



## **Griffin Theatre Company Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation**

Griffin Theatre Company welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the consultation on Australia's new National Cultural Policy.

As Australia's only dedicated new writing theatre company, Griffin exists to develop and produce Australian stories and sustain the artists and arts workers who create them. For over 45 years, Griffin has played a significant role in the national ecology of Australian playwriting: commissioning, developing and premiering new Australian plays and supporting early-career and established playwrights, directors, dramaturgs, producers and production workers that keep the live performance sector thriving.

The ambitions of Revive were significant and necessary. But the years since the pandemic have also exposed the structural fragility of large parts of the performing arts sector. Rising production costs, workforce shortages, audience disruption and unsustainable employment conditions constrain artistic ambition across the country, particularly for organisations focused on developing new Australian work.

This submission is structured around the five pillars of the consultation framework and focuses specifically on the sustainability of Australia's new writing ecology and the workforce needed to sustain it over the long-term.

### **Pillar One: First Nations First**

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As a company supported through the National Performing Arts and Partnership (NPAP) Framework, Griffin supports the recommendations identified in the Blak Futures Collective and First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network submission. **First Nations cultural governance, workforce development, international exchange and cultural continuity must operate as cross-cutting principles across all pillars of the next National Cultural policy, rather than as isolated initiatives.**

In particular, as a new writing company, Griffin endorses the call for dedicated investment and support for a First Nations commissioning system. Australia cannot meaningfully support First Nations storytelling without long-term investment the creation and development of new First Nations work. New Australian plays require years of development, dramaturgy, cultural consultation, rehearsal and production support before they reach an audience. Existing project-based funding models frequently fail to reflect the timeframes and cultural labour required to responsibly create this work.

## **Pillar Two: A Place for Every Story**

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Griffin strongly endorses the proposed Live Performance Production Incentive (LPPI).

The economics of producing live performance in Australia have become increasingly difficult, particularly for companies developing original Australian work. New, original plays are inherently higher-risk than established titles or adaptations, requiring substantial upfront investment with no guarantee of commercial return.

At the same time, inflationary pressures across freight, accommodation, venue hire, construction and labour have dramatically increased production costs.

Across the sector - particularly amongst subsidised, subscription-based theatre companies like Griffin - this is resulting in:

- Smaller productions
- Shorter seasons
- Fewer commissions – in particular, fewer commissions of original Australian work
- Over-reliance on adaptations of existing intellectual property - in particular, adaptations of non-Australian literary and cinematic works
- Reduced employment opportunities for artists and arts workers
- Increasingly conservative programming decisions - shrinking the potential of the art form

A Live Performance Production Incentive would represent one of the most significant structural interventions available to government. It would stimulate investment in Australian work, increase employment opportunities, reduce financial risk associated with commissioning new work and support both commercial and not-for-profit production activity.

For Griffin specifically, such an incentive would directly strengthen our ability to commission and produce ambitious new Australian plays and support broader audience reach for original Australian stories.

Griffin advocates for an LPPI that is accessible for smaller companies as well as large companies and administratively light weight to ensure this initiative benefits as wide a cross section of the performing arts industry as possible.

## **Pillar Three: Centrality of the Artist and Arts Worker**

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The sustainability of artistic careers is now one of the most urgent issues facing the performing arts sector. The workforce is experiencing significant burnout, attrition and financial precarity.

Recent national and international research demonstrates that the sector is operating with substantially reduced workforce capacity following the pandemic. Support Act's **2024 Mental Health and Wellbeing in Creative Industries report** identified burnout and fatigue, job insecurity and low income as among the most significant issues affecting creative workers. One fifth of respondents reported incomes below the poverty line, while over two-thirds expressed anxiety about their long-term financial future. The report also identified disproportionately high levels of psychological distress across the creative industries workforce.

Theatre companies across the country are producing fewer shows, with smaller casts, smaller creative teams, with fees that are not reflecting increased cost of living. This is resulting in fewer employment opportunities for independent artists and arts workers.

Griffin's own internal workforce analysis reflects these broader conditions. Exit interviews consistently cite unsustainable workloads and low salaries as drivers of resignation. Recruitment timelines for production, ticketing and marketing positions have expanded significantly in recent years, reflecting industry-wide workforce shortages in technical and administrative roles.

Our internal analysis also demonstrates that pre-pandemic models of production often relied on structural overtime and unsustainable workloads in ways that are no longer viable, and arguably never were.

