



Western Sydney's Independent South Asian Theatre Company

Parramatta, Western Sydney NSW

SUBMISSION TO THE OFFICE FOR THE ARTS

Public Consultation — Australia's New National Cultural Policy 2026

Submitted 24 May 2026

“Culture is Courage. Courage is Culture.”

Submitted by: Suzanne Pereira, Chair

Artistic Director: Neel Banerjee

Organisation: Nautanki Theatre Company (community practice since early 2000s; incorporated 2012; ACNC registered charity; DGR 1 status)

Location: Parramatta/Western Sydney, New South Wales

Pillars Addressed: Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story; Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure

1. About Nautanki Theatre Company

1.1 Our identity and purpose

Nautanki Theatre Company's roots in Western Sydney's South Asian community predate our formal incorporation. Neel Banerjee, our Artistic Director and CEO, migrated to Australia in 2003 and began the community theatre practice that would become Nautanki, drawing on deep engagement with the Bangla Association of NSW and with South Asian migrant communities across Parramatta and Blacktown. The company was formally incorporated as a not-for-profit association under Fair Trading NSW in 2012, achieved DGR 1 (Deductible Gift Recipient) status in 2019, and was registered as an ACNC charity in 2022.

In January 2026, Nautanki's Board and Artistic Director came together for a facilitated Strategy Day. The phrase that emerged to capture who we are and what we stand for was simple and exact:

“Culture is Courage. Courage is Culture.”

This is not a slogan. It describes what it actually takes to be a South Asian migrant artist in Australia, to stand on a stage, tell your community's story, and ask a wider audience to see you as you are. It also describes the internal culture of our organisation. Our independent facilitator observed that Nautanki demonstrates “a level of courage, openness, respect and trust that is uncommon in Board and leadership settings.” That culture is what makes everything else possible.

1.2 Mission, vision and values

Mission: Nautanki Theatre is a leading voice in community and theatre arts.

Vision: We tell stories that celebrate inclusivity. We provide creative opportunities to CaLD artists by developing and producing theatre that expresses and challenges cultural identity.

Our 2026 Strategy Day produced an expanded, living set of organisational values through honest discussion. The values our Board named include: Culture, Tradition, Cross-Pollination, Knowledge Sharing, Courage, Access, Continuity, Connection, Creativity, Heritage, Innovation, Selflessness, Storytelling, Generosity, Integrity, Relevance, Honesty, Context, Justice, Open-mindedness, Recognition, Acceptance, Trust, and Compassion.

The most frequently named were Culture, Tradition, Cross-Pollination, Knowledge Sharing, Courage, and Access. These six words tell you everything about what we do, and everything about what national cultural policy must protect.

1.3 Track record

We are the only theatre company in NSW dedicated specifically to South Asian voices. In the decade since formal incorporation, Nautanki has:

- Presented eight major theatrical productions at Riverside Theatre Parramatta, Tom Mann Theatre Surrey Hills, KXT Broadway, and Campbelltown Arts Centre, engaging more than 200 actors, performers, crew and support staff;
- Founded the Annual South Asian Theatre Mela in 2016, now in its ninth year, a bilingual grassroots festival of South Asian theatre held at Riverside Theatre Parramatta;
- Delivered Drama~Sutra, a multi-cycle playwriting development program for Australian South Asian playwrights (three full cycles completed);
- Established the Ernest Thalayasingam MacIntyre Award, recognising outstanding South Asian contribution to Australian theatre;
- Reached more than 10,000 audience members at live events, and more than 50,000 people across Western Sydney annually through broader programs;
- Been formally acknowledged by Riverside Theatre Parramatta as its cultural presenting partner for Western Sydney (2019);
- Delivered the Theque Qalander program for emerging artists new to performance, and cross-city collaborations with KXT Broadway, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Macquarie University, and Parramatta's LIT! Festival;
- Received funding from Parramatta City Council, the SBW Foundation, Multicultural NSW, and the Department of Community Services.

Throughout our entire history, our Artistic Director and all operational staff have worked as volunteers. This is both a testament to extraordinary dedication and a damning indictment of the structural conditions facing independent CaLD arts companies. Our 2026 Strategy Day formally placed "appropriate remuneration for artists and creatives" on the Board decision log, a goal we cannot achieve without sustained funding.

