



**Submission to the Federal Government's
NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY
May 2026**

In Short

This submission from Australian Theatre Live (ATL) advocates for the Federal Government to invest in a new Digital Arts industry that enables the principal live-performance arts disciplines of Theatre, Ballet, Opera, Musical Theatre, Musical Concerts - both classical and contemporary, to be seen by audiences everywhere, including in cinemas, arts centres, community halls, festivals and online to every lounge room in the country with an internet connection.

Our Challenges

Currently the biggest obstacle ATL faces is the lack of a funding window.

The principal funding bodies, Screen Australia and Creative Australia, ask, "Why is this a theatre project, not a screen project?" and vice versa. Current guidelines have not kept up with these new and fast-developing technologies, media business models, and changing audience patterns now happening around the world in every arts market.

In our experience, present funding guidelines of both organisations are outdated, inflexible, overly specific, and fail to recognise the opportunity to engage with an exploding online streaming market of millions of people.

ATL offers the opportunity to make the arts more readily accessible at a reasonable price for people who are either too far from capital cities or, due to age or disability, unable to attend a theatre in person.

Unless this situation changes, and either Creative Australia or Screen Australia find a way to support this remarkable innovation, the event cinema and arts online industries will be totally dominated by foreign arts platforms, as mainstream entertainment platforms are currently dominated by US and UK stories and cultures.

Worldwide, arts streaming platforms are ubiquitous, with National Theatre Live, NT At Home, Theatre Channel, Digital Theatre Plus, Bloomsbury Publishing in the UK, and Medici, Marquee and Broadway On Demand in Europe and the US, all attracting broad international appeal.

The new Revive policy needs to recognise these Digital Arts opportunities; work toward lowering the barriers to entry for production companies, like ours, and broaden the guidelines of arts funding bodies to encourage greater participation in the arts, and, meet the expectations of modern audiences.

Recommendations

To:

1. Propose a new funding framework within Screen Australia, (Live-Performance Window), or Creative Australia, to digitally capture and distribute Australian theatrical events by major and independent companies to increase accessibility, longevity and international reach.
2. Create a dedicated funding category: "Digital Capture and Distribution (Live Performance)", administered by either Screen Australia or Creative Australia, to support high-quality multi-camera capture, post-production, captioning and distribution/archival for at least one production per year from each major State company.
3. Require core organisational grants to CAST, (Consortium of State Theatre Companies), to contribute 1.5% of their total funding to the digital capture of 6 plays, 1 from each State, including supplementary artist and creative interviews.
4. Establish a joint funding program involving the Federal Arts Ministry, the Federal Communications Ministry, (ABC & SBS), Screen Australia and state/territory screen and arts agencies.

Digital Theatre's Appeal and Social Function

Australian Theatre Live has, over the past 8 years, with mostly RISE support and philanthropic assistance, produced and launched 28 plays, opera and music concerts for our two subscription platforms, ATL Public and ATL Education.

We know this industry can succeed with Government support for the following reasons:

1. It works in every country of the western world.
2. It is easily accessible to millions of arts lovers online and in cinemas across the country.
3. It connects artists to audiences everywhere, not just nationally, but globally.
4. It engages younger and emerging artists through social media gateways.
5. It's inexpensive, with recording and distribution costs a fraction of those for feature films.
6. It destroys the elitist idea that the arts are too expensive and esoteric and 'not for them'.
7. It is a new source of jobs and revenue across the creative, broadcast, exhibition, distribution and online industries.
8. It's value for money, with taxpayers already contributing \$8.6 billion to arts events they can't otherwise access.
9. It is an invaluable resource for students and researchers of the arts in high schools and tertiary institutions.
10. As it progresses, it will build a forever archive of the country's best live performances, immortalising Australian artists, performers, writers, creative designers, and arts companies in all the principal arts fields.

The Need For Change

The digital recording and distribution world has completely changed the way we search for entertainment.

It's now common knowledge that the media landscape in Australia is changing rapidly, with media business models being revised monthly, and audience patterns shifting to the much more accessible online subscriber platforms.

This is not a bad thing in our view, especially if it means that more people can participate in the arts at lower price points. In order to support this mission, Australia's arts policies at large, and the principal arts funding institutions need to prioritise these new developments and promote the opportunities they bring.

We believe a comprehensive shift to a new Digital Arts Policy will recognise these opportunities, build arts audiences for low cost, and create a more stable and supportive environment for artists, companies, and workers in the broader arts industry.

