MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY

NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY: SUBMISSION

INTRODUCTION

Melbourne Theatre Company welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the new National Cultural Policy.

Melbourne Theatre Company is Australia's oldest professional theatre company and has delivered more than 850 productions to audiences since 1953. We create stories that entertain, challenge and move people – stories that reflect the full complexity of who we are as a country and spark genuine conversation about the world we live in. We are a National Performing Arts Partnership (NPAP) organisation and Victoria's state theatre company, producing an annual program of productions from our home at Southbank Theatre, as well as Arts Centre Melbourne and regional and interstate touring venues.

In 2025, we reached over 190,000 audience members – including almost 13,000 who were new to the Company – and delivered 550 performances, championing new Australian writing and bringing the best international work to Melbourne audiences. We continued to invest in homegrown Australian stories through our landmark NEXT STAGE Writers' Program, which has commissioned and supported more than 50 writers since 2017. We also support the next generation of Australian theatre makers through the MinterEllison Future Directors initiative, our Future Creatives program, Deadly Creatives, and our extensive Education & Families program. Performing arts organisations are part of Australia's $64 billion cultural and creative industries, which contribute around 2.5% of GDP – comparable in size to either the agriculture and forestry or accommodation and food services industries. More Australians attend live performance than all major sporting codes combined. Melbourne Theatre Company alone estimates our audiences generated almost $15.8 million in ancillary economic activity in 2024, including $5.2 million on food and drink – a reminder that investment in the arts ripples well beyond the theatre door.

However, Australia's performing arts sector is at a critical juncture, with economic conditions facing arts organisations like Melbourne Theatre Company continuing to deteriorate: including rising costs of making theatre, particularly in travel and production; fewer corporate partnerships; changes to audience behaviours including reduced frequency and predictability of attendance; the impacts of higher costs of living; and the reduction or flattening of Government investment at all levels. These pressures are systemic rather than cyclical and felt across the entire arts industry – from major companies, independent artists, regional venues and small-to-medium organisations. A healthy sector depends upon the entire ecosystem.

The next National Cultural Policy, building upon the landmark *National Cultural Policy – Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, needs to move beyond the incremental and into the structural. This requires clearer articulation of the roles different parts of the sector play, alongside policy mechanisms that support implementation.

As a state theatre company operating at scale, Melbourne Theatre Company offers a perspective grounded in the practical delivery of national cultural policy across artistic, commercial and community contexts. We

are already actively realising *Revive's* vision through platforming First Nations voices, nurturing diverse Australian storytellers, and ensuring world-class theatre reaches audiences in Melbourne and beyond.

RECOMMENDATIONS | SUMMARY

The new National Cultural policy should:

Pillar One: First Nations First

1. Establish dedicated philanthropic incentives for First Nations arts programs, ensuring these incentives strengthen overall investment in First Nations artists and art without diverting support from First Nations-led organisations or artists.

2. Develop cultural policy guidance on best-practice models for First Nations leadership and self-determination within major arts companies that support culturally safe workplaces and ways of working, respect Indigenous cultural and intellectual Property, and enable the retention and development of First Nations staff and artists, while recognising the roles of First Nations-led organisations.

Pillar Two: A Place for Every Story

3. Endorse and commit to the introduction of a 40% Live Performing Production Incentive for commercial and not-for-profit producers, structured as a tax offset or rebate tied to eligible production spend.

4. Develop national, privacy-safe frameworks and standards for audience and artist data collection, providing consistency across the sector.

Pillar Three: Centrality of the Artist and Arts worker

5. Support nation-wide, industry-led skills and training initiatives to address critical workplace shortages, including clearer national expectations around fair conditions, career pathways and skills development.

6. Develop funding frameworks that account for the artist employment implications of co-productions, including fewer jobs in a shrinking industry, and introduce an artist stipend to support sustained creative practice.

Pillar Four: Strong Cultural Infrastructure

7. Increase government arts investment with real-terms indexed growth.

8. Introduce tax reforms: 1.5x deductibility for arts donations, GST-free ticket treatment for DGR organisations, PBI status extension, expanded matched funding.

