One Fell Swoop Circus Submission to the National Cultural Policy.

One Fell Swoop Circus is a touring circus company based in Naarm/Melbourne, Victoria. Founded in 2016 by Charice Rust and Jonathan Morgan, our work has reached more than 50,000 people across 40 cities and 9 countries, employing over 40 Australian circus artists and creatives. [onefellswoopcircus.com]

Australian circus has a long history and significant place in Australia's current arts landscape. It is an artform that is both particularly accessible to a very wide audience, as well as being at the forefront of Australian artistic innovation. Australian contemporary circus is also incredibly strong in international markets, including non-English speaking contexts.

1. Income instability for freelance circus artists and circus arts organisations

Problem

Circus artists are often asked 'what age do you have to stop performing due to injury?'. However most Australian circus artists end their artistic careers due to financial instability well before their body requires them to. Similarly, micro and small Australian circus companies are under extreme financial pressures and funding scarcity. Chronic funding shortages force circus artists and companies to subsidise their practice through unpaid work, and by spending time away from their practice in non-arts related work.

This precarity disproportionately excludes artists without financial privilege, limiting who can sustain a career in circus and diminishing the diversity and quality of Australian art. Financial instability also makes it difficult for artists to raise families while continuing their practice, leading many experienced mid-career artists to leave the sector entirely.

As a result, the Australian circus sector is losing skilled mid-career artists at a critical stage of their careers. While training organisations continue to produce emerging artists, the sector lacks the financial sustainability needed to retain them long term, with great loss to the artform and to audiences.

Over the past ten years running a micro circus company, we have experienced these pressures firsthand. However for the last 2 years, we have received operational funding from Creative Australia - funding to support the operational work of running our company. This model of funding has been a game changer for our company, allowing us to establish sustained operations, move away from boom and bust cycles of work towards consistent and coordinated activities. It has meant that we have stayed in the industry - improving our artistic practice, employing other artists, and reaching audiences - as we've been able to draw a wage for our work outside of performance outcomes. When this funding finishes (there is no ongoing program in place that we can re-apply to) our artistic output will need to be reduced for us to sustain the level of unpaid labour required. Given how much faster costs have increased relative to the fees presenters are able to offer the company may not be able to continue, despite strong demand from international and Australian presenters and audiences.

In real terms public investment in Australian arts is the lowest since 2019, and in terms of percentage of GDP it is the lowest since 2007. We invest well below the OECD average, despite the high value the Australian public places on arts and culture. [https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/the-arts-need-funding-not-philanthropy/]

Solution

The next National Cultural Policy must prioritise an increase in arts funding that directly supports the long-term sustainability of artists. It must increase funding to:

- Current arts funding programs
- New arts funding programs or models that support independent artists and micro/small arts companies artistic practices, not just when there is an outcome such as a presentation season or tour.

Note: while philanthropy has a place in the arts funding landscape, it should not be used as a substitute for increased arts funding. In particular, relying on philanthropic support increases the access barriers for lower-wealth people to sustain careers in the arts, as they generally do not have access to the network of wealthy individuals required for successful philanthropy.

Policy Mechanism

Increased funding to current Creative Australia funding programs.

Introduction of a 2-year investment funding program as a stepping stone for arts companies to move from project-to-project funding to multi-year funding.

Introduction of an artist wage program, either in the model of the French ‘Intermittent Artist Status’ program or the Irish basic income for artists scheme.

Relevant Pillars

A Place for Every Story; Centrality of the Artist; Strong Cultural Infrastructure.

2. Audience development and equitable access to live performance

Problem

The financial and logistical pressures on touring work have resulted in arts organisations creating touring work that is minimal in the number of artists and set/apparatus. This means audiences, particularly regional ones, do not have access to the full range of artistic experience. Many people are not familiar or comfortable with their nearest performing arts centre, or live a significant distance from it. In our arts practice we try to address both of these issues - we make works with relatively large circus ensembles with unique apparatus that enables performance in public places. Our work *In Common* has performed to audiences outside traditional theatre contexts on a footy oval in remote East Gippsland, a refurbished quarry in Warrnambool Community Garden, and in a shopping street in West Melbourne. Due to the challenges involved in presenting in this way, including the high cost of employing a large number of artists, each of these opportunities involved significant unpaid and volunteer labour - both from the company and the communities interested in hosting our work. This required labour signals the value communities place on bringing high quality work directly to their members, but also limits the amount of this kind of work we are able to deliver.

As audiences face rising cost of living it is more difficult for them to choose less well-known arts experiences. Live performance is a high cost but high impact arts experience, particularly relative to consuming media at home, which is live performance’s main competition. Where audiences and venues are only able to attend/program circus infrequently it limits the ability to develop a larger audience and audience’s knowledge and appreciation of the artform.

When we tour internationally, particularly to countries with more significant touring networks and international touring funding (such as Canada) we are told by presenters that Australian companies are less favourable to import because of the lack of reciprocal touring opportunities for international companies in Australia.

Additionally, while we have significant demand from international presenters to tour our work, the high costs of travel from Australia limit the amount we are able to take on. We support the submission made by the Australian Live Performance Export Alliance to recognise live performance export and international engagement as critical to the careers of Australian artists, the reputation of Australia overseas and the long-term viability of the performing arts ecology.

Solution

The next National Cultural Policy must support audience development by funding ambitious work to reach people where they are - not only where existing arts infrastructure already exists. This means supporting touring models that can bring high-quality live performance into regional, outer-suburban, public, and community-led contexts, including places where audiences may not regularly attend traditional performing arts centres.

The policy must recognise that meaningful audience development takes repeated exposure, local trust, and properly resourced presentation.

Australia should also increase support for international touring and reciprocal exchange. Bringing international live performance into Australia - beyond major capital-city festivals - broadens audience understanding, contributes to a thriving artistic community, strengthens presenter networks, and creates the reciprocal conditions that help Australian artists tour internationally.

Policy Mechanism

Dedicated funding for community-led and non-traditional presentation contexts, including public spaces, regional communities, outdoor sites, and partnerships with local councils or community organisations.

Audience development programs that support repeated exposure to live performance, not just one-off presentation outcomes.

Increased support for inbound international touring outside major festivals, to build audience literacy, cultural exchange, and reciprocity for Australian companies touring overseas.

Expanded international engagement and export funding for Australian live performance, recognising the high cost of touring from Australia and the role of international presentation in sustaining artistic careers.

The National Cultural Policy should also consider audience-side investment, such as arts vouchers or cultural credits for Australian-made live performance. Rising cost of living makes audiences more cautious about unfamiliar work, especially for families, young people, regional audiences, and lower-income households. A voucher scheme could reduce the financial risk of attending Australian work, encourage audiences to try artforms they do not already know, and help build demand for local companies. This should supplement, not replace, direct investment in artists, touring infrastructure, and presentation support; vouchers only work if high-quality Australian work is properly funded to exist and reach communities in the first place.

Relevant Pillars

A Place for Every Story; Strong Cultural Infrastructure; Engaging the Audience