

National Cultural Policy Submission

Australia needs a stronger, fairer professional theatre ecosystem in every capital city, and that requires coordinated government action. A national agreement between the federal and state governments could establish and sustain at least one fully funded MainStage company in each capital, with a home theatre, a six-show annual season, and dedicated space for emerging artists to develop and be programmed alongside mainstage work. That model would expand access, create clearer career pathways, and keep Australian stories visible on major stages.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the consultation on Australia's next National Cultural Policy. My submission focuses on the need for a stronger, more equitable national theatre infrastructure. The most relevant pillars are those concerned with access, cultural participation, support for artists and cultural workers, and the long-term sustainability of cultural institutions and creative careers.

At present, professional theatre opportunities are unevenly distributed across Australia. In many capital cities, the absence of a stable, well-resourced MainStage company limits:

- the number of artists who can build sustainable careers
- the visibility of new Australian writing
- the ability of audiences to see regular high-quality local work
- pathways for emerging performers, directors, designers and technicians
- the development of a long-term theatrical culture in each jurisdiction
- the representation of diverse communities and lived experiences on major stages

Too often, the theatre ecology is fragmented. Emerging artists may find occasional opportunities, but not the consistent structural support needed to move from training into practice and then into sustained professional work. Audiences also face high ticket prices, which can limit participation and reduce the reach of public cultural investment. A national agreement between the Commonwealth and state governments could change this materially.

I recommend that the next National Cultural Policy include a commitment for the federal government to work with state governments to ensure that each capital city in each jurisdiction has at least one fully funded MainStage professional theatre company. Each company should have:

- a permanent home theatre
- the capacity to deliver a six-show season each year
- a clear commitment to programming both new local writing and interesting adaptations

- structured opportunities for emerging young artists
- regular open auditions and applications every year
- a strong commitment to inclusive programming that reflects diverse groups, cultures, identities, abilities and experiences
- affordable ticket pricing supported through public subsidy

This model would create a more stable and visible theatre environment, similar in spirit to the way Belvoir integrates major productions with pathways for artists to enter the company's creative ecosystem. This proposal would deliver several benefits across the cultural sector.

For artists: It would create genuine pathways into professional practice, not just one-off opportunities.

For companies: It would strengthen the viability of theatre organisations by giving them a stable base, predictable seasons, and stronger audience relationships.

For audiences: It would make theatre more affordable and accessible, especially if public support is used to subsidise ticket prices.

For the national culture: It would ensure that Australian stories are regularly developed and staged in each capital city, rather than concentrated in only a few metropolitan centres.

For emerging talent: Open annual auditions and applications would help ensure that artistic teams regularly see fresh performers, writers and creatives.

For communities: Inclusive programming would ensure that diverse groups are not only represented as audiences, but also reflected in the stories, casting, creative teams and decision-making processes on stage.

What the policy should reflect?

I would like to see the next National Cultural Policy explicitly recognise that theatre is not only an artform, but also a workforce, a civic space, and a pathway for emerging Australian talent. The policy should support a national framework that:

- guarantees sustainable MainStage theatre infrastructure in every capital
- funds a mix of new Australian work and adapted repertoire
- builds structured pathways for emerging artists
- keeps tickets affordable through public subsidy
- values regular open access to auditions and creative opportunities
- strengthens the connection between local communities and local theatre companies
- ensures the inclusion of diverse groups in programming, casting, and artistic leadership

Response to Pillar 5 — Engaging the Audience

A critical strategy for sustaining and growing audience engagement in Australian performing arts is the support of a mainstage theatre company that delivers a consistent annual season within a dedicated home theatre venue. This approach strengthens audience connection, loyalty, and participation in ways that fragmented or project-based models cannot.

Audiences engage more deeply when they feel a sense of ownership and belonging. This is evident in other cultural and social sectors most notably in sport where connection to a home ground fosters identity, ritual and long-term commitment. Theatre can and should operate similarly. When a company is consistently present in the same venue, audiences begin to see it as their theatre: a place they return to regularly, trust artistically, and recommend to others.

A stable, ongoing season creates habitual engagement. Rather than one-off attendance driven by marketing campaigns, audiences develop patterns of participation subscribing, attending multiple productions per year, and bringing others along. This predictability is essential in an environment where audiences are increasingly overwhelmed by choice and competing entertainment options. Regular programming builds familiarity and trust, reducing barriers to attendance.

Equally, a resident theatre company enables stronger local identity and storytelling. When artists are embedded in a place and supported to deliver a full season, they can respond more directly to their community, building relevance and cultural resonance. This strengthens the connection between the work on stage and the audiences in the seats an essential element in ensuring Australian stories continue to inspire and reflect contemporary life.

From a discovery and marketing perspective, a home venue with a consistent program acts as a physical anchor in an increasingly digital landscape. While digital discovery pathways are important, they are most effective when they point toward a clear, trusted destination. A known theatre space with a reliable program simplifies audience decision-making and enhances visibility for Australian work.

Importantly, sustained funding for this model allows for investment in audience development, not just production outcomes. Companies can build long-term relationships through membership programs, education initiatives, community partnerships, and targeted inclusion strategies. These activities require continuity and cannot be effectively delivered through short-term or touring-only models.

In contrast, a dispersed or project-based system risks weakening audience attachment. Without a consistent place, programming identity, or rhythm of engagement, it is difficult to build the kind of emotional and cultural connection that drives repeat attendance and intergenerational participation.

To truly respond to changing audience behaviours, cultural policy should recognise that innovation is not only digital, it is also structural and relational. Supporting at least one

mainstage theatre company in each jurisdiction to deliver a full, high-quality annual season in a dedicated home venue would:

- Build strong, place-based audience loyalty
- Support consistent discovery and engagement pathways
- Strengthen Australian storytelling through local connection
- Enable long-term audience development strategies
- Provide a stable platform for artistic risk and innovation

In summary, if Australian creativity is to continue to inspire, include and connect, audiences must have something enduring to connect to. A consistently funded mainstage theatre company in a home venue provides that anchor, transforming attendance from a transactional activity into an ongoing cultural relationship.

A national theatre network of fully supported MainStage companies in each capital would be a practical and ambitious cultural investment. It would improve access, grow talent, support Australian writing, and make theatre more affordable for the public. Most importantly, it would give every capital city a meaningful professional theatre presence that can serve audiences, artists, and the broader cultural life of the nation.