9. Introduce corporate partnership tax incentives to reverse the decline in private sector arts investment.

10. Establish a dedicated digital infrastructure fund for arts organisations, recognising digital and organisational capability as core cultural infrastructure

11. Reform the Creative Futures Fund to differentiate between the distinct needs, capacities and missions of different arts organisations, and ensure its remit and funding cycles are fit for purpose for live theatre production.

Pillar Five: Engaging the Audience

12. Explore arts and culture as a driver of intrastate and interstate cultural tourism.

13. Commission and fund a national, government-led live performance campaign and ticketing initiative to actively promote the value of live arts audience attendance.

14. Establish a federal Cultural Pass for 13-25 year-olds.

15. Develop a cross-government dedicated Arts Access program for schools

We would also point to and strongly support the submission from the 39 National Performing Arts Partnership (NPAP) organisations, which outlines a range of initiatives and measures to strengthen the live performing arts sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS | DETAIL

PILLAR 1: FIRST NATIONS FIRST

Melbourne Theatre Company approaches First Nations programming and relationships through multiple pathways: commissioning and producing the work of First Nations writers, collaborating with First Nations organisations to present work, and providing designated First Nations roles within the Company, including a resident dramaturg and a project officer to oversee the Deadly Creatives program. The Deadly Creatives program is aimed at providing pathways for young First Nations theatre makers to make and produce work. Members of our First Nations Giving Circle, established in February 2025, help to fund our First Nations-led productions, our Deadly Creatives program for young First Nations artists, and our BlakTix program, which subsidises tickets for First Nations audiences. These programs are also supported by funding from foundations such as the Robert Salzer Foundation; however, their funding is limited and they have indicated they face competing demands.

The new National Cultural policy should:

Establish philanthropic incentives for First Nations arts programs

Fundraising for First Nations-specific programs within the organisation remains structurally difficult. While changes to the minimum distribution rates for Private and Public Ancillary Funds are welcome, the new Cultural Policy should enact targeted incentives to direct philanthropic investment towards First Nations arts programming specifically.

Develop cultural policy guidance on best-practice models for First Nations leadership and self-determination within major arts companies.

The new Cultural Policy should also recognise the potential isolation experienced by First Nations artists working within predominantly non-Indigenous arts organisations and set out support mechanisms. The policy should set clearer expectations for how major organisations create meaningful and sustained space for First Nations practice, while ensuring First Nations cultural authority remains with First Nations artists and organisations.

PILLAR 2: A PLACE FOR EVERY STORY

Melbourne Theatre Company has been one of the most consistent champions of new Australian writing across Australia through the largest development program for new work, our NEXT STAGE Writers' Program. Since its establishment in 2017, NEXT STAGE has commissioned 54 writers and staged 24 new works by Australian playwrights that have gone on to anchor our annual seasons and reach more than 240,000 audience members. Since new artistic direction under Chief Executive Officer & Artistic Director Anne-Louise Sarks, have consistently increased the number of Australian works on our stages year-on-year, from five in 2022 to nine in the 2026 season. In doing so, we are building the Australian theatrical canon, developing a body of work that expands audiences' perception of what constitutes a new Australian work.

Programming new work and welcoming emerging creatives is, by its nature, a higher-risk endeavour. New Australian plays do not carry the recognition of established titles, and new voices do not yet have the audience following that established artists command. The result is that championing new work – however vital to the health of the artform and the richness of our national culture – places greater financial pressure on organisations that do it consistently and at scale. Without structural policy support, the economic logic pushes organisations toward safer, more commercially predictable programming. That is the opposite of what a healthy national cultural policy should incentivise.

The new National Cultural policy should:

Endorse and commit to the introduction of a 40% Live Performing Production Incentive for commercial and not-for-profit producers, structured as a tax offset or rebate tied to eligible production spend.

Melbourne Theatre Company supports the NPAP sector's position on introduction of the 40% the Live Performance Production Incentive, and adds our voice emphatically. This 40% offset on qualifying production costs – applied as a tax offset for taxpaying entities, or as a rebate for non-taxpayers – would

stimulate private investment in Australian theatre, underwrite the development of ambitious new works, and rebalance the economics of live performance in a globally competitive market. Following the Creative Industries Tax Summit in September 2025, this initiative is understood to have the support of all state governments and now requires federal leadership.

Develop national standards for audience data collection with safe, sector-wide frameworks.

