JOEL BRAY DANCE

Submission to the next National Cultural Policy

May 2026 • Joel Bray, Creative Director & CEO

About Joel Bray Dance

Joel Bray Dance (JBD), founded in 2017 by Wiradjuri choreographer Joel Bray, is a Melbourne-based, First Nations-led Contemporary Dance company. We make and tour Contemporary Dance and First Nations Contemporary Dance nationally and internationally, employing dozens of artists and arts workers each year. Our works include eleven seasons of Daddy (including Europe), the ten-city national tour of Garabari (Sydney Festival's 50th anniversary), Storage Unit (NGV 2023), Homo Pentecostus (Malthouse 2024) and Monolith (2025). Giraru Galing Ganhagirri has entered the NGV Collection. Joel is a 2025 Sidney Myer Creative Fellow. We are punching above our weight — and constrained by the same structural funding settings this submission addresses.

Australia is in a slow-motion cultural crisis, and I don't believe most Australians — or our leaders — recognise it as such. This submission speaks to that crisis as it is unfolding in Contemporary Dance, and especially in First Nations Contemporary Dance, and offers five proposals for the next National Cultural Policy.

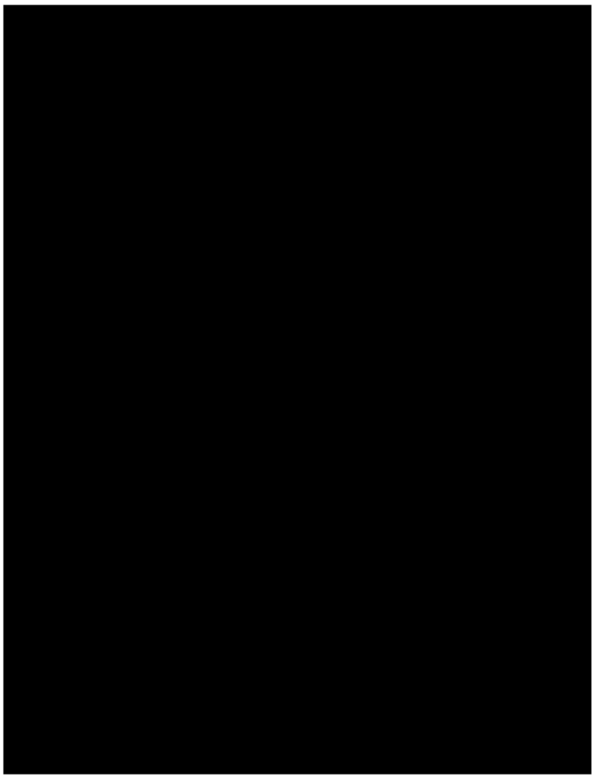
1. A crisis hiding in plain sight

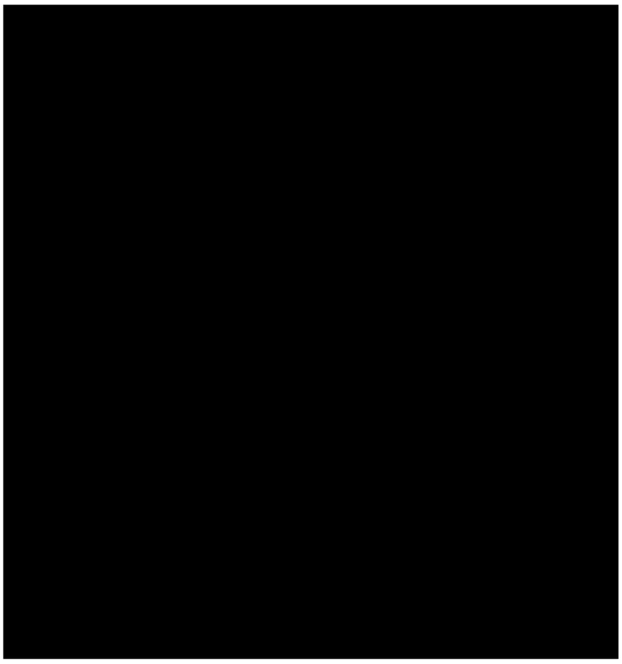
Since the Howard years, the contraction of arts funding, combined with the rising real cost of making and presenting work, has put unrelenting pressure on the institutions that commission, present and tour Contemporary Dance. Those institutions have largely inelastic expenses — infrastructure, administration, production — so when budgets tighten, the thing that gets squeezed out is the art and the artists.

Where once we had time and money to research and make work, we now get “free space” with no money attached. Where once we had months to make, we now have weeks. The making is rushed. Quality is falling. Skills are attriting. This is especially acute in Contemporary Dance, where artists need to stay “dance fit” — training daily, working regularly — which casualised, project-by-project employment cannot deliver.

This is a death spiral. Less work, of lower quality, means audiences lose literacy; ticket income falls; presenters become more risk-averse and program less Contemporary Dance. Meanwhile, Australians' cultural diet becomes more digital, more online, more imported from overseas. We are losing our culture and the artists who generate it. What kind of country are we if we don't tell our own stories?

> **Proposal: Recognise the structural underfunding of live performance — and of Contemporary Dance and First Nations Contemporary Dance in particular — as a national priority, and substantially increase recurrent investment in the small-to-medium contemporary performing arts sector.**





2. First Nations Contemporary Dance is cultural infrastructure

First Nations Contemporary Dance is not solely artistic output. It is both a contemporary artform and a living cultural practice that sustains the world's oldest continuing cultures through ceremony, cultural governance, intergenerational knowledge transmission and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) frameworks. Evidence consistently shows that connection to culture improves social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples — a national priority under Closing the Gap.

