

BELVOIR ST THEATRE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION MAY 2026

INTRODUCTION.

The gist of our claim is this:

The *cultural infrastructure* of Australian theatre is failing to sustain the *artistic and cultural ecology* it exists to serve.

Increasingly the reverse is happening: the ecology is sustaining the infrastructure.

This is not just a crisis of organisational viability. It is a crisis of artistic and cultural custodianship. The foundational democratic drive of Australian theatre is fading.

The solution lies, as always, in the artists and the art itself - in putting the life back into the ecology.

We need an immediate **emergency response strategy** to stabilise Australian theatre, and a **national review and a ten-year national theatre strategy** aimed at reforming the cultural infrastructure so it can properly support the ecology and lay the foundations for the next generation.

A note on our submission.

It comes in two parts.

One speaks the language of structures, governance and policy - the language of cultural infrastructure.

The other is in the language we use at Belvoir to think and talk about the work itself - the language of Australian theatre as a living ecology.

We'll start with the second one.

PART ONE – THE WORK ITSELF.

Australian theatre is fighting for its life.

There is a reasonably clear picture of the state of the cultural infrastructure - the companies, venues, festivals, training institutions, philanthropic networks. Much of that infrastructure can no longer deliver its stated purposes or maintain its financial viability.

There is an urgent need for emergency initiatives and stabilisation measures across the sector. We support the recommendations in the submissions by the LPA, NPAPF and CAST.

But it's the ecology of Australian theatre that we'd like to draw attention to here, and its long-simmering and rapidly accelerating breakdown.

By ecology we mean the whole interconnected network of people, knowledge and practices which carry on the artistic work itself across the whole of society and across generations: freelance artists, arts workers, audiences, supporters, teachers, critics, journalists...

The function of the infrastructure is to create *cultural space* inside our society and economy for the ecology to live and thrive.

The function of the ecology is the living continuation of Australian theatre: to grow artists, audiences and expert arts workers; to preserve and evolve artistic knowledge; to contribute to the ongoing democratic and cultural life of the country.

The whole interconnected system of our ecology has been under strain for well over a decade, since before the crises of Covid and inflation. Like the Critically Endangered Murray-Darling, it can no longer flow together the way it needs to.

Australian theatre is Critically Endangered because *there is no longer enough space in the cultural infrastructure for the artists and the work to sustain and renew themselves.*

The infrastructure is not supporting enough good artists to make enough brilliant work to enough different audiences to carry Australian theatre outwards and forwards for future generations.

And like the Murray-Darling, it can't just be put back the way it was.

Our argument is that preserving the infrastructure as it is will not save the ecology. It may even accelerate its decline.

The infrastructure is not merely underfunded. Much of it belongs to another time.

The ecology continues by carrying the inherited knowledge of the artform into new forms and new times. The infrastructure, too often, is stuck in the past.

The infrastructure needs reform and evolution.

The danger we face is not just that we will lose companies - though that danger is very real.

The danger is that we could save the companies and still lose the knowledge, practices, people and audiences that make Australian theatre possible at all.

That it will no longer be possible for artists to attain the level of shared and embodied knowledge required to sustain the artform.

That it will no longer be viable for an artist to make a life in Australian theatre.

That Australian theatre will de-professionalise.

That its place in the democratic and cultural life of the country will diminish accordingly.

That this process has already begun.

If this sounds alarmist, remember the West Indies cricket team. What was once the greatest team in the world can now barely field a team. And it wasn't for lack of talent that cricket died in the West Indies.

How we got here: from democratic upwelling to institutionalised decline in a lifetime.

The actor Peter Carroll is 80 and still performing. So too Bruce Spence. John Bell is still with us. Robyn Nevin, too, who went to NIDA in its first intake in 1959.

When they began their artistic lives, the Australian theatre as we know it didn't exist. It was largely not professional and rarely Australian. Peter Carroll remembers fighting for the right to be paid to rehearse; until then actors were often only paid for performances. And most of what was professionally staged was English in one or all ways.

Then, in the late 1960s and 1970s, an unruly and self-starting "New Wave" transformed Australian theatre. It liberated the Australian voice and kicked off a triple revolution - artistic, cultural, and industrial.

This eruption of energy was driven by the art and the artists, not the organisations (there were barely any). There was no template, no policy. *They made it up as they went along.*

And it was not just a vernacular/nationalist cultural project. It soon took on an unusually rich and rigorous artistic project alongside its cultural one. The two projects drove each other on, improvising and discovering its paths, driven by artistic risk and creative daring, by new processes and formal invention, egged on by intrepid individuals and groups, international influences, festivals (lets never forget the international cross-fertilising role of festivals)...

The criss-crossing paths that led from the Pram Factory to the Lighthouse ensemble and Company B, from Rex Cramphorn to Patrick White's *A Cheery Soul* via Robyn Nevin, from

travelling boxing tents to *The Rocky Horror Show*, from the Sydney Uni Dramatic Society to the Sydney Theatre Company, from the National Black Theatre to Ilbijerri —

— *this* is what a thriving ecology looks like. Looked like.

The push-pull of ecology and infrastructure - of art, institutionalisation and public policy - took decades to work itself out. To take Sydney as a case study: in the decade from 1979 to 1989, Nimrod and The Old Tote Theatre companies went broke; but the Sydney Dance Company (relaunched 1979), Sydney Theatre Company (1979), Griffin (1979), Company B (1984), Bangarra Dance Theatre (1988), Bell Shakespeare (1989) and Performing Lines (1989) were all founded - some from the art up, some from the infrastructure down.