We recognise the need for more consistent, ethical and privacy-conscious approaches to audience and artist data collection, in order to assist with producing more diverse works of theatre. The sector currently lacks shared language and practical frameworks for measuring diversity and inclusion among our employed artists, writers and theatre makers, making it difficult to evaluate progress, design targeted engagement strategies, or understand representation across audiences and artists alike. This is particularly the case for sensitive demographic data such as ethnicity and sexuality. We support the development of national standards for audience and artists data collection, alongside privacy safe frameworks that enable meaningful and comparable insights across the sector, and additional education and training for best practice when it comes to reporting. This would provide a consistent national approach while allowing organisations flexibility in how data is collected and applied.

PILLAR 3: CENTRALITY OF THE ARTIST AND ARTS WORKER

Artists are at the core of Melbourne Theatre Company. We are committed to fair remuneration, safe and respectful workplaces and environments that support creative risk-taking and sustained careers. However, current policy settings do not consistently define what supporting artists as workers means in practice. We welcome the policy focus on recognising artists and workers and protecting their rights in a rapidly evolving digital and technological landscape.

The new National Cultural policy should:

Support nation-wide, industry-led skills and training initiatives to address critical workplace shortages.

Melbourne Theatre Company directly experiences the workforce and skills shortages identified in the Service and Creative Skills Australia study, particularly for technical and production employees, and roles that are specialised for the sector such as props makers and scenic artists. We support nation-wide, industry-led skills and training initiatives to address structural challenges such as precarious work conditions, a disconnect between formal education and industry needs, persistently low wages and on-the-job mentoring.

Melbourne Theatre Company is working to address these challenges internally through initiatives such as Future Creatives, which provides mentoring, networking opportunities and paid employment for designers from historically underrepresented cultural backgrounds. However, this initiative addresses only one aspect of the broader challenge, and initiatives such as this are currently at risk of concluding due to funding shortages. The new Cultural Policy should create clear national mechanisms to support the scaling and replication of these initiatives across the sector. This includes long-term, flexible funding models for training and apprenticeships to pass on skills to the next generation; and support for industry education partnerships and frameworks that prioritise equity of access. Creating the conditions for these programs to

scale and be replicated across the sector will ensure a more sustainable, skilled, and diverse workforce across Australia's performing arts sector.

Develop funding frameworks that account for the artist employment implications of co-productions, and introduce an artist stipend to support sustained creative practice.

The new Cultural Policy should grapple with an unintended consequence of the current funding environment: the pressure on producing companies to co-produce and collaborate, which while enormously valuable in many instances, will reduce the total number of artist jobs created. When Melbourne Theatre Company co-produces with another theatre company, the employment generated is shared between the organisations, rather than in full by each. As funding stagnates and organisations seek efficiencies, co-production is increasingly used as a budget mechanism rather than a creative one. This has a long-term impact on artist employment and career sustainability that currently policy settings do not account for. The new Cultural Policy should monitor and respond to this dynamic, ensuring that funding frameworks actively support direct artist employment rather than inadvertently incentivising structures that reduce it.

This reflects broader concern across the sector that short-term and often unpredictable funding environments are making it increasingly difficult to create sustainable employment opportunities, with many artists leaving the industry or not entering it as a viable long-term career. Australia should look seriously at the introduction of a direct artist stipend as a structural response to this challenge. Ireland's Basic Income for the Arts scheme provides a weekly stipend to artists and creative arts workers, regardless of their income from arts practice. The pilot became permanent in 2026 after the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport found for every €1 of public money invested, society received €1.39 in return. This offers an instructive international model for allowing artists to remain in the profession through period of interrupted work, take creative risks and develop their practice without being forced into unrelated employment to survive. We call on the new Cultural Policy to examine an equivalent Australian model as a serious and urgent policy response.

Ensuring that artists have access to sustained employment opportunities and see arts practice as a viable long-term career pathway must be a vital and central objective of the next National Cultural Policy. This is critical not only for the sustainability of individual organisations, but for the strength and resilience of Australia's cultural ecosystem as a whole.

This will require longer-term, more predictable funding settings that provide organisations with the certainty to invest in talent, take creative risks and support sustained career development.

