



## Submission to the National Cultural Policy Public Consultation

### Aboriginal Theatre's relationship to the Five Enduring Pillars

Yirra Yaakin means "Stand Tall" in Noongar language.

Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company was established in 1993 on Whadjuk Noongar Boodja. Based in Boorloo / Perth, it is one of the longest standing and largest Aboriginal performing arts companies in Australia. We produce award-winning theatre that tells First Nations' stories, foster the next generation of emerging storytellers, celebrate and nurture Aboriginal culture and support the development and employment of Aboriginal artists. Yirra Yaakin has commissioned and premiered over 70 new theatre works that have reached 13 countries in five continents. We have worked with and nurtured prestigious Aboriginal writers including David Milroy, Sally Morgan, Derek Nannup, Mitch Torres and Dallas Winmar, among many others.

Yirra Yaakin stands tall in asserting that Aboriginal theatre is not a niche cultural offering. It is essential cultural infrastructure that carries story, language and responsibility. It strengthens wellbeing, identity, employment, knowledge sharing and intergenerational connection.

We believe that Aboriginal theatre **must be recognised as essential cultural infrastructure** within Australia's next National Cultural Policy. It is where stories are held, where language is spoken and kept alive, where community gathers, and where cultural authority is practised in public.

The National Cultural Policy Public Consultation Paper asks the sector to respond to the five enduring pillars that we set out in 'Revive'. For Aboriginal theatre, those pillars are inseparable. First Nations First, A Place for Every Story, Centrality of the Artist, Strong Cultural Infrastructure and Engaging the Audience are realised when Aboriginal stories are developed, governed, produced and presented by Aboriginal people and organisations with cultural accountability.

Aboriginal theatre holds together story, truth telling, language revitalisation, cultural transmission, artistic excellence and community connection. It is both a contemporary artform and a sovereign cultural practice. It holds:

- storytelling
- truth telling
- language revitalisation
- cultural transmission
- narrative sovereignty
- cultural governance
- Aboriginal workforce development
- audience engagement
- international diplomacy
- intergenerational community connection.



We believe that the next phase of national cultural policy must **move past recognition** of First Nations arts and culture **to implementation of cross-sector structures that sustain it**. This means investing in place-based Aboriginal cultural infrastructure, Aboriginal companies, long term pathways for artists and arts workers, and the conditions required to make and tour new work from community, Country and language.

Aboriginal theatre companies already generate cultural, artistic and civic value across the country. What remains absent is a policy framework that understands state-based Aboriginal cultural infrastructure as core to the national ecology, rather than peripheral to it.

Policy settings and investment structures must now align with how Aboriginal theatre is made, led and sustained.

## **Narrative Sovereignty and Self-Determination**

At the centre of this submission is the principle of narrative sovereignty, held through Aboriginal self-determination.

Narrative sovereignty sits at the heart of our work - it protects local community practices, protocols and safety. There is a clear difference between Aboriginal self-determined companies and non-Aboriginal companies producing Aboriginal work. The difference is not cosmetic - it is structural. It is about who holds cultural authority, who governs process, who is accountable to the community, who carries language and protocol, and who benefits from the work over time. Policy and investment preferences must go toward self-determined Aboriginal companies if we are serious about engaging audiences and cultural sovereignty.

As a text based and spoken word artform, theatre makes visible who has authority to speak, to frame, to interpret and to carry story. That is why the distinction between Aboriginal self-determined companies and non-Aboriginal companies producing Aboriginal theatre works matters so deeply. The difference is not simply who is on stage. It is about who controls the story from beginning to end. It is about who sets the terms of engagement, who holds ICIP, who employs Aboriginal artists and producers, and who builds enduring benefit for community. Self-determined theatre practice requires control over:

- cultural governance
- Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP)
- language
- dramaturgical process
- community accountability
- intercultural collaboration
- audience context and framing.

When Aboriginal companies lead this work, theatre continues long held traditions of storytelling, ceremony, language and knowledge transmission, while creating contemporary spaces for public reflection and exchange. That continuity cannot be replicated by short term models.



## The Role of Theatre, Language and Cultural Infrastructure

One of the key differences of Aboriginal theatre created by self-determined Aboriginal theatre companies is that it has many layers of responsibility to broader society and government policies, beyond creating a work for an audience to consume. Some of these are:

- Supporting cultural storytelling and truth telling (aligns with *Revive* pillar *First Nations First*)
- Sustaining First Nations language, ceremony and cultural knowledge (supports *Closing the Gap*, including Outcome 16 and Target 16 on languages, and aligns with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Policy Partnership).
- Creating employment pathways and strengthening economic participation for Aboriginal artists and arts workers (aligns with *Revive* pillars *Centrality of the Artist* and *Strong Cultural Infrastructure*, and supports *Closing the Gap* Priority Reforms centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community control and shared decision-making).
- Contributing to national and international cultural dialogue and exchange (aligns with Commonwealth objectives for cultural diplomacy and international engagement, including DFAT's work in public diplomacy, alongside *Revive*'s objectives to strengthen Australia's cultural presence internationally).
- Supporting education outcomes through schools and learning programs (aligns with the Australian Curriculum (ACARA) cross-curriculum priority *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures*, and commitments in *Revive* to embed First Nations knowledge and stories across cultural life).
- Creating space for public reflection, cultural exchange and community connection between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians (aligns with *Revive* pillar *Engaging the Audience*, and priorities under *Closing the Gap* that support stronger relationships and outcomes through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led approaches).<sup>1</sup>