Changing Audience Patterns

It is being made increasingly apparent to everyone working in the arts industries today that Australia has an audience problem.

Post-COVID, arts organisations still struggle to recover box office and subscriber patronage. Most recent Live Performance Australia figures claim, "Theatre, Opera, Comedy, Festivals, Ballet and Dance recorded y-o-y declines in attendance", figures which "underscore a shifting landscape in audience behaviour and economic pressures".

Screen Australia recently announced a new corporate plan focusing on audiences, "to future-proof the industry amidst rapid change and guide the sector in seizing growth opportunities."

Additionally, Melbourne Theatre Company CEO and Artistic Director, Anne-Louise Sarkis reported, "Rather than waiting for a return to previous [business] models, we are actively reshaping how we work – diversifying income streams, exploring new ways of connecting with audiences and building a company that is as resilient as it is ambitious".

Free-to-air TV audiences also continue to decline, with Arts and Culture programs on the ABC now down to 0.2% on their iView channel, (70 hours of Australian Content – all repeats). On their main channel, it's down to 2.7%. (ABC Annual Report).

Commercial broadcasters are experiencing a dramatic decline in audience size with their share of national advertising expenditure collapsed from nearly half of all spending in 2006–07 to just 18% by 2020–21, undermining the economic foundations of their ability to produce local content.

Audiences in the online streaming market, however, are growing rapidly year on year, with 90% of Australians, (approximately 26.6 million video streaming accounts), using at least one service. The streaming market is currently worth more than \$3.5B and projected to increase to more than \$10.4B by 2030, (Statista).

These figures cannot be ignored, and the opportunity to reach, engage, and react with this growing audience, from an online arts point of view, should be enthusiastically embraced.

A new arts policy also needs to recognise and address the decline in cinema attendance, which, 6 years later still remains below pre-pandemic averages. While Screen Australia helps produce more local feature films than ever, the average admissions and box office returns per Australian film have halved since the 07-08 policy reset, (Filmlink).

Cinemas are at the heart of communities, contributing to social engagement and sustaining small businesses. A new policy direction should consider opportunities for cinema owners to offer a more diverse range of film products for their patrons, including the filmed arts, while they deal with changing patterns in film distribution, that favours the online subscription market.

Bringing the arts to cinemas and arts centres is perfectly suited to those who can't travel to the theatre or afford box-office prices. Particularly in rural, regional and remote areas.

Filmed theatre, known as Event Cinema, has seen dramatic growth in the capture and screening of live performances of all the arts disciplines in UK, European, Asian, and US cinemas.

For example, the UK company, National Theatre Live (NTLive), now records and distributes their plays online through, NT At Home, and to hundreds of cinemas in over 94 countries, including Australia. A recent NTLive production, All My Sons, played on 54 screens in Australia last month, earning over \$950 per screen, more than the combined earnings of six Australian feature films playing in the same week, (Kate Separovich - Australians In Cinemas).

Filmed arts events are now a part of the cinema scene and need to be recognised for the contribution they make to maintaining the film production and exhibition industries and for their ability to engage audiences of all types, and ultimately encourage more people to attend live-performance events.

According to a recent NT Live report, rewatching theatrical events they had enjoyed in person was also a significant benefit for filmed theatre audiences, "filmed theatre, far from reducing engagement with in-person theatre attendance, appears to be increasing opportunities for both current and new audiences to experience theatre... it is increasing overall engagement and widening the reach of theatre productions, as well as demonstrating new ways in which we might help audiences of the future to experience theatre", (Filmed Theatre and UK Audiences Feb 26. - Indigo).

ATL endorses the recent Independent Cinemas Association (ICA) report, 'Made, Not Seen', which points out current screen policy settings neglect, "the conditions that allow films to be found, accessed and experienced by the public". We agree with their

proposal to build, “a contemporary policy framework that recognises how audiences actually live, choose and gather... that requires reconnecting policy to audience, production to exhibition, and cultural aspiration to practical access.”

Who We Are

Australian Theatre Live is an arts production company that uses digital technologies to film live performance theatre, both fringe and mainstream, to distribute to audiences online as well as in cinemas, arts centres, and community halls, both nationally and globally.

We aim to make more Australian theatre accessible and affordable to arts lovers regardless of location, language, or economic circumstances.

ATL enables a much greater audience for participating theatre companies, playwrights, performers, and live theatre practitioners, further developing the Australian live-performance and film industries.

Our principal purpose is to inspire, encourage, and promote artistic achievement at every level of our society and to enable all Australians to enjoy, criticise, and participate in the development and direction of our artistic heritage.