There is an increasing contradiction emerging in the performing arts sector where expectations around care, safety and sustainability in workplaces have improved substantially post-pandemic – appropriately so – while funding settings and production expectations have largely not shifted to reflect this. For example, inside theatre companies, producers are now expected to assume the responsibilities of a company manager, acting as primary human resources point-of-contact for the entire show company, resulting in a significant increase to their workload compared to pre-pandemic.

In practice, this means many organisations are being asked to deliver pre-pandemic levels of output with reduced workforce capacity, higher costs and less resilience amongst company staff and creative workers.

We therefore support:

- Increased investment in sustainable arts employment through increased funding to NPAP companies and, vitally, to small-to-medium organisations which are essential to a healthy arts ecology
- Industry-led workforce development initiatives targeting production and technical shortages
- Expanded support for traineeships, mentoring and early-career pathways

Importantly, policy discussions about artists must also recognise the broader arts workforce that enables artistic production: producers, administrators, production managers,

technicians, marketers, dramaturgs, stage managers and venue staff. Without these workers, new Australian work simply cannot reach audiences.

## **Pillar Four: Strong Cultural Infrastructure**

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Strong cultural infrastructure is not limited to buildings. It also includes the systems, organisations, artists and development pathways that allow Australian work to succeed.

Griffin supports increased long-term operational investment in arts organisations and independent artists, structured to ensure sustainability rather than short-term project delivery.

In particular, in relation to the new writing ecology, the loss of historical play development organisations like the Australian National Playwrights Centre (ANPC), Playworks, and Playwriting Australia is still felt profoundly. Australia currently lacks sufficient coordinated investment in the commissioning and long-term development of new Australian plays prior to production.

This is particularly significant for a theatre company such as Griffin, whose new writing-focused artistic model requires ongoing development of original Australian work, yet our current level of government funding does not provide capacity to deliver this at the volume required for each of our annual seasons.

This narrative is common across most NPAP companies. Current funding structures are often weighted toward production-ready outcomes rather than the earlier and essential dramaturgical and developmental phases required to create ambitious new work and sustain careers for Australian playwrights.

We support:

- Adjacent to the Creative Futures Fund, the introduction of a dedicated funding stream that enables NPAP organisations, small-to-medium companies, and independent artists to collaboratively commission and develop new, original Australian works of a small and medium scale, before presentation outcomes are attached. The Creative Futures Fund is an excellent initiative, but its focus is on scale is excludes smaller companies, venues, and projects.
- Increased baseline operational funding indexed to real costs

Without sustained investment in development pipelines, Australia risks producing fewer original stories and becoming increasingly dependent on commercially safer adaptations, existing IP and imported work.

## **Pillar Five: Engaging the Audience**

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Audience engagement cannot really be separated from questions of access, geography and affordability.

Griffin strongly supports expanded investment in live performance touring across Australia - but specifically, support for **touring between metropolitan centres**.

At present, there is limited funding available to support touring work between Australian capital cities. This creates significant barriers for independent artists and theatre companies attempting to extend the life and reach of new Australian work.

For a new writing company like Griffin, in particular, this means we are making substantial investment in the commissioning, development, and premiering of Australian plays - often years of work, tens of thousands of dollars of investment - but with limited ability to extend the life of work through touring. Productions may only be seen in a single city despite years of creative development and significant public investment. There is often strong desire from potential metropolitan presenting partners to present Griffin work, but costs prove to be prohibitive, with no available funding to bulwark against this.

Expanded touring support between metropolitan areas would:

- Increase audience access to Australian stories
- Improve financial sustainability and return-on-investment
- Create additional employment opportunities for artists and arts workers
- Strengthen relationships between producing and presenting organisations nationally
- Support greater national visibility for Australian playwrights and original Australian stories

The development of Australian stories should not end at a single premiere season, particularly in a country as geographically dispersed as Australia.

## **Conclusion**

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If the next National Cultural Policy is to succeed, it must move beyond short-term project thinking and recognise the arts as long-term civic and cultural infrastructure. This includes sustained investment in artists, arts workers, development pipelines, touring systems and the organisations that support them.

As a dedicated new writing company, Griffin believes Australian stories matter. But these stories require sustained investment, workforce capacity, infrastructure, artistic risk and long-term commitment. The future strength of Australian culture depends not only on what we produce, but whether artists and arts workers can sustainably remain in the sector long enough to create it.