

Dear Committee

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on this next phase of our cultural policy. It's much appreciated.

I'll focus my comments chiefly on Pillar 3.

The lives of artists working in theatre are rapidly becoming unviable. Earning "a living" without having a parallel job is nigh on impossible.

I'll use my own situation as a concrete example to illustrate this. And please bear in mind that amongst my peers, I'm one of the very fortunate ones.

I've worked as a theatre designer for over 40 years and would be regarded by most in the industry as being pretty much at the top of the tree and ergo "comfortable". I've achieved this dubious level of comfort, by working the 60 to 80 plus hour weeks that are common in subsidised theatre; hours that cause a significant level of burn-out and mental health issues. Despite this, were it not for the fact that I occasionally work in commercial theatre, I would never have been able to maintain a career that sees me earning around the average Australian wage. I could have spent my life making commercial shows and earning considerably more money, but then I wouldn't have been making the kind of work that this policy is aimed at producing. I've also been able to work overseas, in countries which set a higher value on culture. Back in the 80's, I was one of the only Australians doing this. Nowadays, as the brain-drain of Australian talent floods overseas at their earliest opportunity, I sometimes find myself working with the very people who should have been the next generation of Australian cultural leaders, all of whom have been forced to go elsewhere in order to make work.

The state of so-called subsidised theatre in Australia is utterly unsustainable. Many artists simply give up and move away. Companies are forced to turn elsewhere for their funding. This funding inevitably comes from the very small number of private philanthropists who are interested in giving their money to the arts. But these funds come with strings attached. Understandably, no-one wants to give their money to a company that produces work that they themselves don't like. The quantum shift from public to private funding over the last few decades is clearly reflected in the production of increasingly conservative work. This shift is strangling the artform. Companies have become beholden to the likes of their donors. This leads to increasingly unimaginative work. The Art becomes Entertainment.

Furthermore, in their attempt to chase the elusive philanthropic dollar, bigger companies have now had to employ large numbers of professional fundraisers. These fundraisers inevitably come from the real-world economy and are therefore paid vastly more than the artists who make the "product".

These factors bring us to the point that we've now reached. A demoralised and impoverished "workforce", making uninspired and backward-looking work, for an ever shrinking, elite audience who can still afford to buy a ticket to a night's entertainment – as long as they know they're going to approve of what they get served up. Hardly a recipe for a great culture.

The Revive policy mentions “supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators”, a laudable aim. What artists currently need, is a modicum of job security. The only real solution is a substantial increase in government funding.

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