

17 000 Hours: A Case for the Universal Basic Income for Artists

There are moments in an artist's life where someone doesn't just give you money - they give you time. And time, for artists, is survival.

Also rent. Rent is also survival. But time sounds more poetic, so let's start there.

My name is Margaret Thanos and I am a professional theatre director in Sydney. I am in residence at Belvoir St theatre and most recently directed *The River* at Sydney Theatre Company in the Sydney Opera House. I am the youngest ever director to direct for both of these companies. I was featured in *Vogue Australia* last month.

Today I want to talk about what it took to get me here.

Before I received the Andrew Cameron Fellowship at Belvoir St Theatre, I was already directing constantly. I was making work obsessively, ambitiously, and completely unsustainably. I had already received the Sandra Bates Director's Award from Ensemble Theatre in Kirribilli - my first doorway into fully paid work. This award gave me the opportunity to be an assistant director on two productions through their 2023 season. Until that point, I had never been paid to work in theatre. This award first cracked open the possibility that maybe there was space for me in the Australian theatre industry beyond making shows in warehouses. But it wasn't easy.

In 2023, I was assistant directing at the Ensemble Theatre in Kirribilli from 9:30am to 6pm at night, and then racing across town to Newtown so I could direct my own show - a 15 person production of Lucy Prebble's *A Very Expensive Poison* from 6:30 until 10:30pm. I would then get home, write notes on whichever show needed prioritising until about 1am and repeat the cycle again. I did this almost every day for a period of 6 months, alongside which I also did weekend rehearsals for both productions. On nights where I wasn't directing, I was out seeing shows at my own cost trying to find inspiration and get better at the thing I so desperately wanted to be: a truly great director.

Since 2022, I have directed 10 productions. I have also assistant directed seven. I have produced 6 productions, not all of them mine.

Out of all the 10 shows that I directed in the last four years, I have been paid for two (my most recent ones - my debut shows at Belvoir St and Sydney Theatre Company earlier this year). Every other one of those shows was a profit share production, in which I sacrificed my already meagre cut of somewhere around \$1000 per show in order to ensure that the artists who were donating their time to my career progression got paid that few dollars more.

If I add up all of the hours that I have worked for free in my career it comes to approximately 17000 hours. I did a series of calculations to get to this, including adding up rehearsals and

meeting time that I've done in the last seven years since I started my career. If I were to have been paid for all of that time that I have spent (even at minimum wage), I would have made an extra \$600 000 that I do not currently have.

So what am I here to say?

In Australia, we do not get paid to become great artists.

It doesn't matter how much talent you hold, promise you demonstrate, profile you gain or ideas you have - ultimately if you want to be an artist in Australia, you'd better hope you've got money, time, privilege and patience.

What this leads to is a homogenising of the art. If a large portion of the people who become artists come from a background of privilege because their parents can afford to pay for their drama school fees, or support them while they work for free it means similar ideas, similar stories and similar ways of making are emerging on repeat. This means we don't grow our national identity and artistic voice, because there's not enough new ways of thinking entering the pool.

You, the reader might simply be thinking that this is just a rant from an unsatisfied artist - but you'd be wrong. I'm one of the most satisfied artists that I know, and that's because I've been afforded an opportunity that very few others have: time to grow.

At the end of 2023, I was in the middle of a rehearsal for my summer season production of *Sport for Jove's Timon of Athens* when I got a phone call from Belvoir St Theatre. My series of interviews for the Andrew Cameron Fellowship had been successful and I was being offered the position.

So what is the fellowship? And why is it relevant?

The Andrew Cameron Fellowship is a resident position at Belvoir St Theatre that gives a young creative (usually an aspiring director) the chance to work at the company for a period of two years. That's right, a golden goose of Australian theatre: job security for an emerging artist.

In the Fellowship you are required to assistant direct two productions per year and to participate in the life of the company, but otherwise your time is yours to create and make as you wish. Getting this Fellowship was like winning the goddamn lottery to me. Finally, I didn't have to worry about how I was gonna pay rent or food or any of the things that I needed to live. I could finally think about one thing and one thing only:

What stories did I really want to tell?