Over time this unruly Australian theatre became more professionalised, more ambitious, and unshakably embedded in Australian cultural life.

It had also become increasingly expensive and organisationally complicated. The Nugent report in 1999 locked in the idea of the "performing arts" as a fixed, national, institutional system with increasing emphasis on governance, organisational management and private philanthropy.

And a new commercial imperative was set - and distorted - by the benchmarking of funding levels for the "Major" theatre companies against the financial results of the STC off the back of its outlying commercial success with *Tap Dogs*.*

The infrastructure took precedence over the ecology.

Since then the story of Australian theatre has been one of decline. The infrastructure has contracted, and the major goals of Nugent - financial stability and increased artistic risk - have gone backwards. Nearly every organisation or institution in the sector operates under extreme financial duress, and the work itself has been cut back.

What of the ecology in all this?

One fact alone can tell the story.

Seven major companies took root and were brought into the infrastructure in less than ten years in Sydney from 1979 to 1989; in the 37 years since then: none.

In the same period, the population of the city grew by more than two million people.

We all go about our lives assuming that the engine in a car is there to get us from A to B. In fact most of that horsepower is spent moving the weight of the car around. In the same way, our cultural infrastructure seems more and more geared around moving itself along.

* *This was reported to Eamon Flack by Michael Lynch, who led the Australia Council at the time the Nugent Report was put into action.

Which brings us to the single most worrying thing in all this: the marginalisation of the artists themselves within the infrastructure. The broad national community of people, who carry the knowledge of the artform in their bodies, practices and working lives, is demoralised.

The infrastructure is not simply failing to support the ecology.

It may well be crushing it.

What does a living theatre ecology need?

The central policy question facing Australian theatre is this:

What must the infrastructure do to properly support the ecology?

We offer the following principles:

Art Like Sport.

Theatre should grow from the grassroots up, connecting community participation to professional excellence, both for artists and for audiences.

Like sport, artistic development begins early and unfolds over decades. It requires pathways, mentoring, repetition, community participation, elite training and long-term investment.

Australia understands how to build sporting ecosystems. We have not applied the same thinking to the arts.

An Artist is for Life.

Artists do not emerge fully formed. A Pamela Rabe, a Leah Purcell or an S. Shakhidharan represents decades, sometimes multiple lifetimes, of accumulated and inherited artistic knowledge, training, collaboration and opportunity.

But the pathways that produced these artists no longer exist in the infrastructure.

Australian theatre needs life-long artistic pathways that extend from someone's niece in her school play in Cairns to Peter Carroll in *King Lear* in his eighties.

Artists are Workers.

Artists are workers. They should be able to make a living from their labour and sustain life-long professional practice.

The current freelance model is increasingly untenable. Too many artists are surviving through exhaustion, subsidy from other work, or eventual departure from the sector altogether.

A theatre culture cannot survive if professional artistic life becomes economically impossible.

Custodianship and Continuation.

Unlike the other artforms in the national “keeping house” of the NPAPF which have salaried ensembles, Australian theatre relies entirely upon freelance artists to carry artistic knowledge across generations.

This makes the ecology extraordinarily fragile.

The task of the infrastructure is not simply to fund productions or maintain organisations. It is to sustain the people and practices that allow the artform to continue evolving.

This is the work not just of a few years or a short-term strategy, but of a strong and supple *intergenerational* ecology.

By, With and For the Community, IRL.

Theatre is the opposite of the internet. Its power *and its future value* lie in its actuality: people gathering in shared time and space.

Community-engaged practice should not be peripheral to the sector. It should be central to it.

There is currently too little room within the infrastructure for genuinely community-led artistic processes.

Faith in the Work.

Theatre depends upon belief.

Artists commit their bodies, minds and lives to it. Audiences and supporters commit time, money and attention to it. Arts workers commit careers to it. Everyone does it at a cost because they believe in it.

Faith in the work is the real currency of theatre.

That faith has been profoundly weakened.

The artistic outlook for many theatre-makers is now deeply demoralising. A healthy ecology requires not only adequate funding, but a sense of *possibility*.

Risk Everything.

Like a trapeze artist, a piece of theatre that risks nothing means nothing.

We make theatre to show, live, that some particular way of being human or thinking about the world or living together *is possible after all*.

At present, the infrastructure leaves too little room for risk.

Better Together.

Collaboration and ensemble are the essence of theatre.

Large casts and sustained artistic relationships do not merely create employment. They expand artistic possibility and cultural scope.

A theatre culture without the capacity for ambitious ensemble work is a theatre culture in decline.

And a theatre culture in decline is a democracy in decline.

Local is Universal.

Theatre does an outsized amount of the foundational work of Australian storytelling.

16,000 people attended the premiere season of Tommy Murphy's *Packer & Sons* at Belvoir. Compare this to the print run of a Miles Franklin Award shortlisted novel, or the eyeballs on a new Australian film.

Australian theatre is an under-acknowledged part of the democratic and imaginative infrastructure of the country. It does it within community, and does it more efficiently than it is given credit for.

No Going Back.

Theatre is not sustained by preservation but by evolution.

