

Katherine Tonkin
Melbourne, Australia

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Dear Members of the National Cultural Policy Consultation Panel,

I deeply appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the redevelopment of Australia's National Cultural Policy. This is a pivotal moment to invest meaningfully in our cultural identity and the long-term sustainability of the Arts sector. Culture is not decorative. It is part of the infrastructure of a healthy society. It shapes how we understand ourselves, how we tell our stories, how we process grief and conflict, and how we imagine our collective future. In a time of growing global uncertainty, what could be more important?

I live and work predominantly in Naarm/Melbourne and trained at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and The University of Melbourne. I have worked professionally across theatre, television and film for twenty-four years, appearing in over fifty productions and working with companies that include Melbourne Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Belvoir St Theatre, The Australian Chamber Orchestra, Black Swan State Theatre Company, and many others. I have toured nationally and internationally, representing Australia at overseas theatre and dance festivals, contributed to the development and production of numerous new Australian plays, and taught performance skills to young people across primary, secondary and tertiary levels. All of this is to say: I am not a hobbyist. The Arts are my profession, my livelihood, and my contribution to Australian society. I pay taxes. I contribute economically and culturally. Yet like many actors, I have effectively subsidised this industry through countless hours of unpaid or underpaid labour, inadequate rehearsal periods, insecure employment, and wages that often fail to reflect the level of training, expertise and labour required to sustain a professional career.

I write this submission not only as a working actor, but as someone deeply invested in the future of the Australian Arts sector and in the wellbeing of the people who sustain it. Much of my professional life has also involved mentoring emerging artists and supporting younger generations entering an increasingly precarious industry. I care profoundly about the future of Australian culture, and I am deeply concerned by what I am currently witnessing among my colleagues: exhaustion, financial crisis, disillusionment and a growing exodus of highly skilled mid-career artists who simply can no longer afford to remain in the profession.

The contradiction at the heart of Australia's Arts sector is stark. The Arts are repeatedly asked to justify themselves economically - and they do. Australia's cultural and creative

sector contributed \$67.5 billion to the Australian economy in 2022–23 and employed approximately 690,000 people.[1] The sector generates jobs, tourism, innovation, education outcomes and intellectual property, while supporting the wider hospitality, tourism and events economies that rely heavily upon cultural activity.

But unlike many industries, the Arts also generate enormous non-market value. Engagement with arts and culture has been consistently linked to improved mental health, resilience, social cohesion, civic participation and wellbeing - particularly for young people.[2] At a time of escalating loneliness, anxiety and social fragmentation, investment in culture is also investment in preventative public health. Australians themselves overwhelmingly recognise this value, with national participation research demonstrating strong public support for arts funding, particularly funding that ensures young people can access creative experiences and pathways.[3]

And yet Australia continues to fund the sector below OECD norms while relying increasingly on a workforce sustained by unpaid labour, chronic insecurity, and personal sacrifice.[4]

This model is not sustainable.

We are now losing many of the very people who hold the sector together: mid-career and late-career artists who carry institutional memory, artistic expertise, mentorship capacity, and decades of professional knowledge. These are not failed artists leaving the industry. They are often some of our most experienced and accomplished practitioners. Their departure represents not only personal tragedy, but a profound loss of cultural knowledge and creative infrastructure for the nation as a whole.

I strongly support policies that place artists at the centre of cultural policy. In particular, I urge the government to fund the proposed 'Artists as Workers' pilot program led by Belvoir St Theatre in partnership with national theatre companies. The proposal's model of hybrid artistic and administrative employment, training and up-skilling offers an intelligent and practical response to the instability currently facing freelance artists. It recognises artists as workers with valuable transferable skills, rather than as individuals expected to survive indefinitely through passion alone.

I also strongly support the development of a long-term National Arts and Culture Strategy comparable to the strategic frameworks that support Australian sport. Australia has clear national pathways that identify, nurture and sustain athletes from grassroots participation through to professional excellence. The arts deserve the same seriousness of vision. Without sustained investment in youth arts education and creative pathways, the sector cannot regenerate.

Additionally, I urge serious consideration of

- A national inquiry into the benefits of a Universal Basic Income for Artists, informed by Ireland's recent and highly successful pilot program.[5]

- Tax reform exempting arts grants, fellowships and prizes from assessable income;
- Tax reform that encourages greater philanthropic support for the arts sector;
- Dedicated investment in First Nations performing arts commissioning pathways that support works of scale, long-term development processes and independent First Nations artists;
- Funding and accountability measures that address diminishing cast sizes in publicly funded theatre companies, including consideration of minimum ensemble benchmarks to encourage the production of ambitious large-scale works and generate sustainable employment opportunities for performers.

Australia cannot continue expecting artists to deliver economic growth, tourism, national identity, education outcomes and measurable wellbeing benefits while making it nearly impossible for them to survive professionally.

Culture is not a luxury. It is essential national infrastructure. And the people who create it deserve the conditions not merely to survive, but to continue contributing meaningfully to the cultural life of this country for generations to come.

“We are what we imagine.”

- Judith Wright, *Because I Was Invited*

Thank you for taking the time to read my submission, and for taking the future of our creative vitality into your hands. I hope you treat it with vision and care.

Sincerely,
Katherine Tonkin

[1] Australian Government, Bureau of Communications, Arts and Regional Research. *Cultural and Creative Activity Satellite Accounts, 2022–23*. Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts. Available at: <https://www.infrastructure.gov.au/research-data/bureau-communications-arts-and-regional-research/arts/cultural-and-creative-activity>

[2] Fancourt, Daisy & Finn, Saoirse. *What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-being?* World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2019. Available at: <https://www.who.int/europe/publications/i/item/9789289054553>

[3] Creative Australia. *National Arts Participation Survey 2022: Creating Our Future*. Available at: <https://creative.gov.au/research/creating-our-future-results-national-arts-participation-survey/>

[4] Australian Parliament House Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts. *Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions*. Available at: https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House/Communications/Arts

[5] Arts Council Ireland. *Basic Income for the Arts Pilot Research Scheme*. Available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2f8f6-basic-income-for-the-arts-pilot-research-scheme/>