

# First Nations theatre submission

## National Cultural Policy 2026

### Submission summary

First Nations performing arts are essential cultural and social infrastructure, contributing to wellbeing, cultural identity, employment, knowledge transmission and community connection across Australia. Evidence consistently demonstrates that connection to culture contributes to improved social and emotional wellbeing and is recognised as a national priority under [Closing the Gap](#).

Current policy settings continue to frame culture primarily as an industry. While economic contribution is important, this framing is insufficient. First Nations theatre operates as civic, social and cultural infrastructure.

First Nations theatre plays a critical role in:

- storytelling
- truth-telling
- language revitalisation
- cultural transmission
- narrative sovereignty
- community connection across generations.

As outlined in the overarching Blak Futures and FNPAC submission, the next phase of Revive must move beyond symbolic recognition toward structural implementation and long-term sustainability.

First Nations theatre already operates nationally and internationally as a system of:

- storytelling
- cultural transmission
- workforce development
- audience engagement
- truth-telling

- international exchange
- Indigenous diplomacy
- cultural governance.

Narrative sovereignty sits at the centre of First Nations theatre practice. Theatre enables First Nations peoples to shape public consciousness, cultural memory and policy discourse through lived experience rather than abstraction. Narrative sovereignty is not simply about voice. It is about structural control over how stories are developed, governed, produced, presented and transmitted across generations.

First Nations theatre requires extended and iterative development processes including:

- script development
- dramaturgy
- workshop periods
- community consultation
- rehearsal and redevelopment
- cultural governance and Indigenous Cultural and Intellectual Property (ICIP) processes.

These are essential forms of cultural labour and must be properly resourced.

Current systems remain overly short-term and project-based. They do not adequately support:

- writing and dramaturgy pathways
- producer and touring workforce capacity
- long-term development processes
- organisational sustainability
- touring and presentation pathways
- international exchange and market development infrastructure.

First Nations theatre is also increasingly operating within global cultural networks through touring, intercultural collaboration, translation, co-creation and Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange. This work is not solely export activity. It is also reciprocal exchange, international cultural relations and Indigenous diplomacy.

The Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-In-

Indigenous transnational exchange, export and commissioning strategy between Indigenous artists and organisations across 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.

We call for:

- long-term commissioning and development investment
- support for playwright, dramaturg, producer and director pathways
- dedicated touring and presentation systems
- dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure
- support for Blak-led cultural infrastructure
- investment in workforce and organisational pathways
- embedding cultural governance and ICIP across all systems
- support for international exchange and Indigenous diplomacy.

First Nations theatre is not solely artistic output. It is cultural infrastructure, workforce infrastructure, diplomatic infrastructure and community infrastructure.

## **Submission**

### **Introduction**

First Nations performing arts are essential cultural and social infrastructure, contributing to wellbeing, cultural identity, employment, knowledge transmission and community connection across Australia. Evidence consistently demonstrates that connection to culture contributes to improved social and emotional wellbeing and is recognised as a national priority under Closing the Gap.

Current policy settings continue to frame culture primarily as an industry. While economic contribution is important, this framing is insufficient. First Nations theatre operates as civic, social and cultural infrastructure.



First Nations theatre plays a critical role in:

- storytelling
- truth-telling
- language revitalisation
- cultural transmission
- narrative sovereignty
- community connection across generations.

As outlined in the overarching Blak Futures and FNPAC submission, the next phase of *Revive* must move beyond symbolic recognition toward structural implementation and long term sustainability.

First Nations theatre already operates nationally and internationally as a system of:

- storytelling
- cultural transmission
- workforce development
- audience engagement
- truth-telling
- international exchange
- Indigenous diplomacy
- cultural governance.

Policy settings and investment structures must now align with how this work operates in practice.

## **Narrative sovereignty**

At the centre of this submission is the principle of narrative sovereignty.

As a text based and spoken word artform, theatre enables First Nations peoples to shape public consciousness, truth telling and cultural memory through lived experience rather than abstraction.

Narrative sovereignty is not simply about voice. It is about structural control over how stories are:



- developed
- governed
- produced
- supported
- presented
- archived
- transmitted across generations.

This includes control over:

- cultural governance
- ICIP
- language
- dramaturgical process
- community accountability
- intercultural collaboration
- audience context and framing.

Without First Peoples professionals embedded across every role in the cultural ecosystem, these narratives remain mediated by systems that can dilute or distort meaning. Likewise, without culturally safe, Blak-led venues, storytelling lacks the sovereign space required for truth-telling, performance and transmission.

## **The role of theatre**

First Nations theatre:

- supports storytelling and truth-telling
- sustains language, ceremony and cultural knowledge
- requires extended writing, dramaturgy and development processes
- creates pathways for writers, dramaturgs, actors, directors, designers, producers and technicians
- contributes to international cultural dialogue and exchange
- supports intercultural collaboration and touring pathways
- creates spaces for public reflection, cultural exchange and community connection.

Theatre development is often iterative and long-term, requiring:

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

These processes are essential cultural labour and must be properly resourced.

First Nations theatre is not solely artistic output. It is also:

- cultural infrastructure
- workforce infrastructure
- diplomatic infrastructure
- community infrastructure.

