

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Refresh

Our submission is informed by:

- Structured community discussion with circus professionals across NSW, who have connections to over 10 circus organisations
- Our lived experiences of professional circus practice

Pillar 2 A Place for Every Story

Australian arts policy continues to overlook circus as a distinct artform with its own traditional, contemporary, social, and community subsets. This creates a structural barrier to adequate support and recognition for the sector.

Circus is not represented on the expert panels or advisory groups convened for this policy refresh. This failure to engage the circus industry reflects and perpetuates these barriers.

We strongly recommend Creative Australia:

- Recognise circus as a distinct artform with its own recognised subsets
- Disaggregate circus from physical theatre in all grant processes, and evaluation and reporting data
- Ensure relevant assessment panels include circus expertise
- Ensure circus industry representation in consultation on the development of the cultural policy refresh

Pillar 3 Centrality of the Artist

Circus is characterised by inconsistent, casualised income, creating structural financial instability for artists. This instability contributes to talent loss with many artists forced to undertake work outside of the arts, leave the sector altogether, or leave Australia to pursue more secure performance work. It also undermines artist wellbeing, and has broader negative economic impacts.

The Irish Basic Income for the Arts scheme was established as a pilot program to address low and unstable earnings and limited job security within the arts, supporting artistic practice and wellbeing in Ireland. As a result of the resounding success of the pilot, it has since been made permanent. An independent evaluation of the pilot found the program generated a 139% return on investment in social value, with the benefit-to-cost ratio increasing year on year over the duration of the pilot, reaching 175% in its final year.

We recommend Creative Australia:

- Examine the Irish Basic Income for the Arts scheme and the significant cultural, social, and economic benefits reported by the pilot program as a possible solution

Access to appropriate training and international knowledge exchange constrains our world-class circus sector from reaching its full potential.

We recommend Creative Australia:

- Provide ongoing grant writing training

- Engage with the DoHA to encourage amendments to temporary work activity visas to support international touring artists to teach while in Australia

The absence of circus-specific industry standards creates inconsistent safety practices and a lack of reliable sector-relevant guidance for practitioners. This has contributed to the growth in sales of unsafe aerial acrobatic equipment marketed to amateur circus artists. Current rigging certifications are also not fit for purpose, as available training is overwhelmingly construction-focused and fails to address the specific dynamic requirements of circus environments.

We recommend Creative Australia:

- Resource the circus sector to develop and implement documented, circus-specific safety standards and frameworks
- Work with relevant Government bodies to review and adapt rigging qualifications to ensure they are fit for circus practice
- Support engagement between the circus sector and the insurance industry to improve access to appropriate and affordable coverage

Pillar 4 Strong Cultural Infrastructure

Access to appropriate venues for training and performance remains a critical constraint on the circus sector. A shortage of suitable spaces exposes organisations to business disruption, limits sector growth, and increases vulnerability to unfavourable, exploitative leasing arrangements. Circus artists in Sydney reported low motivation for developing new work due to a lack of venues in which to present it.

Where spaces do exist, access is frequently constrained by risk assessments that are disproportionate to well-managed circus practice and reflect a lack of familiarity with the artform rather than genuine safety concerns. This excludes circus from venues and opportunities where it could have significant positive impact.

We encourage the Government to:

- Improve low-barrier access to government-held spaces (e.g. Cockatoo Island, Chowder Bay) for residencies and low-cost performance seasons
- Support venue operators to better understand and appropriately accommodate circus-specific requirements, reducing disproportionate risk aversion in access decisions
- Support cross-sector collaboration to open-up unconventional performance spaces, including targeted funding for infrastructure upgrades where required
- Incentivise local councils to increase access to suitable facilities and outdoor spaces for circus training and performance

Pillar 5 Engaging the Audience

Circus is a live, embodied artform that connects with audiences through shared, in-person experience. Supporting audience participation in circus requires a strong and sustainable live performance ecosystem, alongside effective pathways for discovery, access and engagement. Digital tools have an important role to play in extending reach and strengthening audience connection, particularly in marketing, distribution and audience development. Increasing policy emphasis on digital engagement risks inadvertently disadvantaging live, embodied practice if not carefully balanced. Preserving the integrity and viability of live performance remains central to the sector's cultural and economic contribution.

We recommend Creative Australia:

- Ensure that investment in digital engagement does not disadvantage or deprioritise live performance-based artforms
- Ensure emphasis on digital engagement in grant selection criteria doesn't disadvantage or present a barrier to grant applications centred on live performance
- Provide targeted capability-building support to enable arts organisations to use digital tools to market live performances and build and engage audiences
- Extend export development support equitably across artforms, including circus, to align with current levels of investment in the music industry