

## Submission to Australia's National Cultural Policy Consultation

My name is Guy Hooper, I am 63 years old and I currently live in Nipaluna/Hobart on the unceded lands of the Muwinina. Please stay with me over the next bit as I give a potted c.v. I am not trying to be self-aggrandising (my modest achievements certainly don't justify that) as I summarise my career. I am just trying to give whoever reads this some idea of my background as a working actor in the little world of Australia's small to medium theatre sector over the past four decades. I hope this will give my later comments some context, authenticity and authority but if you find it tedious then by all means skip the next four paragraphs.

I am a theatre-maker, primarily a performer but in my time I have also worked as a director, deviser and dramaturg. I have a BA from the University of Sydney (1983) and an Honours degree in theatre from La Trobe University (2006). I have worked professionally as an actor since 1984 beginning my career in Sydney in CACD work with Death Defying Theatre. I worked in physical theatre/circus with Circus Oz for two years and spent three years as an ensemble member of the regional theatre The Murray River Performing Group (MRPG) in Albury/Wodonga in the early 1990s. I was a freelance actor in Melbourne in the mid-90s working mostly in theatre but occasionally in television. In this period I worked for Back to Back and also for Zootango Theatre in Hobart.

In 1998 I travelled to England to study with [REDACTED] at his London school. On returning to Albury/Wodonga in 2001 I began a six-year tenure as a lecturer in Theatre and Drama for La Trobe University at its Wodonga campus. In this time I also performed in various productions for HotHouse Theatre and The Flying Fruit Fly Circus. My honours thesis was a 34,000 word paper on the implementation of the Artistic Directorate model that was pioneered by HotHouse Theatre in its early years as it transitioned from the MRPG into one of the few remaining thriving regional theatres in Australia.

In 2008 my family and I moved to Nipaluna/Hobart where I have lived until the present. In the intervening years I have worked for every professional theatre company in the state in numerous productions as a performer, deviser and director. These companies include the Tasmanian Theatre Company, The Round Earth Company, Blue Cow, Terrapin, Mudlark and Archipelago Productions. As well as theatre I have had roles in various television series that have been shot in Tasmania including *Rosehaven* (What Horse?/ Guesswork Television), *The Survivors* (Netflix) and *Ground Up* (Gristmill). I am a sessional teacher of performance skills for the University of Tasmania's Theatre and Drama Program. I have been a peer assessor of theatre funding applications in various rounds for the Australia Council and Creative Australia over two three year terms. I continue to work as an actor in the increasingly fragile professional theatre sector of my home state, most recently appearing in Andrew Bovell's *Things I Know to be True* (Mudlark/Tasmanian Theatre Company) and currently

rehearsing for the Terrapin production of Nathan Maynard's *Space Neighbours* which will be touring Tasmanian schools and theatres in late 2026.

By my rough estimation, over 42 years I have created, performed in, directed and contributed to over 80 professional productions, with a preponderance of new Australian works but also some classics and quite a few plays by Shakespeare. I've ranged across genres from circus/physical performance and clowning and comedy to straight naturalism, from puppetry to buffoonish satire to dark tragedy. I have lived and worked in three Australian states, in metropolitan and regional contexts, and I have toured to every capital city and many regional centres across the country. I have performed on main stages, in regional arts centres, community halls, school gymnasiums, prisons, public housing estates, child-care centres and remote First Nations communities. On tour I have slept in caravans, on living room floors, in pubs, hotels and motels of varying quality, school halls and tents. Over my creative career I have found myself working alongside extraordinary Australian artists from diverse backgrounds and cultures, some of whom are household names, some of whom are recognised nationally and internationally as outstanding and ground-breaking practitioners of theatre, some of whom are fine artists who, like me, count ourselves successful because we are fortunate enough to be able to cobble together some sort of consistent career path doing the thing we love. It took me a while to realise that the satisfaction comes from the work, not the fame or fortune (although it is nice when those two things come along as well). I pride myself that, although I did not come through a recognised actor training course, I have educated myself through private study, reading, and through discussing, watching and making theatre with gifted, passionate people to the point where I count myself as a versatile, reliable, professional theatre actor who can turn his hand to most jobs that come his way. I think after 40 odd years I can call myself a craftsman at least.