Yirra Yaakin produces works in language and this is core to who we are. Producing works in language is one of the clearest expressions of Aboriginal theatre as cultural infrastructure and requires time, trust and proper resourcing including extended and iterative development. These are not optional extras. Investment of time and resources is required in:

- script development
- dramaturgical process
- workshop periods
- community consultation
- cultural governance
- rehearsal and redevelopment time
- ICIP and protocol processes.

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<sup>1</sup> Policy frameworks referenced: *Revive* (National Cultural Policy); National Agreement on *Closing the Gap* (Outcome 16/Target 16 and Priority Reforms); Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Policy Partnership; DFAT public diplomacy; Australian Curriculum (ACARA) cross-curriculum priority *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures*.



These are essential cultural and artistic processes. If government policy is serious about language, truth telling and access, then these processes must be funded as companies' core infrastructure and recognised as additional cultural labour, not as short-term or project-based overheads. Cross-sectoral system approaches are critical for works in language, as it needs to be taught, translated and shared broadly through Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities over the entirety of the process. To achieve this, the sector requires strong, state/territory based First Nations theatre companies with secure operational investment, producing capacity, rehearsal and development space, and long term workforce pathways.

Despite the scale and maturity of Aboriginal theatre practice nationally (with some companies such as Yirra Yaakin, Ilbjerri and Moogahlin being 33, 35 and 19 years old respectively), there remains a profound structural gap in sustained support for Aboriginal self-determined companies, particularly at the state/territory level where artists build careers, communities and audiences gather and works are developed over time. Currently, there are only three states (WA, VIC and NSW) that have self-determined First Nations theatre companies.

This creates a major structural gap between independent practice, project funded development and major institutional models of the non-Aboriginal companies, such as state theatre companies. While all of these parts of the sector work together regularly in a collaborative way, without this infrastructure nation-wide, the sector faces ongoing risks of workforce instability, loss of producing capacity, reduced touring sustainability & international engagement capacity and loss of long-term cultural development.

Yirra Yaakin sees our role as an Aboriginal theatre company – and that of others around the country, as not being solely about artistic output. In every state and territory, it must be recognised as place-based cultural, workforce, diplomatic and community infrastructure.

## **Training, Higher Education and Workforce Development**

Responding to Pillar 3 Centrality of the Artist, current training systems often separate cultural knowledge from professional creative development. For First Nations practitioners, this separation is neither accurate nor culturally appropriate. We recommended that training and higher education systems should:

- Recognise cultural practice as sovereign knowledge systems.
- Embed First Nations cultural authority within curriculum and delivery.
- Support structured intergenerational learning environments.
- Connect Elders, artists and cultural practitioners with emerging creatives.
- Recognise creative practice as both cultural continuation and cultural innovation.

First Nations-led training infrastructure and professional development pathways should operate across all elements of artistic practice, as well as the crucial areas of governance, management, administration, marketing, production and fundraising. Place-based training and workforce development systems that protect local community practices, protocols and safety, is essential in supporting the companies to create work. Currently, apart from NAISDA, most formal First Nations arts education in Australia is delivered through predominantly non-Indigenous-led institutions. This risks both continuation of the courses when institutional priorities change and, the cultural appropriateness of their delivery.



In Western Australia, we are fortunate that there is a dedicated Aboriginal Performance course that currently sits within WAAPA (ECU), which is a direct workforce pathway for Yirra Yaakin (and other non-Aboriginal companies Australia wide). However, this limited supply infrastructure represents a significant risk for Yirra Yaakin from a workforce development perspective.

## **State-Based Aboriginal Cultural Infrastructure for a Nation-wide Network**

Pillar 2 A Place for Every Story highlights the importance of place-based practice. This makes state/territory-based Aboriginal cultural infrastructure critical because theatre is made in place and within the cultural practice, language and protocols it relates to. It grows from Country, community and local relationships.

To do this effectively from an Aboriginal theatre perspective, this requires culturally safe and sovereign spaces for creation, development, presentation, community gathering and audience development. Currently in WA and across the country, Aboriginal theatre companies must work and present in non-Aboriginal spaces and ask our Aboriginal community audiences to come into spaces that may not be culturally safe or appropriate. Aboriginal companies respond to this by creating work that can be taken into community settings, however these settings are generally extremely limited in their cultural infrastructure, thus compromising the artistic intent and, in many cases asking artists/artworkers to work in spaces may be unsafe or inappropriate. This contradicts the principles outlined in Pillar 3 Centrality of the Artist.