It survives by inheriting old forms and processes and applying them in new conditions and new ways. That is why it has survived for thousands of years.

The infrastructure must support that evolution rather than constrain it.

Process Determines Outcome.

Different artistic processes create different artistic possibilities.

The creative development and rehearsal models currently embedded in the infrastructure were the product of another era.

If Australian theatre is to generate new stories, new forms and new audiences, the infrastructure must make room for new artistic processes.

Evolving Organisations.

Most theatre companies in Australia were founded before the 1980s and operate within structures largely consolidated by the late 1990s.

Are these organisations still fit for purpose?

What kinds of theatre companies will be needed in the twenty-first century?

The ecology has repeatedly generated new possibilities, but the infrastructure has struggled to take them up.

Australian theatre cannot move forward if its structures remain fixed in the past.

No Decisions Without Artistic Authority.

Are there enough informed and empowered artists in the leadership, decision-making and governance structures of the infrastructure? Are those structures properly geared towards the nature of artistic and cultural practices? Are artists being properly supported to prepare for and take on positions of *artistic* leadership, as distinct from “cultural” leadership or organisational leadership?

We posit these as among the most urgent and serious questions to be faced.

The arts have a cultural and artistic licence which is different to the social licence of other kinds of organisations. The responsibility of our cultural infrastructure is to make sure that this priceless liberty is protected, and never wasted.

In short.

More artists in the arts.

Summoning a greater sense of possibility for audiences and the artform.

Driving our democracy on.

Into the 21st century.

Eamon Flack
Artistic Director

PART TWO - OUR RECOMMENDATIONS.

Belvoir St Theatre is a signatory to both the NPAP and CAST submissions and contributed extensively to the development of their recommendations. We endorse the full suite of recommendations contained within those submissions and recognise them as comprehensive, ambitious and necessary responses to the structural challenges currently facing the Australian performing arts sector and the broader aims of the Australian Government's new National Cultural Policy consultation process.

The recommendations included in this submission do not seek to duplicate the substantial work already undertaken collectively through NPAP and CAST. Rather, they aim to provide expanded detail and additional emphasis on several areas Belvoir considers especially urgent to the long-term sustainability, evolution and democratic function of Australian theatre.

We draw your particular attention to the additional recommendations and initiatives we have included:

- Recommendation 5: Artists as Workers Scheme and Pilot Program (Pillar 3 but equally applicable to Pillars 2 and 4)
- Recommendation 7: The ANA report and a model for a National Strategy for theatre and the arts more broadly (Pillar 3)
- Recommendation 10: A National Review of the Health of the Australian theatre industry, with particular reference to investigating the Universal Basic Income for Artists (Pillar 4, but equally applicable to Pillar 3)
- Ongoing Life Initiative – a National Touring Circuit and a National Regional Australian Theatre Festival (Pillar 5, but equally applicable to Pillars 2, 3 and 4)

These are areas we believe require not only policy recognition but sustained structural intervention if Australian theatre is to continue renewing itself artistically, culturally and socially into the future.

We also note that neither the additional recommendations we make here nor the detailed recommendations in the CAST submission represent the full possibilities for how the infrastructure can support and renew the ecology. As such we re-iterate our call for a national review and a long-term strategy as the best way to create a strong but evolving infrastructure in which Australian theatre can revive and thrive for future generations.

Pillar 1: First Nations First

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 for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and is recognised as a national priority under Closing the Gap.

To fully realise *Revive* and *Closing the Gap* commitments, the new National Cultural policy should:

1. **Sustainably support, develop and recognise the entire First Nations performing arts workforce system.**
2. **Provide dedicated investment and support for a dedicated First Nations performing arts commissioning system.**
3. **Ensure appropriate resourcing and recognition of requirements to fully support cultural governance and ICIP Infrastructure.**

Pillar 2 – A place for every story

The new National Cultural policy should:

4. **Endorse and commit to the introduction of a 40% Live Performance Production Incentive (LPPI) for commercial and not-for-profit producers to attract investment in a globally competitive market, supporting the development of new works in Australia across theatre, dance, ballet, opera, music and other live performance, and including First Nations works.**

Pillar 3 – Centrality of the Artist

The new National Cultural policy should:

5. **Support sustainable careers for artists and arts workers, including in not-for-profit organisations, through an Artists as Workers scheme**

Only about 9% of artists work full-time solely on their creative practice. Much of the workforce balances multiple jobs, relying on a mix of freelance work, arts-related employment, and non-arts jobs to make ends meet. While creative output is highly valued culturally, economic conditions remain tough. Average incomes for artists fall well below the national workforce average, with professional artists averaging just \$23,200 annually from creative work, and the sector routinely suffers from higher-than-average job mobility and underemployment.

Without arts and arts workers, the goals of *Revive* will not be able to be met, and the benefits to the community will be severely impacted. Conditions to retain a healthy and sustainable creative workforce must be addressed, including addressing sector-wide recruitment and retention.

Artists as Workers Pilot Scheme – Pilot Program

The Artists at Work Pilot Program is a three-year, national training and employment initiative that places professional theatre artists in full-time, salaried roles within a small group of participating Australian theatre companies.

Led by Belvoir St Theatre, in partnership with three national not-for-profit theatre companies, the program combines artistic practice with arts administration and organisational operations. It tests a new model of hybrid artistic and administrative employment, supporting artists to build sustainable careers while strengthening the creative and operational resilience of participating organisations and the wider theatre sector.

