

## **Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation**

**Bell Shakespeare**

**May 2026**

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the next iteration of the National Cultural Policy. We are pleased to see the Australian Government's ongoing commitment to our nation's artistic and cultural life and industries, and we acknowledge the significant progress made so far as part of the Government's five-pillar framework.

We particularly acknowledge the guiding principle in *Revive* that all Australians, regardless of language, literacy, geography, age or education, have the opportunity to access and participate in arts and culture. This is the same grounding principle of equity on which John Bell founded Bell Shakespeare in 1990, and it remains our key mission today. This ethos underpins our extensive national education program, which has enabled millions of young Australians to access the arts and achieve positive educational and social outcomes.

We commend the Government for acknowledging that all Australian students should have the opportunity to receive an education that includes culture, creativity, humanities and the arts. Yet while arts education is referenced in guiding principles of *Revive*, it is not embedded within core policy design, investment or accountability. This is a critical gap in the cultural policy – arts education is the foundation on which our nation's cultural life is built. Without young people and education, we do not develop our future artists and arts workers, our audiences, nor our cultural infrastructure. We therefore ask the Government to ensure that arts education and youth are embedded within the new National Cultural Policy, to strengthen the entire policy with a clear foundation.

## **ABOUT BELL SHAKESPEARE**

Bell Shakespeare is Australia's national theatre company specialising in Shakespeare, delivering an annual program of performances and education programs to every state and territory across the country. In 1990 when John Bell AO founded Bell Shakespeare, his central mission was to create a company dedicated to performing the works of Shakespeare, and to make those works accessible to all Australians, regardless of age, location, or socioeconomic challenges. This ambitious vision was driven by John's belief that Shakespeare's works in performance broaden our minds and enrich our lives, and should be accessible to all.

Since 1990 we have remained dedicated to access and touring, ensuring our education programs and productions reach all Australians regardless of age, geographic location or socioeconomic background. Our education programs and productions reach more than 90% of Australian Federal electorates face-to-face in every state and territory, while our extensive and innovative digital programs and resources support those we cannot reach in person.

## **WHY EDUCATION MATTERS TO US**

Education has been core to Bell Shakespeare since day one, and is our unique difference in the Australian arts landscape. We are proud to deliver Australian theatre's most comprehensive and geographically wide-reaching education program. We reach, on average, 80,000+ students and teachers face-to-face annually. Our programs reach students and marginalised young people in metropolitan centres, regional towns and remote communities, Youth Justice centres, Aboriginal communities and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities. Another 100,000+ students access our digital and online programs each year.

*We use Shakespeare as a vehicle for transformative learning.*

Our annual program, supported by the Australian Government and our existing philanthropic base, includes live touring performances in schools, workshops, seminars, Artist in Residence programs, scholarship and training mentorships for students and teachers, Professional Learning for teachers, and resources to support classroom learning. Over 36 years, Bell Shakespeare has revolutionised the teaching of Shakespeare in Australia and given an estimated 2 million+ students and teachers life-changing learning experiences through access to live performance and education programs.

At Bell Shakespeare we believe learning is lifelong, and crucial to the development of a thriving, vibrant, productive, and civic-minded nation.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTS EDUCATION TO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY**

Bell Shakespeare supports the National Cultural Policy outlined in *Revive*, however we highlight that the policy does not prioritise a crucial aspect of cultural development: arts education and youth. Education must not only be referenced in guidelines, it must be structurally embedded within core policy design, investment and accountability.

*There is no Australian arts industry without education.*

Every artist was once a student and forged a career through learning their craft, guided by teachers and industry practitioners. Currently, we are seeing a steady and systematic decline in arts education through diminishing tertiary programs and declining school participation (Gattenhof & Saunders 2026). Without clear and unambiguous action to embed arts education into cultural policy, we will see a further decline in artist development, which will see a devastating flow-on effect on the future of the Australian arts industry and audiences.

We see the profound impact of arts education in Bell Shakespeare's National Teacher Mentorship program. By training teachers, of any subject, to implement arts-rich learning and approaches in their classrooms, engagement and achievement outcomes improve for students, teachers, and the wider school community. 100% of teachers report increased confidence, 92% use strategies learned to teach subjects and topics other than Shakespeare, and 77% reported that participating in the Mentorship positively impacted their decision to stay in teaching. For their students, teachers report that shifting to an arts-led teaching approach improves student engagement and positive attitudes to learning (95%), increases student confidence (87%), increases academic results (66%), and increases student attendance by 36%.

Education plays a vital role in artist and artform development, cultural life and audience engagement. When we deliver arts-rich learning from youth, we cultivate citizens who are critical and creative thinkers, collaborative and empathetic. We foster citizens who value cultural understanding, have diverse perspectives, and the language to discuss big ideas. We create citizens with confidence in their own voice, and who have the ability to think reflectively and flexibly about themselves and their place in our rapidly shifting world. The arts supports and fosters resilience and mental health, in turn influencing productivity within workplaces and communities. When the arts is embedded in education from youth it is valued for a lifetime, creating meaningful and lifelong audience engagement with the Australian arts industry. Art is not a luxury, it is a key tool to navigate our complex world, and we must ensure that all Australians, from youth, have access to it. Ensuring equitable access to arts education is vital for artistic and educational excellence, cultural participation, and national cohesiveness.

