

To whom it may concern,

My name is [REDACTED] or by stage- [REDACTED], and I am an independent Australian cabaret and variety performer working across live performance, circus, cabaret, festivals, community events, and touring productions all across Australia and the globe. I am writing to advocate for stronger recognition, support, and investment in the Australian circus and variety arts sector as part of the new National Cultural Policy.

Circus, cabaret, and variety performance are uniquely Australian forms of live entertainment that connect deeply with communities across metropolitan, regional, and remote Australia. Despite this, our sector remains consistently underfunded, underrepresented, and misunderstood within national arts policy and funding structures.

One of the biggest issues facing the sector is that circus is still frequently grouped under “physical theatre” rather than recognised as a distinct artform with its own practices, audiences, training pathways, touring models, and technical requirements. This lack of recognition means circus and variety artists are often assessed against criteria that do not reflect the realities of our work. Touring productions involving tents, rigging, specialised equipment, outdoor sites, and large-scale logistics cannot be evaluated using the same framework as small-scale theatre productions.

I recommend that circus and variety arts be formally recognised as a standalone artform within funding bodies and policy frameworks, with dedicated representation from experienced circus and variety practitioners on assessment panels, advisory groups, and policy consultations. Decisions about our sector should include people who understand the realities of our industry.

Another major challenge is financial instability for independent performers. Many artists work across multiple short-term contracts, gigs, festivals, teaching roles, and self-produced projects with little consistency of income. This instability is causing highly skilled performers and creatives to leave the industry altogether.

The vulnerability of the sector became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when many circus, cabaret, and variety artists fell through the cracks of government support programs due to the heavily casualised and contract-based nature of our workforce. Many performers work across multiple employers, freelance contracts, short-term engagements, festival circuits, and self-employed arrangements that did not fit traditional employment models used to assess support eligibility. As a result, a significant number of artists were left without meaningful financial assistance during one of the most devastating periods the live performance industry has ever experienced. Future cultural policy must acknowledge the realities of freelance and gig-based creative work and ensure that emergency support systems are designed to include independent artists and casual arts workers rather than excluding them.

To address this, I recommend the development of a federal income support model for artists during gaps between contracts and projects, similar to international schemes such as the Irish Basic Income for the Arts initiative. Australia cannot continue losing experienced artists simply because surviving in the sector has become financially impossible.

Training and professional development also remain inaccessible for many artists. Grant writing processes are unnecessarily complex and difficult to navigate, particularly for independent and regional artists without organisational support. Ongoing sector-specific grant writing and business skills training should be funded and made widely accessible.

Safety and insurance are also critical issues for the circus sector. Current rigging and safety certification systems are largely designed around the construction industry and do not adequately reflect the realities of performance rigging or circus practice. The sector needs support to develop nationally recognised circus-specific safety standards and training resources.

At the same time, rising public liability insurance costs are becoming unsustainable for independent artists, producers, and small companies. Insurance premiums are forcing productions to scale back or cancel entirely. Government intervention is needed to support affordable insurance pathways and reduce the financial burden on live performance makers.

Access to affordable venues and training spaces is another urgent issue. Urban development and rising rents are rapidly reducing the number of suitable rehearsal, training, and performance spaces available to independent artists. Circus and variety performers require spaces with appropriate height, rigging capability, and safety infrastructure, yet many venues and councils reject applications due to misunderstandings about perceived risk.

I recommend greater access to government-owned spaces for affordable residencies, rehearsals, and performances, along with incentives for local councils to support live performance activity in community venues and outdoor spaces. Venues should also receive education and support to better understand the technical needs and risk management practices of circus and variety arts.

Live performance itself must remain a priority within arts funding. Circus and cabaret are fundamentally live artforms built around human connection, shared experience, and audience participation. Current funding trends that prioritise digital engagement risk disadvantaging sectors whose strength lies in live community experiences. Rather than replacing live performance with digital outcomes, artists should instead be supported to use digital tools for marketing, audience development, and accessibility.

Regional touring support is also essential. Touring circus productions involve significant transport and logistical costs, including moving rigging, tents, staging, generators, technical equipment, and crews across long distances. Rising fuel and freight costs are making regional touring increasingly unviable, despite regional communities often having the greatest appetite for live entertainment access.

A dedicated logistics rebate or regional touring support program for large-scale live performance touring would allow circus and variety productions to continue reaching regional and remote audiences across Australia.

Finally, I strongly support increased federal investment in community-led First Nations circus and performance programs. Circus is a powerful tool for storytelling, confidence-building, cultural connection, and youth engagement. Community-led programs can create culturally safe environments that strengthen resilience and provide meaningful opportunities for First Nations young people, particularly in regional communities.

Australia has a world-renowned circus and live performance sector with enormous creative, cultural, and economic value. However, without proper recognition, representation, and structural support, the sustainability of the sector is at serious risk.

I urge the Government to ensure that the new National Cultural Policy properly recognises circus, cabaret, and variety arts as vital parts of Australia's cultural identity and invests in the long-term sustainability of the artists and communities who make this work possible.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

Sincerely,

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the sender.