The pilot is designed to inform future workforce policy, funding frameworks and organisational practice nationally.

The Artists at Work Pilot Program aims to:

- Reverse the critical decline in job security and career longevity for professional theatre artists
- Address long-term reductions in artistic output, audience reach and cultural impact across the Australian theatre sector
- Test a financially sustainable workforce model for not-for-profit theatre companies without requiring significant new recurrent public funding
- Increase the number of artists employed on salary within Australia's cultural sector
- Counter long-term trends that have shifted expenditure away from artist employment and artistic output toward administrative and operational costs

Rationale

Australian theatre companies have long functioned as creative homes for artists, places where work is made, risks are taken and cultural identity is formed. However, unlike other major performing arts forms, theatre has become almost entirely freelance and project-based, with artists moving between short-term contracts and extended periods of under-employment.

Across Australia's performing arts ecology, theatre is now an outlier in how artists are employed. Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data and Creative Australia research consistently demonstrate that theatre artists experience significantly higher rates of underemployment, income instability and career attrition than both the general workforce and artists in other performing arts disciplines.

By contrast, artforms such as orchestral music, ballet, opera and contemporary dance routinely employ artists on ongoing or long-term contracts, recognising that artistic excellence, organisational continuity and workforce sustainability are deeply interconnected. These models

support artists to develop over time, retain institutional knowledge, and build careers that are both creatively ambitious and financially sustainable.

The prevailing freelance theatre model, while flexible, has produced increasing precarity, loss of intergenerational skills and knowledge transfer, declining opportunities for artistic development, and limited pathways into leadership and organisational roles. These pressures are now impacting not only artists, but the long-term viability, renewal capacity and cultural reach of theatre companies themselves.

The experience of COVID-19 further exposed the structural vulnerability of professional artists and arts workers in Australia. National inquiries, including the Parliamentary inquiry *Sculpting a National Cultural Plan: Igniting a post-COVID economy for the arts*, alongside sector surveys, showed that arts employment contracted sharply during lockdowns. Many independent artists and gig workers experienced immediate loss of income following the cancellation of performances and events, and a significant proportion were unable to access wage-support schemes due to the nature of their employment arrangements. The sector continues to experience the downstream impacts of this period.

The Artists at Work Pilot Program directly addresses these challenges by creating secure, multi-year employment pathways for artists while building transferable skills across arts administration and artistic creation. Participants combine creative practice with vocational training and hands-on experience across producing, production, marketing, fundraising and education. The pilot supports employment stability and career longevity for artists, while strengthening organisational capability and resilience within participating theatre companies.

While modest in scale, the pilot is ambitious in intent. It asks a larger question of the sector: *What would theatre look like if artists were not only engaged to make work, but trusted to help run our theatre companies and shape their futures?*

Recognition of the Theatre Workforce

The Artists at Work Pilot Program is grounded in respect for the full ecosystem of labour that makes theatre possible. This includes technicians, craftspeople, administrators, front-of-house staff, producers and managers, many of whom also commit their professional lives to the artform under similarly precarious conditions.

The program is not intended to elevate one form of labour above others or create new hierarchies within an under-resourced performing arts sector. Rather, it addresses a specific structural gap in artist employment while affirming the shared contribution, interdependence and value of all theatre workers whose collective labour sustains the artform.

National data demonstrates that professional theatre artists experience persistent employment precarity, low-income security and high rates of underemployment relative to both the general Australian workforce and artists in other performing arts disciplines. ABS Census data shows that people employed in performing arts occupations are significantly more likely to be self-employed, working part-time or holding multiple jobs, with median personal incomes well below the national average. These patterns persist across age cohorts, indicating a long-term structural issue rather than a transitional career phase.

National Pilot Design

The Artists at Work Pilot Program will operate across three not-for-profit theatre companies nationally, selected through strategic invitation or an expression-of-interest process. Working across multiple organisations allows the pilot to test the model in different institutional contexts, while maintaining a shared set of principles, expectations and evaluation measures.

Each participating company will implement the Artists at Work model within a common national framework, adapted to local organisational needs, scale and artistic practice. This distributed structure is intentional: it enables the pilot to test scalability, transferability and variation across different company sizes, geographies and operating models, strengthening the relevance of findings for the wider theatre sector.

Belvoir St Theatre will act as the initiating and lead partner for the national pilot, with responsibility for coordination, auspicing and sector learning. In this role, Belvoir will:

- provide national coordination and oversight
- act as the auspicing organisation
- manage evaluation, reporting and sector knowledge-sharing

This structure ensures consistency across the pilot while allowing participating companies to retain artistic and operational autonomy.

Across the pilot, 18 artists will be employed nationally, with 6 artists embedded within each participating company. The cohort will include a mix of established and mid-career artists, with a commitment to include at least two First Nations artists per cohort. Artists will be employed full-time for three years, providing sufficient duration to influence skills development, organisational practice and artistic continuity.

Each year is structured to balance organisational embedding with protected creative practice:

- approximately nine months of company and administrative practice
- approximately three months of artistic and creative practice

This ratio is deliberate. It embeds artists deeply within the operational life of participating organisations while guaranteeing protected time for creative development, rehearsal and performance.