## **KEY RECOMMENDATION**

### ***Embed arts education and youth within the next National Cultural Policy***

Bell Shakespeare recommends prioritising arts education in the new National Cultural Policy by **embedding** arts education and youth within the five existing pillars.

This recommendation calls for:

- Arts education to be recognised as integral to all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy;
- Schools to be recognised as first points of arts engagement for artists and audiences;
- Cultural and Education portfolios to work together rather than in parallel;
- Arts education to be positioned within existing schooling policies and architecture, including the Better and Fairer Schools Agreement 2025–2034, the Australian Teaching and Learning Commission, and NESAC Accreditation pathways;
- Acknowledgement of teaching artists as part of Australia’s creative workforce, and their practice recognised in national teacher development priorities; and
- The establishment of ongoing Commonwealth funding for arts education programs including Bell Shakespeare’s national education program, which enables the company to deliver high-quality and transformative programs face-to-face to students and teachers in metropolitan, regional and remote Australia.

Arts education and youth encompasses:

- Early childhood, primary and secondary school education;
- Tertiary, vocational and higher education and training;
- Teaching artists in schools and communities;
- Teacher training and capacity building;
- Pathways to employment;
- Engagement with industry; and
- Providing equitable access to the arts for young people experiencing barriers to access including geographic location, age, or socioeconomic background.

## **How Arts Education can strengthen the Five Pillars of Revive**

**First Nations First** *Recognising and respecting the crucial place of First Nations stories at the centre of Australia's arts and culture.*

- Arts education provides the means for our young people to engage with First Nations stories and culture from a very young age. Education settings provide a framework to promote respectful discourse, cultural understanding and exploration through learning, so that our nation's young people grow up respecting and understanding the value of First Nations culture. Embedding First Nations arts and culture in education ensures our citizens are connected to Country, language, and community at a formative time in the development of their identity and beliefs.
- Bell Shakespeare works closely with First Nations youth in their communities through Artist in residence programs. We train teachers to connect curriculum with First Nations culture, for example sharing the work of Kyle Morrison in his presentation 'Aboriginality in Shakespeare' at the 2024 National Teacher Conference. We celebrate and work with First Nations artists and language through our ongoing collaboration with Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company WA, a partnership that has created the new Australian work *Hecate*, which premiered at Perth Festival, entirely in Noongar language.

**A Place for Every Story** *Reflecting the breadth of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.*

- The access point to the arts for most Australians takes place within primary or secondary schooling. Many young Australians, particularly those experiencing geographic inequity, may never experience the arts if it does not happen within their school years. We know that 'you cannot be what you cannot see'. If we do not ensure young people engage with the arts within education settings, we will not cultivate the next generation of artists. In prioritising marginalised voices and storytelling in the arts, we must ensure they have access to the arts from a young age, and schools are the ideal place for this to happen.
- Bell Shakespeare tours education programs and performances to 93% of Federal electorates, engaging with 80,000+ young people, teachers and communities face-to-face annually. We connect young people with Shakespeare's storytelling in diverse settings, from schools to hospitals, Youth Justice facilities, community organisations, refugee communities, remote towns and isolated communities, like our work on Christmas Island WA. Our work encourages young people to find their own voice and cultural touchpoints in Shakespeare's works, enabling them to use classic stories to interrogate and engage with their own place in this complex world.

**Centrality of the Artist** *Supporting the artist as worker and celebrating artists as creators.*

- Arts education plays a key role in the development of artists across their entire career, from schooling through to vocational and tertiary study, with many artists themselves becoming teaching artists in their fields. This cyclical nature of arts education connects industry with education, enriching artmaking and providing sustainable employment and

two-way learning between students and artists. However, with declining enrolments in arts subject areas, alongside reduced tertiary provisions, the pathways to industry are dramatically impacted. Policy must ensure that arts subject areas are maintained within schooling and tertiary settings, to strengthen the pipeline into employment for arts workers and industry.

- Bell Shakespeare’s artist development programs begin in schools where we work with young people from ages 5–18, using the arts to develop critical and creative thinking skills, performance skills, vocabulary and confidence. For students aged 16+ we facilitate the John Bell Scholarship, a national program that identifies talent in young performers based in regional and remote Australia, allowing them to work with the company at our HQ. Our Work Experience program welcomes students into all areas of the company to learn how theatre is made. The Players provides year-long, full-time employment for early career actors performing in schools nationally. Many artists move into directorial or other creative roles within education performance programs. Our mainstage productions offer understudy positions as crucial learning opportunities, before actors graduate to mainstage roles. Alongside this, we offer our artists the option to join the company as a teaching artist, delivering workshops and training programs for students and teachers, supporting them financially and creatively. In 2024, Bell Shakespeare employed 175 actors and 28 teaching artists. We work with artists across the lifetime of their careers and acknowledge that people of all ages are artists.