The lack of First Nations-owned, managed and governed infrastructure in each state/territory remains a major structural barrier. Where this infrastructure is weak or absent, language, community process, artist development and long-term producing capacity are all constrained. Investment should prioritise state/territory based Aboriginal companies and infrastructure with locally based First Nations-led performance and rehearsal spaces, governance, management and/or ownership models.

These spaces are not ancillary. They are the foundation on which First Nations theatre is created, governed, rehearsed, shared and sustained and function simultaneously as sites of cultural authority, artistic innovation hubs, workforce development infrastructure, audience development infrastructure and places of cultural safety and continuity.

Infrastructure investment must focus on people, governance, language, producing systems and cultural practice, not solely on buildings. This must include regional and remote communities, especially in a state as vast as WA.

## **International Exchange and Cultural Diplomacy**

First Nations theatre is increasingly operating within global cultural networks and is not solely export activity. It is also:

- reciprocal exchange
- cultural diplomacy
- international cultural relations
- long term relationship building.



International interest in First Peoples languages is also increasing and Yirra Yaakin has previously represented Noongar language at conferences and networks in Europe designed to promote and preserve so called “minority” languages across the world. There is an opportunity here for cultural exchange and dialogue with First Nations theatre companies that work in language.

Increased and dedicated resources are required for international touring and exchange. There has not been sustained dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure embedded within Creative Australia’s international systems despite First Nations arts and international engagement both being identified as national priorities. This has impacted touring sustainability, producer capacity and international relationship continuity and long-term market development.

The Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange, export and commissioning strategy between Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand already provides a strong implementation-ready framework for reciprocal exchange and international collaboration. The strategy already exists. What is now required is implementation and long-term resourcing.

### **Specific Recommendations Across the Five Enduring Pillars**

To address some of the policy gaps outlined in this submission and deliver on Revive’s Five Pillars, as well as linked policies such as Closing the Gap, Yirra Yaakin, along with our colleague self-determined First Nations theatre companies around Australia, seek change to current investment and policy systems that:

- Are short term and/or project based therefore, limit long term development and rehearsal processes.
- Do not adequately support writing and dramaturgy pathways – a fundamental for the creation of our work.
- Under resource touring and presentation pathways – national and international.
- Do not adequately support producer and non-artist workforce capacity – a growing and challenging gap for the arts sector as a whole and is more pronounced for First Nations companies.
- Provide limited support for international exchange and presentation opportunities.
- Do not consistently embed ICIP and cultural governance frameworks.
- Fail to recognise governance and cultural labour as core infrastructure that needs to be funded as such.

These gaps limit the sustainability, visibility and long-term development of First Nations theatre nationally and internationally.



## **Recommendations**

To deliver on the five pillars, with First Nations First as the starting point, the next National Cultural Policy should:

1. Establish long term commissioning and development investment for First Nations theatre – prioritising and recognising as distinct, the role that First Nations self-determined companies play from non-First Nations companies producing First Nations work and those led by First Nations people.
2. Support playwright, dramaturg, director, production, touring and producer training and development pathways at place-based state/territory level.
3. Establish coordinated First Nations led touring and presentation frameworks.
4. Support First Nations international presentation and touring pathways and establish dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure.
5. Embed cultural governance and ICIP across all relevant cultural and creative systems.
6. Support long term place-based language and cultural transmission outcomes.
7. Invest in local, place-based First Nations owned/managed and governed theatre infrastructure.
8. Support place-based organisational sustainability and pathways to long term operational investment.
9. Support Indigenous diplomacy and reciprocal exchange.
10. Recognise governance and cultural labour as core infrastructure for companies.

Across every pillar, the policy must recognise that Aboriginal cultural governance, self-determined companies, works in language, state/territory-based infrastructure and long-term audience relationships are interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

## **Alignment with Broader Submissions**

Yirra Yaakin is part of the national First Nations Performing Arts Companies / Blak Futures network and therefore, our submission has been developed with, and should be read alongside:

- Blak Futures Collective and First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network submission
- First Nations theatre submission
- Self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations submission
- Indigenous intercultural practice submission
- First Nations leadership of non-Indigenous submission
- First Nations dance submission.

Together, these submissions articulate interconnected systems of First Nations cultural leadership, governance and artistic practice across the national performing arts sector.



## **In Summary**

Aboriginal theatre is central to storytelling, truth telling, language revitalisation and cultural continuity across Australia. It must be recognised and funded accordingly. In addition, the difference between theatre produced by First Nations companies, as distinct from First Nations theatre produced by non-First Nations companies is important and should be prioritised for investment and policy changes.

Aboriginal theatre organisations are not only producers of performance. They are keepers and builders of governance, employment, diplomacy, knowledge transmission and community infrastructure.

This work is already happening in communities, rehearsal rooms and on stages across the continent.

The new National Cultural Policy framework must now stand tall with it.