Despite the scale and maturity of First Nations Contemporary Dance practice nationally and internationally, there is no properly resourced, federally funded small-to-medium First Nations dance sector. This creates a major structural gap between independent practice and large-scale institutional models. Cultural governance and ICIP must never be weaponised against First Nations choreographers in ways that restrict artistic mobility or impose discriminatory touring conditions not faced by non-Indigenous peers.

> **Proposal: Build a properly resourced, federally funded small-to-medium First Nations Contemporary Dance sector, with consistent commissioning pathways, embedded cultural governance and ICIP frameworks, and clear organisational sustainability pathways for companies like Joel Bray Dance.**

3. Pay the artists: a Basic Income for the Arts

Australia's current funding model overweights buildings and infrastructure — new venues, new admin layers — and underweights paying the artists who actually make the work that goes into them. The simplest, most evidence-backed correction is to pay artists directly.

In 2022, Ireland launched the Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) pilot: 2,000 artists and creative arts workers, unconditional weekly payment of €325, for three years. The results have been so strong that the Irish government is making the scheme permanent. The independent cost-benefit analysis by Alma Economics, commissioned by Ireland's Department of Culture, found:

- Every €1 of public funding invested returned €1.39 in social and economic value.
- The pilot generated over €100 million in benefits; net fiscal cost was just under €72 million after additional tax revenue and reduced welfare payments.
- Recipients' arts-related income rose by €500+/month on average, and their dependence on welfare fell sharply.
- 97% of public consultation respondents supported making the scheme permanent.

Australia should pilot the same. To make it specifically generative of new work, each artist should also receive a modest non-wage project budget — say $1,000 per quarter — held in a simple online tool where artists pitch new projects to each other and bring their personal budgets with them. A choreographer pitches a new work; four dancers, a lighting designer, a set designer and a stage manager sign on. Eight artists are paid through their UBI, and their pooled non-wage budgets give the choreographer $8,000 toward marketing, costumes and tech hires. Commissioning, but bottom-up — designed by artists, for artists.

> **Proposal: Pilot an Australian Basic Income for the Arts modelled on Ireland's BIA scheme, paired with a per-artist non-wage project budget and a peer-pitching platform that pools artist budgets to commission new work from the bottom up.**

4. The ensemble gap

The single thing acting as a ceiling on JBD's growth — and on every comparable choreographer-led Contemporary Dance company — is the lack of resources to hire a permanent ensemble.

Overseas, and historically in Australia, the best way to make high-quality Contemporary Dance has been to hire an ensemble who can immerse themselves in the choreographer's movement language, build trust and love between them, and stay dance-fit because they train together every day. In Victoria, the only company with a permanent ensemble is Back to Back Theatre. Back to Back won the International Ibsen Award. In my opinion, the best dance work being made in Australia is coming out of Dancenorth, largely because of the power of the ensemble model.

A permanent ensemble also offers what casualised employment structurally cannot: financial security to save toward a home, plan a family, train sustainably, and build a long career rather than burn out. My peers and I need only a few hundred thousand dollars a year more — each — to make this dream a reality.

> **Proposal: Establish a dedicated funding stream enabling a small cohort of choreographer-led Contemporary Dance companies — explicitly including First Nations-led companies — to employ and sustain permanent ensembles.**

5. From international demand to viable touring

Australia does not lack international demand for First Nations Contemporary Dance. Daddy has played eleven seasons including European tours; Garabari toured nationally to ten cities. What is lacking is the system to convert international invitations into feasible touring.

Presenter fees have not kept pace with rising costs of travel, freight, accommodation, wages, visas, insurance and contingency. Disruption — geopolitical, climate-related, freight, visa — is no longer exceptional; it is the normal operating environment.

For First Nations Contemporary Dance, this is compounded by additional cultural governance, reciprocity and ICIP responsibilities that standard export models do not recognise. The Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange strategy between Indigenous artists and organisations in Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand has been developed by Indigenous-led organisations over more than twenty years. The strategy exists. What is required is implementation and long-term resourcing.

> **Proposal: Establish a dedicated live performance export fund — including a presenter-fee matched funding model and a quick-response international disruption fund — with explicitly dedicated First Nations-led international exchange infrastructure, and resource the implementation of the existing Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange strategy.**

Summary of proposals

- **Recognise and fund the crisis.** Name the structural underfunding of live performance — and Contemporary Dance and First Nations Contemporary Dance in particular — as a national priority, and substantially increase recurrent investment in the small-to-medium contemporary performing arts sector.
- **Build a small-to-medium First Nations Contemporary Dance sector.** Properly resourced, federally funded, with consistent commissioning pathways, embedded cultural governance and ICIP frameworks, and clear sustainability pathways.
- **Pilot an Australian Basic Income for the Arts.** Modelled on Ireland's BIA scheme, paired with a per-artist non-wage project budget and a peer-pitching platform for bottom-up commissioning.

- **Fund permanent ensembles.** A dedicated stream enabling a small cohort of choreographer-led companies — explicitly including First Nations-led companies — to employ and sustain permanent ensembles.
- **Make international touring feasible.** A dedicated live performance export fund, presenter-fee matched funding model and disruption fund, with dedicated First Nations-led international exchange infrastructure, and implementation of the Tri-Nations strategy.

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*Submitted by **Joel Bray**, Creative Director & CEO, Joel Bray Dance. Prepared on Kulin Country, Melbourne, May 2026.*