**Strong Cultural Infrastructure** *Providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts, culture and heritage.*

- Companies like Bell Shakespeare facilitate crucial arts experiences for all Australians, significantly for young people. For many young Australians, we provide their first, transformative engagement with the arts, which leads them to lifelong arts engagement, as an artist or audience member. The value of continued support for companies working in arts education therefore cannot be overstated. Further, schools and universities are places of early and significant arts learning engagement and must be viewed as critical cultural infrastructure. Without schools and universities, our cultural institutions would not exist, nor have artists working within them, and so schools and universities must be acknowledged in policy for their crucial role in the arts industry pipeline and networks.
- Bell Shakespeare delivers programs and performances to, on average, 800+ schools across Australia each year. We have three partnerships with Australian universities: the University of Sydney, the University of Melbourne and most recently, the University of Western Australia. We are a NESA-Accredited provider of teacher Professional Learning programs, ensuring that the National Teacher Mentorship and National Teacher Conference provide teachers with approved and highest quality training. In addition to our face-to-face programs, we provide extensive digital resources including the open-access Shakespeare Hub, and the renowned new digital series, *Macbeth: 360*, so that any school we cannot reach has access to highest quality resources.

**Engaging the Audience** *Making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad.*

- Schools are where audiences are born and bred. Audience engagement for the arts starts with arts education in primary and secondary schooling, so that our people grow up with the arts as a rich companion to their lives. Arts education is where we instill in young people the belief that the arts are not for a privileged few, the arts are for *all* Australians. Sustained and prolonged access to the arts throughout one's life, from youth, builds long-term arts engagement. Companies such as Bell Shakespeare work within and partner with schools to give young people sustained exposure to the arts via performances, workshops and Artist in Residence programs. We cannot neglect the role that schools and arts education play in audience development. We also must view young people as current audiences, not future audiences, and acknowledge their right to access high-quality arts learning and experiences.
- Bell Shakespeare's performances and programs place young people as key audience members in their own right. In 2013 we established our Primary Shakespeare program, which sees The Players performances, workshops, Artist in Residence programs and teacher training provided for our youngest learners, suitable for students in Years K/P – 6. The Players offer three productions each year that suit all primary- and secondary-aged students. Students are also key audience members of our mainstage productions, and great care is taken to support their experience with resources, Q&As, and artist engagement. With such a range of programs, we can support a young person through arts experiences across their lifecycle, from young learner through to secondary and tertiary study, and as an adult audience member who may one day bring other young people to the theatre, having had critical arts engagement from youth.

**How Bell Shakespeare can support Arts Education within the next National Cultural Policy**

Bell Shakespeare is uniquely placed to support the embedding of arts education within the next iteration of the National Cultural Policy. Education is core to our company, and our work with students, teachers and schools is as important to us as our work on the mainstage. We believe that our journey with the arts should start young. We witness the transformative power of arts education daily. Crucially, we believe in access for all to the arts and arts education.

We are committed to lifelong learning and engaging with Shakespeare's classic works as a lens through which to view and interrogate our contemporary like and place in this complex world. We use the profound language of Shakespeare to reflect on our own human condition. We encourage cross-cultural exploration and relationships, such as our ongoing collaboration with Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company WA, exploring the intersection of Shakespeare's language and storytelling with Aboriginal culture and storytelling.

Our education program already operates in every state and territory, within schools and communities. We work with 800+ schools face to face annually, and have teaching artists based around Australia. We perform in 25+ performing artists venues nationally each year, and work

with numerous community and government organisations. Our three tertiary partnerships allow us to participate in academic research, program delivery and student engagement.

Employment pathways are embedded in everything we do. The unique design of our company's annual program is in itself an artist development pipeline. The John Bell Scholarship identifies school-aged students who have the talent and drive to pursue a career in the performing arts, providing training with the company and 100+ auditions each year offering industry exposure. Early career artists are employed in The Players in-school performance program, giving them full-time employment in which they develop their craft, performing in schools and communities nationally, and receiving expert training from industry leaders. Following The Players program, artists may choose to train as a teaching artist for Bell Shakespeare education programs, offering them ongoing and sustainable employment around contracted periods of work. Our mainstage productions offer graduates of The Players program employment via understudy roles in which they learn to work within a mainstage production team, and eventually join a mainstage cast.

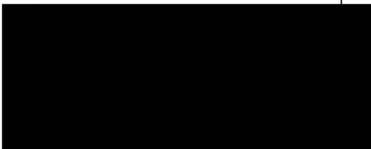
Embedding arts and education within our work has been our mission since Day 1, and we know first-hand the transformative power of education on artist development, audience engagement, and artistic excellence. We urge the Government to bring arts education to the forefront of the next National Cultural Policy, and acknowledge the critical role education plays in the entire arts industry and cultural livelihood of Australia.

**Thank you**

On behalf of Bell Shakespeare, thank you for the opportunity to consult on the Government's next iteration of the National Cultural Policy. Should you have further questions about this submission or Bell Shakespeare, please get in touch using the contacts below.



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