



The Honourable Tony Burke, Minister for the Arts and the National Cultural Policy Team,

WE DON'T HAVE A THEATRE COMPANY IN AUSTRALIA AND HOW FOOTBALL CAN SAVE US!

Firstly, my apologies, there is a lot in this somewhat overloaded submission. I am currently producing three theatre events and (as Lincoln didn't quite say) this was the shortest letter I could write in the limited time available. Thanks for doing this!

It is inspiring to have a National Cultural Policy discussed again. The arts are an essential engine that links this country together and helps shape our sense of self and our connection with our fellow citizens; they have never been more important than they are now as technology and contemporary work patterns lead us towards greater fragmentation and fewer unifying experiences.

My name is Chris Tomkinson and I am an actor, director, writer and producer, born and raised in Sydney, working in theatre for 30 years. I have in that time worked with companies including Sydney Theatre Company, Bell Shakespeare, Sport for Jove, Pinchgut Opera, Monkey Baa, CDP, Melbourne Festival, Sydney Festival, Australian Theatre for Young People and Belvoir, across the country in urban, regional, remote and disadvantaged contexts, as well as producing, acting in and directing work on the independent scene in Sydney and Melbourne with shows that have toured the eastern states on multiple occasions. I am currently Creative Producer and Business Manager (and actor) for the independent company Sport for Jove Theatre.

In recent decades budget cuts have savaged the small-to-medium sector and drastically reduced the capacity of these companies to create funded work – work that is the foundation on which this industry stands. Opportunities for development of artists have vanished – these were jobs that sustained the profession artistically and financially. These cuts have also reduced the capacity of major companies to increase wages in-line with inflation, leading to the increased impoverishment of artists across the country as they subsidise the essential work of the arts in our country with their under-rewarded labour.

We need to reconceive our theatre companies' relationships with our community and build a **strong cultural infrastructure** from the grassroots to the stars wherein community participation by youth and adult alike is connected with a theatre company in the same way a football club has grassroots 'feeder clubs' that connect with the peak professional excellence of star performers.

I put it to you that **we don't actually have theatre companies in Australia** – we have theatre production houses. We would never say we had a ballet or contemporary dance company if it didn't employ full-time dancers, or an orchestra [*and there's one of those in every capital city*] if it didn't employ full-time musicians. It is essential that dancers and musicians are able to train and perform together regularly; without this, they cannot achieve excellence. It is the same with theatre and from this perspective we can see that our theatre culture – with its near-amateur restrictions minimising the **centrality of the artist** – is a profound impoverishment of our cultural potential. We need theatre companies that can employ artists full-time, with access to ongoing training under a single artistic vision that unites the work – in the way a coach leads a football club.



Within the current system, actors are forced to compete for limited opportunities, in an environment of cost-of-living inflation, in urban areas suffering an accommodation crisis, and then are expected to somehow squeeze in the maintenance of the high-level skills of an arts practice in between the non-artistic jobs required to simply stay alive. It is *their* cheap labour and endurance under these pressures that subsidises the arts more than any other factor. And while this life is a sacrifice that many commit to with stoic fortitude due to a belief in the value to society of live performance and the creation of Australian stories – which are essential as the ‘software’ that shapes the country’s values – it is not a sustainable system for the excellence our communities need to thrive.

A theatre company structured with the ambition of a symphony orchestra or ballet company could forge a highly skilled and powerful ensemble of actors able to work on a scale that enriches our nation, developing works that inspire and unite, representing us boldly to the world and connecting deeply to our community at home.

Like a football club, whose players chat with fans at the fence after a game and visit schools and amateur clubs to pass on skills and inspiration, this model of a theatre company could leverage its ‘team’ of ‘stars’ to help build the next generation of artists and audiences. By **engaging the audience post-show at the theatre, in educational settings, and in community groups** – in both urban and rural areas – the artists would build a strong, emotionally-engaged fan-base from the grass-roots to the stars. Within this ecology of arts practice, active participation becomes as important as spectatorship and brings with it a raft of profoundly positive and well-documented health and educational benefits.

This vision requires long-term planning and commitment to supportive financial structures. Only then will we be able to build a theatre culture that proudly represents all Australians. A culture in which **every story has a place**, where the full diversity of Australia’s people can see themselves reflected – from our **First Nations people** to the most recent arrivals to our shores. A culture where we recognise ourselves, sense our shared humanity and touch the transcendent joy that art can kindle in the soul, healing and uniting us as a nation with a big heart and a bold future.

Let’s build this theatre company and build a future for all Australians where they are truly part of their own culture!

Jovially

Chris Tomkinson