PILLAR 4: STRONG CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Producing world-class theatre does not happen without the systems and investment to support it. Yet for Melbourne Theatre Company – and for the arts industry more broadly – the infrastructure that underpins our work has been quietly eroding. Federal arts funding is at a per capita low. Corporate partnership has more than halved as a proportion of our revenue. Digital systems built for a different era strain to meet the demands of contemporary audiences and operations. The next National Cultural Policy has an opportunity to address these structural deficits directly.

The new National Cultural policy should:

Increase government arts investment with real-terms indexed growth.

With federal per capita expenditure on arts and culture at its lowest on record in 2023 ($114 per person), and with Australia ranked 23rd out of 34 OECD countries for cultural expenditure, the case for increased government investment is clear. For Melbourne Theatre Company, as for every NPAP organisation, the cumulative effect of flat or below-CPI-indexed funding has resulted in a decline in the resources available to produce world-class theatre, employ artists, invest in new work and keep tickets affordable.

The new Cultural Policy must commit to government funding that keeps pace with rising costs – not funding indexed at less than CPI, which is a decline in real terms.

Introduce tax reforms.

Melbourne Theatre Company strongly supports a suite of tax reforms that would structurally rebalance the economics of cultural production and philanthropic investment:

- Live Performance Production Incentive (see Pillar 2)
- Increasing tax deductibility to 1.5x the donation amount, following the Singapore model, to incentivise philanthropic giving to the arts
- Extending GST-free treatment for eligible non-commercial ticket sales from 75% to 100% for charity-endorsed and DGR organisations – removing a structural barrier to revenue growth and reducing retrospective tax risk
- Extending Public Benevolent Institution (PBI) status to a broader range of arts and cultural organisations, enabling better competition for skilled staff
- Expanding matched funding programs, building on existing programs such as Plus1, MATCH Lab and ACF Boost

Introduce corporate partnership tax incentives to reverse the decline in private sector arts investment.

Melbourne Theatre Company has experienced a dramatic decrease in corporate partnership as a source of income. Our corporate partner base has fallen from 43 partners representing 10.5% of revenue in 2015, to 18 partners representing just 2.1% of revenue. This decline has not been addressed by government policy. Tax incentives that reengage corporate partners, including incentives for first-time and returning corporate arts sponsors, would help reverse this trend and diversify the sector's income base.

Establish a dedicated digital infrastructure fund for arts organisations.

Melbourne Theatre Company, like many NPAP organisations, operates on ageing and highly customised digital systems – CRM, ticketing and data platforms – that require ongoing investment to remain effective, secure and integrated. Without targeted support, these constraints limit operational efficiency, audience engagement and the sector's ability to adapt to changing behaviours. The next Cultural Policy should recognise digital infrastructure as essential cultural infrastructure and establish dedicated funding to enable system modernisation and long-term capability building across the sector.

Creative Futures Fund & sector collaboration

Melbourne Theatre Company welcomes the Creative Futures Fund as a recognition that ambitious, large-scale artistic projects require dedicated investment. However, in its current form, the Fund does not sufficiently acknowledge the different needs, capacities and missions of those eligible to apply, and can, in practice, favour project models that rely on increased collaboration and partnership between organisations.

While these models can deliver strong and ambitious outcomes, they may also have longer-term implications for artist retention and employment, particularly where collaboration becomes the dominant mode of production, to support operational and financial sustainability, rather than creative choice. This dynamic is already evident within live theatre, where increased co-productions are increasingly driven by financial necessity.

The Creative Futures Fund timelines are also not always aligned with the programming cycles of theatre companies producing annual seasons under a subscription model where seasons are committed well in advance. This can create challenges in integrating supported projects into organisational planning, limiting the ability to realise the ambition of both funded work and the Fund itself.

We recommend that the Creative Futures Fund be reformed, so that its funding cycles and assessment criteria better reflect the distinct needs, timelines and missions of different types of arts organisations.

PILLAR 5: ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

Cost of living is now the primary barrier to arts attendance in Australia. Almost 60% of young people (16—25) identify expense as the main reason they do not attend live performance. For Melbourne Theatre Company, this is not an abstract statistic, but shapes our ticket pricing, our Education & Families season, our access programs and our subscriber base, which has experienced softening consistent with sector-wide trends. Rebuilding and diversifying Australian arts audiences is a long-term, structural challenge that requires government investment alongside organisational planning.