Artists are employed as salaried staff members within participating companies, with clear responsibilities, line management and accountability. During their administrative periods, artists will be embedded within core areas of the organisation, which may include:

- Producing and Artistic Operations
- Production and Technical
- Marketing, Communications and Digital Content
- Development and Fundraising
- Front of House and Box Office
- Community and Education

A central principle of the program is that artists hold real positions, not assistant or observer roles. Each placement will be supported by:

- a clear position description
- defined deliverables and KPIs
- structured supervision and professional development

Skills development will include practical experience in budgeting, CRM systems, scheduling, audience strategy and stakeholder engagement.

Artists contribute their creative intelligence and lived experience directly to organisational decision-making, strengthening alignment between artistic ambition and operational reality. This exchange benefits both artists and organisations, supporting leadership development and more resilient institutions.

Creative practice remains central to the program and is protected within the annual structure. Creative time supports:

- development of new Australian work and intellectual property
- creative laboratories and skills workshops
- adaptation and artistic exploration
- participation in productions, co-productions and touring activity

Together, these elements ensure the Artists at Work Pilot Program remains grounded in artistic excellence, while addressing the structural conditions required to sustain creative careers and future-facing theatre companies.

Leadership and Succession

The pilot responds to a growing leadership and succession challenge across the theatre sector. In a period of rising operating costs, increasing governance complexity and workforce contraction, there is a need for pathways that offer deeper exposure to organisational leadership, governance and operational decision-making.

While making and directing work remain central to artistic development, they do not alone equip artists to lead complex cultural institutions. By embedding artists within the operational life of theatre companies, the program supports those inclined toward leadership to develop the experience, judgement and institutional understanding required to step into senior artistic or executive roles. This is recognised as a potential outcome of the pilot, rather than a universal expectation.

The Artists at Work Pilot Program does not replace Australia's freelance theatre model and does not create permanent ensembles or exclusive companies. Participating organisations will continue to commission, present and collaborate with a wide freelance artistic community. Participating artists do not receive guaranteed casting or programming, and all artistic decisions remain subject to each company's existing processes and standards.

The pilot builds on established artist development pathways, including fellowships and residencies extending these models into longer-term, salaried employment with deeper organisational embedding.

Benefits to Artists

- Secure, salaried employment over multiple years
- Job-ready training and transferable professional skills
- Increased career longevity and reduced precarity
- Greater capacity to develop artistic excellence
- Pathways into leadership, producing and cultural governance roles

Benefits to the Theatre Sector

- Stabilisation of the sector's most critical workforce
- Increased artistic output and development capacity
- Improved organisational resilience and succession planning
- A scalable model adaptable by other theatre companies
- Stronger alignment with national cultural policy goals around skills, employment and sustainability

Community Benefit

The Artists at Work Pilot Program delivers public value by:

- Creating secure cultural employment and retaining highly skilled workers within their field
- Reducing reliance on income support during periods of artistic unemployment
- Supporting Australian cultural production and intellectual property
- Expanding access to Australian stories for diverse communities
- Strengthening cultural institutions without requiring major new public investment

6. **Support nation-wide industry-led training initiatives to address identified critical workforce and skills shortages across the arts and cultural sector.**

Pillar 4 – Strong Cultural Infrastructure

The new National Cultural policy should:

7. **Enhance the overall level of investment in the sector, structured for long term sustainability. This would allow for rebuilding of capability within the sector, organisational stability and vitality, and the crucial scaffold to support the ongoing development of artists and artform.**

With federal per capita expenditure in 2023 being the lowest on record at \$114, there is a clear and urgent need for increased investment to achieve the ambitions of the National Cultural Policy.

This increase should include a step change in the level of overall investment that:

- reflects the current increased cost base impacting all arts organisations and individual artists;
- acknowledges the recent broadening of criteria applied to many funding schemes to a wider range of entities and increases funding pools to ensure ongoing equity to all types of organisations.

- enables individuals and organisations, including multi-year funded organisations, to seek specific strategic project funding which specifically supports the new Cultural Policy.

In addition, to be sustainable, structurally

- Government funding must keep pace ongoing with rising expenses, rather than being indexed at less than CPI. The sector cannot meet the objectives of *Revive* or a new Cultural Policy with partially indexed funding from government, which is a decline in real terms. This damages the ability to maintain standards, employ artists and arts workers, maintain infrastructure, invest in new work, and keep ticket prices affordable and audiences representative of the whole community.
- Funding arrangements must enable long-term strategic and operational planning, with multi-year horizons and adequate timelines for decision making.

Stable multi-year public investment in Australia's major theatre producing companies remains vital and should be continued and strengthened in the new policy. Government should consider an increased investment quantum relative to the actual cost of researching, developing and producing theatre at a world-class standard, and reflective of the sector leadership role these companies play in commissioning Australian work, developing artists and connecting with audiences nationwide. Funding levels to theatre companies falls well below funding levels provided to other performing arts forms and this fact alone increases the precarity of work and income for the performers of this genre. Unlike ballet or orchestral companies that have large workforces of full-time artists, theatre companies rely heavily on freelance actors employed on short term contracts and declining funding and rising costs puts downward pressure on the volume of work available for these artists.

We applaud the investment made in the Creative Futures Fund through *Revive*, and the focus on telling Australian stories in impactful ways and we advocate for the continuation of this initiative. The specificity of the fund's requirements and the highly competitive nature of the fund means that it largely picks up works which have already received investment in the commissioning phase of a new work life cycle.

