

I am a freelance sound designer & composer working in the live theatre industry in Sydney. I regularly work with major publicly funded theatre companies as a Sound Designer/Composer and this work comprises my main income.

From my perspective as a freelance artist working in this sector, the main issue I would like to see addressed in the new National Cultural Policy is that of working conditions for contracted freelancers, relating to Pillar 3: Centrality of the Artist. In the theatre industry, it is standard practice for creatives (set designers, costume designers, composers, sound designers, video designers, etc) to be engaged as independent contractors on a project by project basis. In my experience, this has always been in the form of a flat fee for a project, agreed upon before the commencement of rehearsals on the project. The rationale behind this from the industry is that the artist is being paid a flat fee for their intellectual property on a show. However, in practice, these fees almost always translate to a very low hourly rate. I have commonly accepted contracts which equate to an hourly rate of \$20 or less, as a professional creative in a field requiring highly specialised work.

Creatives in the theatre industry are considered "independent contractors", not employees, and therefore we don't receive any sick leave, holiday pay, or overtime for extra hours worked. However, in practice, we often function as if we are employees - especially during technical rehearsals when we are required by the company to be physically present in the theatre, often for upwards of 60 hours a week. We also don't have any compensation for missed meal breaks or turnarounds of less than 10 hours, which are common.

As a composer for theatre, there is also a huge amount of time required before technical rehearsals in order to create the music and sound content for a show. This also has to be balanced with the need to be present in the rehearsal room to engage in development with the director and the rest of the creative team. The trend in theatremaking has been for more and more productions to require significant amount of music and underscoring, and the availability of digital sound technology means that the expectation is often now for sound and music to be available in the rehearsal room. I have frequently been in the rehearsal room for 7-8 hours in a day, to then work another 4 or 5 hours in the evening in order to have music ready for the next day of rehearsal, which then repeats the next day. It is also common for the scope of a project to significantly increase during the rehearsal period - directors often continue to ask for more music than was initially discussed, and the expectation from the companies is that designers will deliver whatever is asked for.

As the fee structure currently stands, it is very unusual for the fees offered by companies to be high enough to cover these hours of work at a reasonable hourly rate, without even considering any overtime pay. It is also almost never possible to negotiate fees with companies to an extent which would cover these costs - and due to the small size of the industry, we don't have enough bargaining power to negotiate with companies. The choice is usually between taking a contract or not having a job for that period - most designers, especially emerging designers, cannot afford to turn down contracts, even when we know that the fee is too low for the amount of time and work that the contract will take.

I understand that companies are working with extremely tight budgets and that as things are currently structured, it's probably true that they can't afford to raise fees by the amount that would be needed. However, without structural changes to how creatives are employed and compensated, it is difficult to see how this can be a sustainable career path. Burnout is extremely common amongst my peers, and I know of a number of prominent sound designers who have left the industry in recent years due to these working conditions.

I would like to see structural legal change to fee structures to ensure that we are compensated not only for our intellectual property but also for our time - for example, that companies are required to pay us an hourly rate for sessions where we are required to be present in the theatre in addition to fees that cover our intellectual property, or that contracts need to explicitly state the scope of the project (for example, \$X for X minutes of original music). A Universal Basic Income program for artists, similar to the pilot program recently trialed in Ireland, could also be a way of providing stability and security for artists so that we are better able to negotiate the terms of our contracts with companies without risking being unable to pay our rent.

I do this job because I genuinely love it, because I love Australian theatre, and because I believe that my work is a valuable element of storytelling which can help to move and engage audiences. However, as it stands, I am faced with a career where I have no job security, no sick leave or annual leave, and I have to accept working extremely long hours for very little income. It is hard to recommend to younger emerging composers that they pursue a career in the theatre industry under these conditions, and it is unsurprising to me that more and more creatives are leaving the industry. If we want to be able to continue to create and celebrate Australian stories on the stage, we urgently need to make changes in order to make theatre design a sustainable and liveable career.