2. Pillar 2 — A Place for Every Story

2.1 The chronic underfunding of independent CaLD companies

Revive acknowledged that culturally and linguistically diverse artists and organisations are creators of Australian culture, not a footnote to it. Nautanki Theatre Company welcomes that recognition. However, recognition without resourcing is inadequate, and after more than two decades of community practice, we speak from hard experience.

South Asians are the largest migrant community in Australia, concentrated most densely in Western Sydney (Parramatta, Blacktown, Hills District). They have strong cultural appetite and considerable disposable income directed at entertainment. Yet they remain almost entirely absent from the stages of Australia's publicly funded theatre sector. Nautanki exists to change that. But we cannot do it on volunteer labour alone.

Our strategic analysis is unambiguous: our greatest single threat is dependency on project grants and vulnerability to arts funding cuts. Our entire operational team is volunteer or minimally compensated. We plan two productions annually, a national theatre festival, and a playwriting development program on forecasted ticket revenue of approximately \$30,000 per year. The gap between what we do and what we are resourced to do is not a planning failure. It is a policy failure.

The competitive grant model consistently disadvantages organisations like Nautanki that:

- Lack the administrative capacity to produce grant-competitive applications;
- Operate without multi-year funding security, making long-term artistic planning and artist employment impossible;
- Serve communities not traditionally captured by mainstream cultural participation metrics;
- Are geographically located in outer Western Sydney, far from the cultural infrastructure and networks of the inner city.

We call on the new National Cultural Policy to introduce a dedicated, multi-year funding stream for independent CaLD performing arts companies — distinct from competitive project grants and not in competition with larger mainstream organisations. Equity in cultural expression requires structural equity in resourcing.

2.2 Against censorship, political interference, and racism in the arts

Nautanki Theatre Company makes an unambiguous call: the new National Cultural Policy must contain explicit, enforceable protections against censorship, political interference, and racism in the arts.

One of the core values that emerged from our 2026 Strategy Day, through honest discussion about what we stand for, was Justice. Justice means artists from migrant and diaspora backgrounds should not have to navigate additional layers of

gatekeeping, ideological scrutiny, or cultural dismissal simply because the stories they tell are unfamiliar to some.

Nautanki's work, which includes stories about migration, identity, belonging, domestic violence within diaspora communities, the South Asian experience of contemporary Australia, is precisely the work that political interference most endangers. These stories are sometimes uncomfortable. That is why they matter, and why they need protection.

We ask that the new National Cultural Policy:

- Enshrine artistic freedom as a foundational principle, affirming the right of artists to create without fear of political reprisal or ideological censorship;
- Establish clear, transparent appeal mechanisms for artists and organisations who believe funding decisions have been influenced by non-artistic criteria;
- Require all government-funded arts bodies to adopt and publish anti-racism policies covering grant-making, programming, and employment, with independent accountability mechanisms;
- Ensure peer assessment panels systematically represent CaLD, First Nations, and independent artist perspectives, not only those of established institutions.

3. Pillar 4 — Strong Cultural Infrastructure

3.1 A new Arts and Cultural Centre for the Parramatta–Blacktown corridor

Among the core values our Board named in January 2026 were Access and Continuity. Access: the conviction that culture must be reachable by everyone, not gatekept by geography or income. Continuity: the belief that cultural practice must be sustained across generations, not left to survive in gaps between project grants. Both values point to the same structural need: Western Sydney needs its own dedicated arts and cultural infrastructure.

The Parramatta–Blacktown–Hills District corridor is home to one of the most culturally diverse populations in the world, the largest concentration of South Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, East Asian and First Nations Australians in the country. Yet cultural infrastructure in this region remains critically underprovided relative to the size of the population and the vibrancy of its creative life.

Nautanki's own ten-year strategic vision states it plainly: in Year 10, we want our own space to create and showcase work. We have been building toward that for more than two decades. We should not still be waiting. Our Strategy Day placed Nautanki's visibility and space, including partnerships with venues such as Eternity Playhouse and KXT, explicitly in our planning log, reflecting how central the question of space is to our sustainability.

Independent and community artists in Western Sydney currently lack:

- Affordable, accessible rehearsal space;

- Flexible black-box performance space configurable for community-scale events and festivals;
- Production and technical facilities within reach of emerging companies;
- Long-term residency arrangements that allow companies like Nautanki to develop work over time, not just hire a venue for a short season.