New work is expensive, risky and takes time to make. Belvoir invests extensively in new work, but constrained financial operating environments have meant that many companies have had to reduce investment in this important but highly speculative area of our business models. We therefore propose a dedicated commissioning fund available to the theatre sector specifically tied to the generation of new work. This could take the form of an Australian commissioning fund to extend the number of scripts under commission by NFP companies. Such a fund would be a natural precursor to works suitable for support through the Creative Futures fund for development/ presentation and ensure the pipeline of new Australian works for both the stage and often then moving onto the screen

In addition to a new commissioning fund we advocate for increased investment levels to support core funding on a broader, ongoing basis, to allow companies to deliver ambitious and engaging works for the Australian community, and which showcase the breadth of talents of Australian artists and creatives.

Belvoir St points to the ANA (A New Approach) *Imagine 2035* report as a model for how Australia might approach long-term cross-portfolio investment, coordination and strategic development across the arts and cultural sector. The report argues that Australia's cultural policy environment is constrained not simply by funding pressures, but by the absence of an agreed long-term national vision, coordinated intergovernmental structures and enduring mechanisms for strategic collaboration across federal, state and local government. It recommends the development of a ten-year National Arts and Culture Strategy — modelled on the National Sport Strategy — to establish shared national principles, outcomes and measures for cultural policy, alongside regular review and renewal processes. The report also recommends the establishment of a formal Ministerial Council reporting to National Cabinet, focused on cultural access and the creative industries, in order to coordinate structural reform, investment, regulation and long-term planning across government portfolios.

Importantly, the report positions arts and culture not as discretionary expenditure, but as essential public infrastructure connected to social cohesion, democratic participation, education, productivity, health, sustainability and national identity. It identifies the need for stable and coordinated investment settings, stronger cross-sector partnerships, improved access and participation, and structural reform capable of supporting long-term cultural sustainability and innovation. Belvoir strongly supports this framing and echoes the report's broader argument that Australia requires a coordinated, multi-partisan and outcomes-focused cultural policy framework if it is to sustain a thriving cultural ecology into the future.

8. Empower a coordinated national approach to policy development and funding across federal, state and local jurisdictions, and across portfolios (e.g. Health, Education, Trade, Investment).

International and Australian research confirms that arts and culture have direct, positive impacts on cohesion, health, sustainability, security and prosperity. Providing access to arts and culture for all Australians, whoever they are and wherever they live, is not simply a matter for the arts portfolio. This is a critical whole-of-government responsibility.

Unlocking this power of the performing arts to support other policy areas will require creating real mechanisms designed to broker cross-portfolio connections – with structured opportunities to unleash additional investment.

This could include elevating the existing meeting of Cultural Ministers to a formalised Ministerial Council, reporting annually to National Cabinet, as suggested by A New Approach. This would provide a functional and transformative step to give higher priority to the nation's cultural needs and ambitions. Crucially, this new Ministerial Council should be tasked with developing an intergovernmental non-partisan plan for long-term collaboration.

9. Support affordable and efficient access to rehearsal venues and touring accommodation.

The development, rehearsal and presentation of work within the live performing arts is inherently linked to the physical co-location of the artists, creatives, technical staff and broader arts workers involved. However, rising property costs and limited access to affordable, safe and productive creative space continue to place significant pressure on the sustainability of Australia's arts sector, impeding the ability for artists and organisations to develop, create and rehearse new work.

This issue is particularly significant for Belvoir St Theatre. The development of theatre depends upon artists being able to gather physically over sustained periods of time, yet access to affordable rehearsal and creative development space is becoming increasingly difficult across Sydney. Belvoir regularly experiences space constraints, particularly during periods where multiple productions and community programs are occurring simultaneously, often requiring the company to hire external rehearsal venues at substantial additional cost. At the same time, Belvoir is committed to supporting the broader theatre ecology through initiatives such as the 25A program, which provides independent artists and companies with access to space, resources and producing support to develop and present new work.

This impacts all parts of the sector including those who rent or lease physical ongoing premises, as well as availability and affordability of rehearsal spaces for independent artists and organisations on a project basis.

Opportunities could include:

- providing tax incentives or a rental subsidy scheme to new and existing property developers and owners to provide sustainable access to unused space to artists and arts companies. A national scheme could incentivise property developers and owners to make vacant or underutilised spaces available for rehearsals, studios, creative development, and residency programs. This initiative would increase access to affordable creative infrastructure while also activating unused buildings, supporting urban renewal, and strengthening connections between artists and local communities. It would create practical pathways for developers and the arts sector to partner in ways that deliver both cultural and civic value.
- better leveraging Government-owned assets, solving, in part, the need for space far more efficiently than building more physical infrastructure. For example, this could include a program which coordinates between local and state government to identify unused government-owned spaces that could be donated to arts organisations and freelance artists. Additionally, the leasing model between existing arts organisations who are resident in Government-owned arts assets could be remodelled to shift the focus from commercial return to an investment in artists developing work and creating audience connection. This strategy also develops partnerships between the independent sector, cultural institutions and/or larger organisations
- creating a national Guest Artist Rebate initiative, such as tax incentives for accommodation providers that offer discounted lodging to visiting artists, touring productions, and creative practitioners. This would address the rising accommodation costs that are placing significant pressure on existing creation and touring models, limiting the scale, reach and diversity of work able to be developed and travel across Australia.