Five Pillars

ATL’s own experience to date has shown the viability of a digital arts policy meeting each and every one of the Government’s five policy pillars:

1. First Nations First

ATL features 2 plays on our subscriber platform, written and performed by First Nations artists, featuring Indigenous stories and voices in the larger cultural and artistic conversation in this country. Apart from online access, we have successfully taken these plays to rural and regional NSW cinemas and arts festivals with Q&A sessions featuring First Nations artists, encouraging wider participation of First Nations people in theatre and the arts. Arts events that were once considered elitist, expensive, and beyond the reach of most First Nations audiences are now accessible in every corner of the country. A fully supported digital arts policy that provides funding specifically for the capture of Indigenous art would expand these opportunities and strengthen recognition of Indigenous rights, as well as help showcase First Nations stories to wider Australian audiences.

2. A Place for Every Story

The ATL platform carries plays, concerts, and operas featuring stories and artists that reflect the multicultural nature of modern Australia. Our platform is truly a ‘place for every story’, offering diverse forms of cultural expression and participation in response to changing patterns of audience participation. From plays featuring young Singaporean actors telling their stories, (Golden Blood); outback encounters between Indigenous and Chinese farm workers, (Stay - written by a Sri Lankan playwright), to a colourful collection of people in the front bar of an inner city pub, (This Much is True), our filmed plays support, recognise and respect the contribution of all Australians as the creators of our culture.

3. Centrality of the Artist

ATL has the ability to showcase the skills and creative abilities of live-performance artists to all Australians with an internet connection or who visit the cinema. Importantly, for the first time, filmed theatre provides a new source of revenue for creatives and artists, from additional fees, royalties, and the ability to share in profits. Where once live-performance artists were paid for their efforts on the day, a digital arts platform continues 'long-tail' payments into the future. Additionally, creatives, writers, and actors performing to a season's audience of a few thousand people can be seen by online audiences many times larger, both here in Australia and overseas. The reputations of artists and theatrical companies are more widely known and have greater visibility.

4. Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Subscribers to the ATL platform have access to 30 theatre, music, and opera productions with new productions added monthly. It is not only an easy source of entertainment for families at home, but also of revenue for artists and theatre companies, as well as an invaluable archive of our playwriting, performing, and stage production heritage, creating a rich resource for students and researchers of the theatrical arts globally. Previously, our great plays and performances were lost to the ether of the moment, but with a strong and well-supported digital arts policy that cleverly exploits these technological advances in recording, distribution, and exhibition, those moments will be captured forever. The platform also has the potential to reach broad and diverse audiences necessary to attract new investment in the arts through philanthropic sponsorship and build a wide-reaching subscriber base sufficient to maintain its long-term sustainability. A supportive Digital Arts Policy which recognises these opportunities will ensure platforms such as ATL will remain resilient, adaptable, and fit-for-purpose.

5. Engaging the Audience

ATL captures theatrical performances in a very particular way, employing all the techniques of feature film storytelling. We do not cover the arts as a sports event with cameras recording whatever happens onstage. We respect the work of the writers, directors, and performers by placing cameras onstage and in the audience, focusing entirely on the story. Audience feedback is often along the lines of, "it's as if I were on the stage watching the actors for real". Precise editing also offers a better understanding of story lines with close-up reaction shots of the performers, along with all the grand and colourful thematic transitions that theatre is best known for.

These filmmaking techniques, along with easy online access, directly connect with people of all cultures, socio-economic groups, and ages, from young to elderly, and in particular, those who can't make it to theatrical performances through old age or disability.

Young people have a special interest in digital capture technologies, becoming more literate as creators and collaborators telling stories in new forms and shaping skills, pathways, and patterns of participation in arts disciplines.

Conclusion

Three months after he took up the position of Federal Arts Minister, Tony Burke warned opportunities to see Australian stories were at serious risk, stating, “it would be unforgivable if we let a moment pass which results in future generations basically taking potluck as to whether they ever see an Australian story on screen”, he said.

In calling for submissions for a new arts policy, he declared, “one place where I want to be able to take the story is to continue to take it to the lounge room”.

ATL shares that ambition and believes a new Digital Arts Policy would make that wish a reality.

In today’s shifting digital entertainment landscape, the creation of a subscription streaming platform showcasing Australian arts and cultural performances is an opportunity to build avenues of access to every Australian around the country, create new sources of revenue to support artists directly, and celebrate Australian values and the multicultural diversity of the arts as a force for social cohesion.

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