

Towards a new National Cultural Policy

Based in Djilang (Geelong) on Wadawurrung Country, Back to Back Theatre is recognised as an Australian theatre company of national and international significance who create original works for the stage and screen. Driven by an ensemble of six artists who identify as having intellectual disabilities and/or are neurodiverse, Back to Back Theatre is considered one of Australia's most important cultural exporters.

The company is led by Bruce Gladwin who has been the artistic director since 1999. Back to Back Theatre was established in 1987 and has received 23 national and international awards including the International Ibsen Award (2022) and the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement in Theatre (2024). Since 2005 the company has presented 146 international seasons and 87 national seasons of its stage work, across 29 countries and 107 cities.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Back to Back Theatre submits that the next National Cultural Policy should:

- Be outward facing; the ongoing support for Australian arts organisations to engage with international touring.
- Include visionary commissions: all of Back to Back Theatre's most significant work has been created through commissions; the maintenance of Creative Futures or similar opportunities are essential.
- Strengthen the equality of all people - we should all enjoy the social and cultural rights and opportunities of being an Australian.
- Commit to long term investment - Build audiences by investing in supporting young people to experience the arts.

Following is Back to Back Theatre's response to the prompts in the guidelines for the new cultural policy.

1. The challenges and opportunities in the Pillar or Pillars most relevant to Back to Back Theatre

Back to Back Theatre affirms that the five Pillars reflect and encompass the breadth of Australian culture. They form a base around which the national policy can be structured. They provide clarity and comprehension regarding what this policy is referring to as culture. They support a structured and meaningful conversation thus avoiding excessive, open-ended, rudderless analysis.

Pillar 5 - Engaging the Audience, has the strongest current relevance to Back to Back Theatre and presents the most substantial and continuous challenge. The consultation paper for this policy review posits that this Pillar should make sure that our stories connect with people at home and abroad.

International touring presents both a profound opportunity and a growing challenge. Sometimes, it is when our voices are amplified on an international stage that those at home begin to pay attention.

Back to Back Theatre's claim to being a cultural exporter is not ambit. Financially, we rely on earned income that, dependent on the touring cycle, forms between 30%-40% of our annual income, most of which is derived from international performance fees.

Beyond performance fees, our international identity draws overseas co-commissioning support for the creation of our new works. This has multiple positive outcomes for Back to Back Theatre including:

- A commitment to future international presentations as a realisation of investment in the creative process
- An enhancement of Back to Back Theatre's reputation as a producer worthy of financial investment
- A leverage tool for attracting similar commissioning investment in Australia and overseas
- An easing of pressure on our Australian funding sources as the sole investor in our new work

Back to Back Theatre's work also sits naturally within Pillar 2 (A Place for Every Story), Pillar 3 (Centrality of the Artist), and Pillar 4 (Strong Cultural Infrastructure) — though in truth, our practice refuses the boundaries between them.

For nearly four decades, Back to Back has made world-class theatre by creator/performers who have disabilities. We have toured to some of the most prestigious venues on the planet such as the Sydney Opera House, the Barbican in London, the Kennedy Centre in Washington DC. Whilst we might think that this gives us the right to envisage ourselves as a cornerstone of Australia's cultural identity, it remains undeniable that we are considered as marginal, or exceptional, within the generally perceived view of what constitutes Australian culture.

Back to Back's work is evidence that the most challenging, most internationally celebrated, most genuinely original Australian art does not always emerge from the largest institutions and cultural epicentres. It can emerge from companies with deep community roots, long-term artistic relationships, and the freedom to take real risks. This should be enhanced by a national cultural policy.

Back to Back are evidence that the small-to-medium cultural sector is not a feeder system for larger organisations, but is a vital and distinct part of Australia's cultural ecosystem in its own right.

2. Why the 5 Pillars matter to Back to Back Theatre

The five Pillars, taken together, encapsulate what Back to Back Theatre has always believed: that culture is not a luxury, and that who gets to make it, who gets to be seen making it, and who gets to decide what counts as art — these are not peripheral questions. They are the questions.

First Nations First matters to us because we understand, in our own context, what it means to have your cultural authority questioned or overlooked. We are a company that has had to fight for the right of our artists to be taken seriously as artists — not

as subjects of art, not as inspiration, but as its authors. We stand in solidarity with the centrality of First Nations leadership in this policy.

A Place for Every Story is, in many ways, Back to Back's founding premise. Our artists bring perspectives, physicalities, and interior worlds to the stage that have been excluded from mainstream culture. The stories our performers tell are not niche — they are human. Beyond the rhetoric, this Pillar must be accompanied by real investment.

The notion of what constitutes an Australian story is not limited to a variety of narratives presented as art. Many of our institutions are, in and of themselves, Australian stories. Bangarra is an Australian story, as is Circa. Back to Back Theatre contend that our story is remarkably Australian and that this underpins the worldwide interest in our work. In this context, any original work that is made in Australia is an Australian story.

The matter of “place” within a Place for Every Story is of significant importance to Back to Back Theatre. We are a regional disability arts organisation having emerged through ideas, practices and people that are based in Geelong. We are evidence that long term excellence in artistic output exists beyond metropolitan areas.