10. Endorse and fund an urgent twelve-month national review into the health, sustainability, and future viability of Australia's theatre sector.

Australia's theatre sector — spanning community and amateur theatre, independent practice, youth theatre, commercial production, and subsidised mainstage organisations — is facing sustained structural and economic pressures, including workforce attrition, escalating production costs, reduced organisational capacity, venue instability, declining development pathways, and

increased barriers to participation for both artists and audiences. Despite the sector's significant contributions, there has been no recent coordinated national assessment of the theatre ecology as a whole, and there remains a substantial gap in national data relating specifically to the theatre sector. This absence of sector-wide data limits the capacity of governments, organisations, and practitioners to effectively advocate for reform, respond to emerging challenges, or develop evidence-based policy settings. A comprehensive review is required to establish a clear evidence base and accurately assess the scale and severity of the pressures affecting theatre communities across all levels of practice and production nationally.

The review should include consideration of:

- the sustainability of existing funding and producing models across community, independent, commercial, and subsidised theatre;
- new strategic initiatives to prompt and support the evolution of our organisations and infrastructure in concert with the ongoing externally- and internally-instigated adaptation of the ecology
- workforce retention, employment conditions, volunteer sustainability, and artist remuneration;
- the viability of a basic income model for artists and cultural workers;

Investigation into piloting the Universal Basic Income for Artists

Recently, Ireland has led the way with a large-scale pilot program testing the impact of a universal basic income (UBI) for artists. Beginning in 2022, the Irish Government provided approximately 2,000 artists with an unconditional weekly payment of €325 as part of a three-year randomised trial designed to assess economic, cultural, and social outcomes.

The results of this pilot have been significant. Independent evaluations found that the scheme generated over €100 million in total social and economic benefits, including improved psychological wellbeing, increased creative output, and greater audience engagement with the arts. Notably, for every €1 invested, the program returned approximately €1.39 in societal value, demonstrating a positive economic return.

Beyond financial metrics, the pilot also showed strong cultural and workforce impacts. Artists receiving the income were more likely to remain in the sector, spent more time on their creative practice, and produced more new work compared to those without support. The scheme also reduced financial stress and anxiety, enabling artists to focus on experimentation, long-term projects, and career development.

In light of these outcomes, Ireland has moved to make the scheme permanent in cycles, positioning it as a long-term investment in cultural infrastructure and creative labour.

While this is not the first UBI-style initiative globally, the Irish case provides one of the most robust and well-evaluated examples of its potential benefits. Given the demonstrated economic return, improvements in wellbeing, and strengthening of the cultural sector, we recommend that the Australian Government investigate the feasibility of implementing a similar pilot scheme tailored to the Australian arts context.

A review that included an investigation into the viability of piloting a similar scheme in Australia would completely reimagine the future of the Australian arts scene.

- regional and remote participation, touring capacity, and audience access;
- training pathways and career sustainability for emerging and mid-career practitioners;
- the long-term impact of cost-of-living pressures on artists, organisations, volunteers, and audiences;
- the sector's capacity to support new Australian work, artistic risk, and innovation; and
- equity, accessibility, and representation across leadership, programming, and employment.

The findings of the review should inform the development of a renewed national strategy for theatre, with the objective of strengthening sector sustainability, cultural infrastructure, workforce capacity, and long-term public access to Australian storytelling and performance across all areas of the theatre ecology.

11. **Extend the GST-free treatment for eligible non-commercial ticket sales from 75% to 100% for charity-endorsed and DGR organisations.**
12. **Commit to a more ambitious arts philanthropy framework, incentivising increased private support for arts and culture, specifically to:**
13. **Support arts and cultural organisations, many of which already hold DGR status, to more efficiently harness philanthropic opportunities.**

Pillar 5 - Engaging the Audience

The new National Cultural policy should:

14. **Endorse and commit to providing a federal Government-funded Cultural Pass for 13–25-year-olds.**

Attendance at live performances in Australia is heavily constrained by cost-of-living pressures - 59% of young people (16-25) and over half of the general population identifying expense as the primary barrier.

The pass would support significantly discounted or free access to arts and cultural live performances and participatory workshop experiences, without impacting financial sustainability for organisations.

Successful overseas examples of a Culture Pass have been rolled out in Italy, Germany and France, providing between €100 to €500 to young people to use across cultural events and products; in France, 41% of these funds have been to live performances.

This initiative is particularly relevant to Belvoir St Theatre, whose audience development work has long focused on creating pathways for younger audiences to engage with Australian theatre as an

ongoing cultural and civic experience rather than a one-off event. Belvoir's education, youth and emerging artist programs regularly demonstrate the appetite young people have for live performance when financial barriers are reduced. We also have a large portion of our audience as dedicated single ticket buyers – often of a younger demographic than our subscriber audience.

A federally supported Cultural Pass would improve access for young audiences during a period of acute cost-of-living pressure while helping cultivate the next generation of theatre audiences, artists and cultural participants. For organisations like Belvoir, it would strengthen the long-term sustainability of Australian theatre by reconnecting younger Australians with live storytelling and shared cultural experience.