As I wrote earlier, all the above is to give you some context for what comes next. I'm going to be writing from the perspective of an artist who has made work in the small to medium theatre sector for most of his working life. I won't claim that I have "made a living" in this sector, because I haven't ever earned enough money from performing work (my main practice) to sustain much more than a subsistence income. I have, like almost every artist in the country, had to find other work and income sources. In my case it has been work both in the VET and university sector at various points. To be transparent, I have also had the benefits of some inherited family wealth which helped with house purchasing and the education of my two children. And I suppose this is as good a starting point as any for the discussion of this nation's cultural policy - and I would think this comes under pillars 3 and 4 of the Framework - wages for artists, theatre-workers in particular. The Live Performance Award wage \$1224.90 for actors is pretty much what it was in 1984 when I started (adjusted for inflation) and it allows some distinction between inexperienced and experienced actors but the distinction is small. MEAA and the LPA have instituted the Performers' Collective

Agreement which recognises trained and experienced performers to some degree but the increased amount of remuneration is not huge, around \$140 on top of the award rate.

Basically, after decades of experience and skills development, my work contracts offer me the same weekly wage as an inexperienced 20 year-old. This seems unfair and unjust given the amount of highly developed professional artistry that older actors bring to the productions they work on. The reason why we continue to put up with it are obvious, of course. Firstly as actors we have little clout in wage negotiations. Unless we are high-profile and have the concomitant agents' representation, competition for roles is sharp and we take the job because we want to work. (Plus, obviously, high-profile actors with clout do not work in the small to medium sector as a rule, they work for main stage companies or in TV or film.) In the small to medium sector this willingness to accept a lower wage, in effect to subsidise the shows that we work on, is also due to the fact that most of us actors know that the companies for which we work are doing it tough. The small to medium companies are run by our colleagues and friends – we see them toiling hard for little recompense, to cobble together a production on a shoe-string budget. We know that the money for a decent wage is just not in the coffers, so we take the low wage and count ourselves lucky to have a gig.

But this constant subsidising has real costs for actors – not just financial but also psychological. You can find the research, from MEAA, the University of Sydney, the Arts and Wellbeing Collective and others which reveals the disturbing levels of mental unwellness in the entertainment industry across actors, dancers, directors and technicians. The data reveals very high levels of suicide, suicidal ideation and alcohol intake in these cohorts compared to the general population (eg actors 3x, dancers 5x, technicians 7x the rate of suicidal ideation compared to general population). The cause of this scourge? Two main factors: 1. Constant financial insecurity, 2. Lack of feelings of self-worth. I'll return to point 2 later, but one thing that would seriously help actors in the small to medium sector is funding the organisations who work in this space to pay all their artists and professionals not just a subsistence wage but a decent wage that reflects the training, experience, skills and knowledge that these artists bring to the work.

The above recommendation should not be a surprise to anyone who has monitored arts funding and paid attention to Creative Australia's own research over the past 25 years. There are at least four research papers available on the Creative Australia website which address the dire situation for small to medium theatre and the ongoing battle by non-mainstream theatre makers to continue to produce work of quality. You can also find compelling research on the grim employment conditions that artists are subject to - low wages, job insecurity lack of agency etc. Professor David Throsby has done a lot of work in this field and his studies over four decades of the working conditions of artists in this country offer many insights. Briefly, the small to medium theatre sector in my state of Tasmania, and I believe more broadly in the Commonwealth, is struggling to survive despite years of data and advocacy which clearly point to its significance as an important cultural

field which nurtures risk-taking work, represents marginalised voices, provides training and development opportunities for younger artists and platforms for more experienced artists, and which demonstrably provides the majority of touring works both nationally and internationally.

The sector is reeling. Over the past three decades funding for small to medium theatre companies has declined at both national and state levels, particularly in Tasmania. As a result of having the lowest theatre funding per capita of any state or territory Tasmania has gone from having 3 adult, text-based theatre companies in 2019 to having one in 2026. The proximate causes have been declining audiences, poor programming choices and lack of managerial and artistic drive but these are spurious and convenient charges to make when a sector has been demoralised and exhausted by ever-declining government funding resulting in over-worked administrators, under-paid artists, insecure outlooks and limited resources to take risks or nurture imaginative work, or attract high-calibre artists to lift the quality of the operation. The theatre sector has been ground down by systemic and chronic underfunding for at least twenty years.

George Brandis gutted \$105 million from the Australia Council in 2015 and most of this money was taken from the pool for small to medium organisations. Despite most of the money being eventually restored over subsequent years the damage was immense with many smaller theatre companies falling over in the wake of suddenly reduced or cancelled funding. (You can read various articles about this after a brief online search.) It has been noted that when cuts come to the Creative Australia the small to medium sector wears the brunt disproportionately compared to the large organisations which make up the National Performing Arts Framework. These companies enjoy privileges which are not available to smaller companies and benefit from economies of scale that make comparisons in operational productivity unfair. I recommend restoring some sort of equity in funding between small to medium theatre organisations and the larger organisations in the Framework. This cultural policy should look after the hidden roots of the plant as well as the more visible flowers.

