corresponding funding structure has indeed “revived” much in the Australian arts and creative sector. It’s alive!

We are thankful for the opportunity to contribute to the shaping of the next chapter. We’re wondering how this will be called and have given ourselves permission to suggest a possible name...**Pulse**.

The arts sector can go from being “alive” to further energising Australia and being at the heart of community and creativity. A healthy pulse means a healthy body. The same is true for a country: to be healthy and thriving, a nation needs common stories and inspiration. In other words, it needs art. Without a pulse, robots take over. That might “work”, that might look as if things happen, but that does not bring people together, that does not bond, that does not inspire and push people to have a go.

Our submission consists of two parts: (1) our **overarching view** and suggestions of what the overall NCP should strive for, and (2) **specific suggestions** from our vantage point of Opera in Western Australia.

1. OVERARCHING VIEW

WAO suggests the NCP should (continue) to provide the following:

1. A multi-year (at least 5) perspective and leadership that is national. The arts sector is a web including artists, supporting crafts (eg staging, costume making, musicians), venues, schools, financial structures and more. They can and do change. But each change takes some time to be effective – so a policy that changes every year is damaging. Hence a 5-year perspective
2. Removal of barriers. Yes, arts needs more money (see point 4) but much can be achieved by removing barriers, e.g., around excessive permitting, tax regimes (including on bequests and gifts), needlessly cumbersome applications and acquittals
3. Holistic approach. The arts sector is a web, ie, an ecosystem. For it to thrive, one-dimensional solutions don’t work. The NCP has a unique mandate to oversee the entire field and recognise and strengthen the crossover points
4. More financial means. Costs and population continue to rise, sometimes dramatically. Our funding base hasn’t. This is eroding the amount of good the sector can do – at a time when communities are fracturing and plurality is under duress. It’s ironic that Australia needs art more than ever, while its financial basis is becoming ever more perilous.

2. SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS

The suggestions have been structured in line with the pillars of the NCP¹.

1. **Create a structural way to bring First Nation art to First Nation people** (*First Nation First, A Place for every story*).

Currently there are two issues: (i) WAO and others have developed wonderful FN art, with/by FN people, but we struggle to reach a broad audience. Many (most?) FN people don't feel welcome in capital city theatres. Tours to bring opera to country are prohibitively expensive due to the need to set up stages with sound etc; and (ii) works in FN language don't travel very well given the richness in FN nations and languages. For example, when WAO staged our Noongar language opera "Koolbardi" in Kalgoorlie and Broome (which are in different language areas) they did not resonate as well as the season presented on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja in Perth.

With that in mind, specific asks are:

1. Support and funding to develop a new large-scale collaborative opera inspired by the Seven Sisters Star Dreaming. This is the only First Nations story shared across the whole of Australia, with each mob/clan holding its own version. In partnership with five national opera companies, WAO (plus Opera Australia, Opera Queensland, State Opera of South Australia and Victorian Opera colleagues) would work alongside local storytellers and Elders to develop unique operatic interpretations of the story with each one grounded in place and culture. The outcome of these new works could stand alone but ultimately be presented together across consecutive nights at Sydney Opera House in a sense becoming Australia's very own "Ring Cycle" The Seven Sisters story (or alternate version) is recognised globally across many cultures. This project offers powerful appeal beyond traditional opera and arts audiences by connecting storytelling, science, history and contemporary creative practice.
2. Structural funding to develop and perform works in the most prevalent FN languages, in collaboration with/led by local artists. These works could be opera but also other art forms
3. Upgraded local facilities to perform, so it is no longer necessary to spend \$100k on audio-visual hire and equipment every time a performance is presented outside Perth.

2. **Promote the use of local artistic talent** (*Centrality of the artist*)

WAO believes this pillar should emphasise creating opportunities for local talent, including singers, musicians, stage builders, lighting designers, set and costume designers, directors, marketers and other creative talents

¹ **Revive** is structured around five interconnected pillars which set out the Government's strategic objectives:

1. First Nations First: Recognising and respecting the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia's arts and culture.
2. A Place for Every Story: Reflecting the breadth of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.
3. Centrality of the Artist: Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators.
4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure: Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture, and heritage.
5. Engaging the Audience: Making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad.

A policy that rewards the use of local talent would be very helpful. An artistic version of "A Future Made in Australia" policy. Specific ideas:

1. substantial award of additional funding if >x% of creatives (or creative spend) is spent on local/Australian artists
2. funding to allow structural (local) understudies/apprentice/shadows to be coupled with any international/interstate artist used, so as to grow local talent base

3. Bring Perth's His Majesty's Theatre (HMT) backstage to modern standards
(*strong cultural infrastructure*)

HMT is a wonderful theatre, even if small (1100 seats). Size can probably not be increased due to the footprint and the heritage designation, but upgraded staging facilities, including state of the art lighting and sound equipment, would make a huge difference. Currently HMT is not comparable in lighting, sound and stage machinery to the venues in other capital cities.

HMT needs an upgrade and refurbishment to accommodate productions WAO is developing with other Australian opera companies (like Turandot and Don Giovanni). This would significantly reduce the presentation costs to state companies like WAO, and it would afford creatives who are producing work in Perth access to a modern theatre, comparable to what their colleagues have over east and overseas. Now, creatives feel they're forced to leave Perth/Australia to be able to work with modern facilities

1. Upgrade HMT lighting, sound and machinery to contemporary standards

4. Increase visibility of opera to the broader public
(*engaging the audience*)

The number of people exposed to opera and its constituent art forms (instrumental music, singing, production, design etc) is smaller than it needs to be because of people's unfamiliarity with the art form. Once exposed, people love it. So, increasing the visibility and exposure to opera is essential.

Specific ideas:

1. structural exposure to operatic art forms in primary and secondary schools, eg by massively scaling the current WAO "music in school" initiative. In this program, WAO collaborates with primary schools for a year by bringing a singing-focused curriculum to these schools as well as help in the execution of it. WAO can do more of these, other art companies can do these as well – if funding is available.
2. establishment of a large-scale outdoor summer event eg similar to the previous Opera in the Park initiative that WAO presented every year for 30 years in Supreme Court Gardens (mostly free of box office charge to enable wide attendance) and similar to Hando Opera on the Harbour (HOSH) in Sydney. The climate in Perth is perfect for this as a standing summer event and presents an opportunity to present local talent and stories to a large, new audience.