The new National Cultural policy should:

Explore live arts and culture as a driver of intrastate and interstate cultural tourism.

Policy settings that support audience engagement must grapple with the distinctive value of live experience in a digital world. This distinct value of live performance should be explicitly recognised as part of Australia's cultural and social infrastructure. There is a growing trend of live performance being cited as a counterpoint to digital life – one where community, chance and a shared presence are prioritised. This value proposition should be central to how the government communicates about and invests in live arts. The experience around the art – the occasion, the venue, the community encounter – is itself a pillar or engagement, not just a mechanism for content.

We also support exploring how the cultural sector can drive intrastate and interstate tourism, bringing new audiences to the art. The potential of arts and culture as a driver of regional visitation and economic activity is underutilised in current policy settings.

Commission and fund a national, government-led live performance campaign and ticketing initiative to actively promote the value of live arts audience attendance.

The Government has a direct role to play in shifting cultural attitudes toward live performance attendance. Melbourne Theatre Company recommends the development of a national, government-led campaign and ticketing initiative that actively promotes the value of live performance to Australian audiences, modelled on successful precedents in other sectors where government investment in demand-side awareness has

driven measurable behaviour change, as well as the Victorian Government-supported Always Live campaign for live music. The campaign and ticketing initiative would complement the Cultural Pass and Arts Access Program by building broader social permission and appetite for live arts attendance – particularly among audiences who have lapsed, or who have never considered live theatre as part of their cultural life. The cultural and economic case is clear: more than five million Australians attended a live performance in 2024 through NPAP organisations alone yet cost of living and habitual disengagement continue to suppress participation. A sustained, nationally coordinated campaign would invest in the demand side of the equation in a way that individual organisations, operating within constrained budgets, cannot do alone.

Endorse and commit to providing a federal government-funded Cultural Pass for young people.

Melbourne Theatre Company endorses the proposal for a federal government-funded Cultural Pass for 13-25 year olds to provide discounted or free access to arts and cultural live performances, based on the proportion of 16–25-year-olds (59%) citing expense as the primary barrier to live performance. Successful examples abroad have been compelling in Italy, France and Germany, providing between $100 and $500 to young people to use across cultural events. In France, 41% of these funds have been to live performances.

Develop a cross Government dedicated Arts Access program for schools.

Melbourne Theatre Company's Education & Families program is one of the most extensive programs of all Australian theatre companies, developing workshops and free learning resources to students across the state. In 2025, it reached more than 5,000 students across the season. However, the combination of pressure on school budgets and the rising costs associated with making theatre is affecting reach and affordability of our free programs. An Arts Access program for schools – providing subsidies, artist-in-residence programs, transport for regional schools – would expand access and reduce the inequity that currently prohibits some students from experiencing live theatre.

CONCLUSION

Melbourne Theatre Company values the Federal Government's passion for arts and for artists who bring Australia's stories to life. As a company that has been transforming its programming, its leadership and its relationship with audiences since 2023, we offer this submission with conviction and firsthand experience by demonstrating how the ambitions of *Revive* can be confidently and meaningfully realised. We are committed partners in seeing *Revive* evolve into a policy framework that builds a cohesive, culturally engaged society – one in which all Australians can see themselves reflected in the stories they see on our stages. We offer these recommendations in the hope of shaping future Australian arts funding that is fit for the future and capable of sustaining a resilient and vibrant arts industry.

Melbourne Theatre Company believes these recommendations, along with those outlined in the National Performing Arts Partnership (NPAP) organisations submission, will assist the Government to deliver the full potential of a new National Cultural Policy. To be effective, the policy must move beyond ambition to implementation, clearly articulating the roles of different parts of the sector, establishing mechanisms that support delivery, and creating the conditions for artists to sustain viable, long-term careers.

By investing in the systems that underpin the work, recognising the interconnected nature and value of audiences, artists and organisations, the next National Cultural Policy can deliver a more resilient, sustainable and ambitious cultural sector for Australia, achieving the desired outcomes of a new Cultural Policy, including the centering of First Nations stories; support of artist and arts workers as valued contributors; strengthening cultural infrastructure; engaging the audience; growing the creative economy, and crucially, improving access to the performing arts for all Australians.