15. **Develop a cross Government dedicated Arts Access Program for schools.**

16. **Expand investment that supports live performance touring across Australia, reflecting real growth in costs and ensuring funding models continue to be fit-for-purpose for evolving and unique community needs, sustainable touring models, and audience and artistic development requirements.**

Ongoing Life Initiatives – A National Touring Circuit and A new Regional Australian Theatre Festival

We wish to draw urgent attention to what we perceive to be the single biggest flaw in the design of the national theatre infrastructure: the huge financial inefficiencies and the loss of cultural impact and artistic growth caused by the growing financial and structural barriers to touring and remounting shows.

The biggest inefficiency in Australian theatre is the proportionally large amounts of scarce financial and human resources sunk into mounting shows that only receive a single season. Unless a show is a small-scale work with "broad" appeal, touring and remounting has become prohibitive due to rising touring costs and structural barriers resulting from the absence of any national touring initiative between producing companies and presenting venues.

The lack of pathways to an ongoing life dis-incentivises producing companies from taking artistic and cultural risk and over-incentivises small-cast and monocultural works; and work of major artistic and/or cultural achievement are not being given an on-going life.

The waste of resources, and the waste of cultural and artistic achievement is deplorable. In no other democratic public theatre infrastructure in the world is this the case.

We whole-heartedly call for a co-ordinated **National Touring Circuit** open to all NFP producing and presenting companies and venues, with a focus on nationally sharing works of artistic and cultural significance; and a **Biennial Regional Australian Theatre Festival** where a curated selection of works of major cultural and/or artistic achievement are toured to a major regional centre in each state every two years.

The benefits would include:

- Significant increase in ability of companies and venues to present tested mid- and large-scale shows
- Major opportunities for audience growth, particularly for young audiences who are drawn towards the artistically and culturally “new”, and culturally-diverse audiences
- Greater national sharing of CALD works and artists, with greater growth opportunities for CALD artists and audiences
- Significant regional tourism and economic development opportunities. A biennial national Australian theatre festival held regionally would be a draw-card for audiences to see the best of Australian theatre in a single location.
- “Second chance” benefits – ongoing development of new Australian works, particularly community-engaged works. As evidence we point towards the second seasons backed by Belvoir of shows like Counting and Cracking, Single Asian Female, Prize Fighter and Beautiful One Day, all of which went on to have successful further life off the back of Belvoir’s long commitment to second chances.
- More work for more artists
- Sharing and spreading artistic talent, processes and practices
- Greater sharing of costs and more efficient strategic investment
- Increased co-ordination across both producing companies and presenting venues; at the moment these connections are mostly ad-hoc
- A new way to celebrate the artform. Return seasons of shows brings a sense of achievement and purpose.

Alongside tax reform, Belvoir St proposes this initiative for second life as the single most effective initiative to immediately uplift Australian theatre.

17. Significantly increase support for Australian live performance companies to tour internationally.

We note that many of the argument for national touring initiatives in (16) above also apply here.

18. Embed and support climate policy across all five pillars of the National Cultural Policy.

Belvoir St recognises climate change as one of the defining challenges facing the Australian community, and continues to be one of the leaders within the Australian arts community around sustainability in making practices, as well as telling stories about climate action.

Australia’s arts sector has both a responsibility and a leadership opportunity to respond to climate change, particularly given the country’s ecological vulnerability and the knowledge systems offered by First Nations communities. Traditional touring models are highly carbon intensive and increasingly challenging due to climate-related disruptions such as floods and fires, particularly in regional Australia.

Climate action is necessary not only for environmental responsibility, but also to ensure Australia remains aligned with the global arts community. The new Cultural Policy should engage in dedicated investment in “green” or low-carbon touring models. There should be a formal recognition of live performance as essential to community resilience and recovery in disaster-affected areas. In addition, there should be climate-related cancellation funding, sustainable arts

infrastructure upgrades, and support for artists and organisations adopting climate-conscious practices, as formalised within the Theatre Green Book Australia (TGBA).

CONCLUSION.

Australian theatre is a vital part of the country's democratic, cultural and civic life. Theatre creates shared spaces for reflection, debate, imagination and connection, and remains one of the most immediate and accessible forms of Australian storytelling. However, without urgent structural intervention, the ecology that sustains this work — from community and amateur theatre through to major companies — will continue to weaken. The long-term health of the sector depends not only on preserving institutions, but on sustaining the artists, workers, audiences, practices and communities that give theatre its cultural life.

This submission calls for a national cultural policy that recognises theatre not simply as an industry, but as cultural and civic infrastructure. Australia has the artistic talent and audience appetite to support a thriving theatre ecology, but this requires coordinated long-term investment, workforce reform, renewed support for artistic risk, and policy settings that place artists and communities at the centre of the system. We need a theatre sector built for the 21st century and beyond. Belvoir St stands ready to work with governments, industry bodies, artists and communities to help shape a more sustainable, ambitious and inclusive future for Australian theatre.

If our submission only makes one thing it is this:

That the complexity of our submission and the many other submissions that are circulating points to the inadequacy of the current infrastructure – and the sense of ongoing, unfinished business that art and culture is really made of.

And so we end by re-stating our call for an emergency response strategy, and a national review towards a ten-year strategy.

With gratitude for this opportunity, and hope for the future,

Eamon Flack, Aaron Beach and Margaret Thanos on behalf of Belvoir St Theatre.