

Australia's National Cultural Policy submission

24 May 2026

This is a significant time for Australia's cultural sector. There are challenges across all areas from creative practice, new work development, sustainability of artistic careers and audience engagement. The sector needs enhanced and strategic support to not only revive now, but to thrive, and to be sustainable to support future generations. Crucially, the work of Australia's cultural sector needs to be safeguarded to support long-term sustainability to respond to the challenges of a changing climate.

I am a director, playwright and programmer with a focus on new work development, support for independent artists, regional arts and access, and the intersection of culture and climate. My current role is as Artistic Director of Bondi Pavilion, with previous roles as Director at Critical Stages Touring, Artistic Director at Deckchair Theatre in Fremantle, Artistic Director and founder of Theatre@Risk in Melbourne. I currently serve on the Sydney Theatre Awards panel (Children & Young People), and the National Advisory Panel for the Cultural for Climate Project. I have previously served on boards of Theatre Network New South Wales, Stages WA (Chair), I have been a panel member for the Helpmann Awards, the NSW Touring Advisory Roundtable, PAC Australia's Touring Advisory Group and a peer advisor for Australia Council for the Arts and Arts Tasmania,

A few key issues stand out to me in response to the Public Consultation Paper and the five key pillars of Australia's next Cultural Policy.

- 1) A Place For Every Story: We need to further grow support for ambitious Australian stories and voices that reflect the diversity of modern Australia across both screen media and live performance. Requiring streaming platforms to support genuine program expenditure in Australia is an excellent start. However we also need to support genuine development opportunities for new Australian stories across all platforms and forms. We also need to invest in future lives for new Australian works once created, through remount opportunities, touring support, festival opportunities both nationally and internationally and more.
- 2) Centrality of artists: Currently independent artists are struggling to find financial support to develop their practice, to tell the vitally needed new stories and to build sustainable careers. Targeted support for independent artists has been stripped from state and federal funding bodies, making support so competitive and the success rate so low, especially at a federal level, that it is barely worth the time in applying. Institutions that once supported independent and mid-career artists have one by one folded over recent years, across diverse art forms, meaning that vital structures that were in place through the small to medium sector to support and nurture these artists no longer exist. When artists reach that vital mid-career point, too often without visible support, artists are leaving the profession so they can simply

continue to afford to pay the rent. Targeted federal assistance and support for independent artists and mid-career artists is urgently needed.

- 3) Strong cultural infrastructure : We need to develop systems now to support long-term sustainability both to respond to the climate crisis, to attain sustainability in our sector and to ready our artists and audiences for the changes ahead. Change is already impacting artists and audiences, especially in the realms of outdoor performances, festivals and most significantly touring. All this has consequent impacts on the viability of artists careers, and on access for regional and remote audiences. As an artist who has long been passionate about adapting my own practice and supporting the touring sector through the challenges of the climate crisis, the greatest obstacle has been finding time and resources to develop the tools to adapt. Adaptation requires investment, time and national coordination across all tiers of government and it is needed urgently.
- 4) Engaging the audience: with the cost of living crisis mounting, and, changes in audience behaviour in part due to changes in technologies, now is the time for the long-discussed audience incentives to support audience participation and engagement in the live performing arts. For a healthy society and a healthy arts sector, we need to make attending arts and cultural events a regular part of our lives. Investing in audience attendance, through say a \$100 Culture Voucher, focused on growing support for Australian artists and Australian artworks, will help support new Australian works to reach their audiences.

Thank you for recognising the significant contribution of the arts to Australian society, and for your continued support and dedication to strengthening Australia's arts and culture sector,

Yours sincerely,

Chris Bendall