Nautanki's 2019–20 pilot project supported by Blacktown Council demonstrated both the appetite and the need. Leo Kelly Arts Centre in Blacktown and Bankstown Arts Centre are prospective partners in a broader ecosystem, but the gap remains enormous. Riverside Theatre Parramatta has been an invaluable partner, but one theatre venue cannot serve as the entire cultural infrastructure for a region of this size and diversity.

Nautanki Theatre Company calls for significant federal capital investment in a dedicated Arts and Cultural Centre for the Parramatta–Blacktown corridor, designed for and with migrant and diaspora communities and independent artists.

The centre should provide:

- Culturally appropriate spaces for cross-cultural performance, rehearsal, and community gathering, designed in genuine consultation with South Asian, Pacific, First Nations and other cultural communities;
- Affordable hire rates and long-term residency arrangements for independent companies;
- Dedicated facilities for emerging and young artists aged 16–24, with training, development, and presentation capability;
- A permanent home for the Annual South Asian Theatre Mela and similar cross-cultural festivals.

This investment would be a lasting commitment to the proposition that 'a place for every story' means infrastructure for every community, not just those within walking distance of the CBD.

4. The Next Generation of Cultural Creators

4.1 A paid arts internship program for young people aged 16–24

Selflessness and Generosity were two of the values our Board named in January 2026. They describe, with uncomfortable accuracy, how the Australian arts sector currently sustains itself: on the unpaid or underpaid labour of people who love what they do. This is not a sustainable model, and it is not a just one.

The cultural sector regularly asks young Australians to contribute their creativity and labour for free. This is economically exploitative and structurally exclusive, it advantages young people with financial safety nets and disadvantages those from working-class, migrant, and outer-suburban backgrounds: precisely the communities whose stories Australian culture most needs.

Nautanki's Theque Qalander program has already nurtured emerging artists new to performance. We see every year the hunger among young people from CaLD backgrounds to pursue creative careers, and the structural barriers that prevent them. For many, the choice is between a creative path they cannot afford and a paid path that leads them away from culture. That is a loss to them, and a loss to Australia.

We propose that the new National Cultural Policy establish a federally funded, two-year part-time paid internship program for young people aged 16 to 24. The program should:

- Provide a meaningful stipend that allows participation regardless of economic background, including young people from migrant and low-income households;
- Be part-time in structure, enabling young people to balance education, family responsibilities, or other commitments;
- Be hosted by independent and community arts organisations, as opposed to major cultural institutions, ensuring geographic and cultural breadth in placement;
- Include structured mentorship, skills development across performance, production, digital arts and administration, and clear pathways toward professional creative practice;
- Prioritise young people from CaLD, First Nations, regional, and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

If Australia is serious about the long-term health and diversity of its creative sector, it must invest in the creative workers of the future, not as a peripheral initiative, but as a central, funded commitment of national cultural policy.

5. Summary of Recommendations

Nautanki Theatre Company respectfully calls on the Australian Government to ensure the new National Cultural Policy includes the following commitments:

- Establish a dedicated, multi-year funding stream for independent CaLD performing arts organisations, structurally separate from and non-competitive with mainstream arts funding, to address the chronic underfunding that prevents these companies from paying their artists and fulfilling their cultural and social value.
- Enshrine artistic freedom as a foundational policy principle, with enforceable protections against censorship, political interference, and racism in grant-making and programming, including transparent appeals mechanisms and independent oversight of peer assessment panels.
- Commit significant federal capital investment to a new Arts and Cultural Centre in the Parramatta–Blacktown corridor, designed for and with migrant and diaspora communities and independent artists, providing rehearsal,

performance, residency and development infrastructure for Western Sydney's diverse creative community.

- Create a federally funded, two-year part-time paid internship program for young people aged 16–24, hosted by independent and community arts organisations, with priority access for young people from CaLD, First Nations, regional, and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Australia's cultural story is incomplete without the voices of its migrant and diaspora communities. Nautanki Theatre Company has spent more than two decades relying on volunteer labour, on small grants, on community goodwill, and on courage to ensure those voices have a place on the Australian stage. We have done this because we believe, deeply and collectively, that culture and courage are one in the same.

The new National Cultural Policy has a historic opportunity to change the structural conditions that make this work so difficult, and to invest in the cultural future that Western Sydney — and Australia — deserves. We urge the Government to seize it.



Suzanne Pereira

Chair, Nautanki Theatre Company

On behalf of the Nautanki Board of Directors, Artistic Director Neel Banerjee and the Nautanki Theatre community of artists and audiences

24 May 2026