## **Workforce and organisational pathways**

First Nations theatre operates through interconnected pathways spanning:

- writing
- dramaturgy
- acting
- directing
- producing
- technical and production workforce development
- touring
- audience development
- international exchange.

Despite the scale and maturity of First Nations theatre practice nationally and internationally, there remains no properly resourced federally funded small-to-medium First Nations theatre sector.

This creates a major structural gap between:

- independent practice
- project funded development
- major institutional models.

Without long-term organisational pathways, the sector risks:

- workforce instability
- cultural burnout
- loss of producing capacity
- reduced touring sustainability
- reduced international engagement capacity
- loss of long-term cultural development.

This submission calls for coordinated investment in workforce development pathways that support First Peoples' participation not only as artists and creatives, but across:

- production and technical roles
- arts administration and management
- marketing and communications
- programming, curatorial and editorial roles
- fundraising, development and philanthropy
- policy, advocacy and governance
- executive leadership and board participation.

This is not only a workforce issue, but a structural equity issue. A culturally strong sector requires First Peoples presence at every level of decision-making and delivery.

Without intentional pipeline development, First Peoples' representation remains uneven and dependent on individual opportunity rather than systemic design.

A national strategy is required to build capacity through:

- paid traineeships and apprenticeships
- mentorship and shadowing programs
- leadership development pathways
- institutional employment targets and accountability mechanisms
- sector-wide cultural competency reform paired with First Peoples recruitment and retention strategies.

## **Vocational training and cultural practice**

Current training systems often separate cultural knowledge from professional creative development. For First Nations practitioners, this separation is neither accurate nor culturally appropriate.

Culture and creative practice are inseparable.

Training 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.

This reframing positions vocational training not only as skills acquisition, but as continuation of culture, transmission of knowledge, and rewriting of storylines across generations.

Support for First Nations-led training infrastructure and professional pathways should operate across:

- writing
- performance
- dramaturgy
- directing
- technical production
- arts management
- governance
- policy
- executive leadership.

## **Blak-led cultural infrastructure**

First Nations theatre requires culturally safe and sovereign spaces for:

- creation
- rehearsal
- development
- presentation
- community gathering
- audience development.

The lack of First Nations-owned and governed cultural infrastructure remains a major structural barrier across the sector.

Investment should prioritise:

- locally and regionally based Blak-led performance venues and cultural hubs
- embedded capacity for rehearsal, performance, recording, and digital production
- capital investment models that centre First Nations governance and ownership
- long-term sustainability.

This infrastructure is not ancillary to the sector, it is foundational. Without sovereign spaces, First Peoples artistic practice remains constrained within non-Indigenous institutional frameworks.

Blak-led performance spaces function simultaneously as:

- sites of cultural authority
- artistic innovation hubs
- workforce development infrastructure
- audience development infrastructure
- places of community accountability alongside cultural safety and continuity.

Infrastructure investment must focus on people, governance and cultural practice, not solely buildings.

## **International exchange and cultural diplomacy**

First Nations theatre is increasingly operating within global cultural networks through:

- touring
- intercultural collaboration
- co-creation
- translation
- residency exchange
- Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange
- international presentation.

This work is not solely export activity. It is also:

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

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
- international relationship continuity
- intercultural exchange
- long-term market development.

The Tri-Nations Indigenous-to-Indigenous exchange, export and commissioning strategy between Indigenous artists and organisations across 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.

## The policy gap

Current systems:

- remain overly short-term and project based
- do not adequately support writing and dramaturgy pathways
- limit long-term development and rehearsal processes
- under-resource touring and presentation pathways
- do not adequately support producer and touring workforce capacity
- 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.

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

## Policy priorities

To fully realise *Revive* and Closing the Gap commitments, policy implementation should:

- establish long-term commissioning and development investment for First Nations theatre
- support playwright, dramaturg, director and producer pathways
- establish coordinated touring and presentation frameworks
- support international presentation and touring pathways
- invest in dramaturgical exchange, translation and intercultural co-development opportunities
- support producer, technical and touring workforce capacity
- embed cultural governance and ICIP across all development and presentation systems
- support long term language and cultural transmission outcomes
- invest in locally and regionally based Blak-led theatre infrastructure
- support organisational sustainability and pathways to long-term operational investment
- establish dedicated First Nations-led market development infrastructure
- support Indigenous diplomacy and reciprocal exchange
- recognise governance and cultural labour as core infrastructure.

First Nations cultural governance, workforce development, international exchange and cultural continuity should operate as integrated principles across all pillars of national cultural policy.

## **Alignment with broader submissions**

This submission should be read alongside:

- Overarching Blak Futures and FNPAC submission
- Self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations submission
- Indigenous intercultural submission
- First Nations leadership in non-Indigenous organisations submission
- First Nations dance submission

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

## **Conclusion**

First Nations theatre is central to storytelling, truth-telling, language revitalisation and cultural continuity across Australia.

First Nations theatre organisations and artists are not solely arts producers. They are systems of:

- governance
- employment
- diplomacy
- knowledge transmission
- community infrastructure.

The work is already happening nationally and internationally.

The systems must now match it.