Centrality of the Artist resonates deeply with our model of long-term, sustained artistic relationships. Our performers are not interchangeable. The ensemble and our collaborators are the art form. The policy must recognise that for artists with intellectual disabilities, the pathway to creative practice looks different — and that fair pay, proper working conditions, and recognition of artistic labour applies to all.

Strong Cultural Infrastructure is what makes everything else possible. Back to Back relies on the organisational infrastructure that allows us to develop work over years, to maintain relationships with international partners, and to provide the support our artists need to thrive. That infrastructure cannot be built over the short-term.

Engaging the Audience reminds us that art is a conversation. Back to Back's audiences — in Geelong, across Australia and around the globe — come to our work and find themselves changed by it. The policy should support the conditions under which those encounters can happen: robust touring, genuine regional access, and the courage to present challenging work to broad publics.

3. What would Back to Back Theatre like to see reflected in the next National Cultural Policy

Initiatives such as Creative Futures emerged from Revive. Is this to be maintained? Or refined? It should be and should have increased accessibility.

It is Back to Back Theatre's experience that our most acclaimed works have been supported in their development through commissioning funding. This has been through such sources as the Major Festivals Initiative, the Victorian Government's commissioning funding and via private and philanthropic investment. Whilst the MFI

remains, our state no longer has a commission fund and we have witnessed a marked decrease in the level of commissioning investment in recent times.

Making a 'work of scale' carries with it several implications. This can include a sense of 'vastness', be that number in the cast, the set, visual effects, time on stage, etc. Our experience is that a commitment to time in development, investment in people within Back to Back Theatre alongside our collaborators, constitutes what might be thought of by others as 'epic scale'. Back to Back Theatre commits to a creative process over time, usually three years. This may appear indulgent to the external observer (even those within the creative industries) but, in our analysis, it underpins our successes.

The integration of education with culture. This goes beyond the inclusion of culture (or the arts) as a subject. If education isn't inculcated with culture - what it is, what it means, how it is created, etc - what informs future creatives and audiences? Culture is not self-evident. If it is included in continuous learning from the start, then culture becomes engrained and not just an add-on.

The capacity for Australian culture to enhance soft diplomacy through international presentations. An enhanced reputation in overseas markets increases our ability to earn income. Cultural exports are the linchpin to how the world sees Australia.

We would seek an explicit commitment that artists with disability are artists first. The next policy should embed this principle not only in the Equity framework but across all five Pillars, in funding guidelines, in assessment criteria, and in the language the government uses to speak about culture. Artists with a disability do not want to be accommodated. They want to be recognised.

4. Is there anything else Back to Back Theatre would like to share?

In 2022, when discussions on Revive began, the Minister expressed his ambition to have a Cultural Policy that resonated across all government portfolios.

- Has this progressed?
- Is it meeting resistance?
- How can the ambition be supported to gain traction?

What are the barriers to increasing audiences?

- Cost, including booking fees.
- This place/venue is not for me – how can this be changed?
 - Free performances – particularly within high art venues?

NDIS

We understand changes will be made to the NDIS, including large budget cuts. Whilst we concede that there are budget challenges, probable rorts, some overservicing, and legitimate questions about what constitutes the eligibility for a disability to be included within the scheme, it is apparent that support for people with disabilities to be included in cultural and arts events, as both participants and audience, is something of a soft target.

This must be resisted. If art and culture exists for all, and the NDIS exists to assist people with disabilities to have a full and engaged life, then support for their inclusion in cultural activity is not an unnecessary luxury, or superfluous to their needs.

The election cycle

The frustration, particularly for those actively engaged in the cultural sector, is the knowledge that governments will change. This is inevitable and democracy demands that it shouldn't be avoided.

That said, the constant existential threat to a cultural policy undermines its legitimacy. No-one ever says there should not be a foreign policy, an industrial relations policy, an education policy, etc. There are strong voices that openly speak against the necessity of a cultural policy, both within politics and the media, often fuelled by petty 'culture wars'.

We argue that the need for a cultural policy should be outside of (or not threatened by) the election cycle. We acknowledge that the content of a cultural policy should develop and change and that this may be affected by any real or perceived mandate attributed to the government of the day.

Is it possible for this to be achieved? Is there a level of goodwill attainable that could drive a bi-partisan agreement to the importance, and continual maintenance, of a cultural policy?

Climate change

Arts and cultural activity do not sit outside of the threats and challenges of climate change. Revive did not address climate change directly. The opportunity to do so exists through this review process.

Back to Back Theatre is well aware that our successes in presenting our work internationally comes with a carbon cost. We mitigate this cost with carbon offsets and seek to offer alternative engagements with us via our screen works and capacity to undertake meaningful engagement online.

The threat to life (not merely lifestyle) presented by climate change is palpable. It is clear that any future policy must consider both how to minimise climate change and how best to deal with the changes it will bring. We strongly encourage the policy review to consider the proposals put forward by creativeclimate through their submission.