I'm afraid that it really is all about the money – funding for the arts in general and theatre in particular. If there is more money in the pot for making art then everyone benefits. I might be accused of being simplistic but here's the thing: I've been working as an artist for over forty years and in that time I have engaged in numerous surveys, consultations, campaigns and research projects similar to this one. I have a decent, but by no means expert, knowledge of government funding structures for theatre and cultural policy shifts across those 40 years. I talk and have talked about this stuff with smarter and better-informed people than I in the arts and in the government bureaucracy – some of whom are on the advisory panels for this consultation. And in all of that time, in all of these discussions, I and my passionate hard-working friends and colleagues in the arts have been asking for the same thing – decent, sustained funding which supports making high-quality work across

genres for diverse audiences. We have therefore gone to some pains to respond to various bureaucratic insights and initiatives about how we should justify why the arts should receive funding from the Australian tax-payer. Over those 40 years I have seen policy rationale around funding shift from being framed as a social right in the 70s to a political right in the 80s, to an economic rationalist approach in the 90s, to the current period where we have evolved a sort of deconstructed/contractor model where the traditional theatre company is eschewed and individual theatre-makers are expected to celebrate their agency by becoming their own fund-raisers, accountants, production managers, publicists and administrators rolled into one as they take on what are in fact multiple jobs with hugely different skill-sets to make a single project. When that project ends, they fall over exhausted, before getting up to do it all again for the next cycle. It is a dispiriting pattern. It would be good to see a cultural policy that genuinely and fearlessly increases funding for the arts not for any economic-multiplier benefits, or social cohesion benefits or physical and psychological health benefits (real as these all are) or any other shifting and apparently pointless key indicator, but simply because they are *good* things that people enjoy making and experiencing. That's it really. That's all I can articulate. Fund the arts because they are *good*. In a world where there is so much money going to very bad things, is that such a terribly naive argument?

If the politics of arts funding criteria is dispiriting then I am made only more depressed by the Australian public's indifference to, if not outright contempt for, artists. (I think it is deeply saddening that the words "art" and "artist" have become so toxic in the public mind that we now need to call ourselves "creatives", so that we can hide amongst the ranks of more respected professions. Is that why we no longer call it The Australia Council for the Arts, by the way?) I occasionally torture myself by reading the comments underneath the rare articles in the media which touch on arts funding. The vitriol and outrage, the wilful ignorance and malice that 95% of the commenters direct at artists is breath-taking.

Which brings me back to the second cause of fragile mental health in our industry – lack of feelings of self-worth. It is inevitable as an auditioning actor that you deal with rejection on a regular basis. It can take 19 auditions before you get one job – if you are lucky. The inevitable strain on a performer's mental resilience is then compounded by a general view in our society that artists, certainly those who have no particular celebrity, are unserious, lazy, simultaneously (and in contradiction) privileged and impoverished, and delusional. For actors this is further exacerbated by a perception both within and outside the entertainment industry that there is a creative hierarchy at the top of which sits a producer, then the director, writer, etc until at its lowest rung we reach the actor. It's an unfair and inaccurate characterisation and anyone who has worked extensively in this most collaborative artform understands why it is inaccurate. Actors are part of a team of specialists who work together to make the production, and they bring knowledge and skills that no other member of the team can. The actor's craft, like many jobs, consists partly in keeping the effort and difficulty concealed, and we know that like many jobs when you try

to explain what you do it can come off as self-absorbed, overly earnest or even childish and narcissistic. It's a view that is embraced and reinforced by various aspects of popular culture. But it is a pervasive, inaccurate and ultimately poisonous view that can magnify the performer's feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. Most of the theatre-makers and artists that I have worked with and met over the years are intelligent, informed, hard-working, diligent, conscientious, thrifty and thoughtful. It is a shame that the general public do not seem to take this view. So, what can this cultural policy do about that? Well, shift public perception of artists I guess – but I know that is easier said than done. Good luck to you on that.

I remember reading a report in the MEAA magazine which recounted how a conservative French government in the mid 2000s sought to decrease the traditional "artists dole" widely paid to ordinary performers and musicians of a certain recognised level of professional engagement and calibre. It was a modestly higher rate of unemployment benefits instituted to compensate for the insecurity of artist's freelance existence and to recognise that the work of an artist is valuable to the broader society and the creation of art needs to be encouraged. When the government announced that it was going to scrap the payments, the people marched in the streets in protest. Not just the artists, but the *people*. The citizens of France from all walks of life who realised the importance of art and artists in the culture of their country. Who understood and recognised the path of the artist and wanted to maintain support for them. I dream about that day coming for Australia.

Sandy Bay 24/05/2026