Over the two years of my Fellowship, my imagination cracked open and I feel that I entirely found my voice as an artist. I gained confidence, I worked under some of the greatest and most

experienced Australian directors we have like Eamon Flack, Hannah Goodwin and Simon Phillips, I got exponentially better at running a room and working to professional standards. Eventually it came time for me to pitch my own projects, and I did so with a confidence that 2023 me wouldn't have known. There was no more scrambling around, I knew that no one could take what I had: which was a genuinely unique perspective.

But none of that could have happened without the chance to dream.

What I wish, for all of my fellow artists - especially those in Gen Z like me - is the same chance.

I wholeheartedly believe that the Universal Basic Income for Artists would completely transform artistic practice in this country.

And the thing is: this is not a fantasy policy dreamed up by artists sitting around in black turtlenecks saying "what if society valued us?" - although, to be clear, that would be an excellent meeting and I would attend.

Ireland has already done it.

In 2022, the Irish Government launched the Basic Income for the Arts pilot, giving 2,000 artists and creative arts workers €325 (about AUD \$528) a week, paid unconditionally, so they could actually focus on their creative practice rather than live in a constant state of financial panic. It was designed as a three-year pilot, with participants randomly selected from eligible applicants and compared against a control group, meaning this wasn't just a nice symbolic gesture. It was evidence gathering.

And what happened was both remarkable and, to any artist, completely unsurprising.

Artists who received the payment spent more time on their creative practice. They completed more new work. They were more likely to remain working in the arts. They invested more money back into their own practice - in materials, workspaces, equipment, training, and all the necessary stuff that sits underneath the finished piece of beauty an audience eventually sees. In other words, when artists were given stable support, they did not disappear into a haze of decadent leisure. They didn't 'bludge'. They worked. They made. They got better.

Because I'd die if I couldn't make my art.

I *have* to do it.

I have a compulsion that must be satiated to create beautiful things.

The Irish scheme directly challenged the most non-evidence based argument against paying artists properly: that support will somehow make us lazy. This is a very frustrating stereotype, because most artists I know are already doing the labour of three people, for the income of half

a person, with the email responsiveness of a small government department. The pilot showed the opposite. Financial stability did not reduce ambition. It unlocked it, much like my Fellowship.

The reported impacts went beyond creative output. Participants experienced reduced financial stress, lower anxiety, improved wellbeing, and greater confidence in their careers. This matters because artists are not little content machines. We are human beings. We make better work when we are not trying to rehearse new Australian writing while mentally calculating whether our Opal card will decline. You can only ask the bus driver to give you a freebie so many times before you wonder whether the artistic life is worthwhile.

And here is the part Australia should find impossible to ignore: the scheme did not simply cost money. It created value. Analysis of the pilot found it generated social and economic benefits greater than its cost, including through increased arts activity, increased spending within the creative economy, stronger sector retention, and improved mental wellbeing. One cost-benefit analysis found that every €1 invested returned an estimated €1.39 in social value. That is nearly a 40% return. That is not indulgence. That is return on investment. In this age of needing to prove the economic benefits of everything as if the entire world functions on economic prosperity alone - how could our Federal Government say no to a program that provides both additional economic benefit *and* increased beauty, national identity and artistic practice to our country. It seems like a no-brainer to do a trial of this project in my eyes.

The pilot was so successful that Ireland has now moved to make the scheme permanent from 2026, with 2,000 eligible artists to receive €325 per week in three-year cycles. Ireland has, in effect, looked at the arts sector and said: perhaps if we want artists to keep making the work that defines our national identity, we should stop making them do it while financially drowning. Sensible. Somewhat frustrating that we weren't the ones to lead it internationally, don't you think?

Because if Ireland can do it, Australia can too.

We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We do not need another roundtable where everyone agrees artists are important and then goes home having paid no artists to attend the roundtable. We have a working model. We have the evidence. We have a comparable arts sector full of brilliant people making extraordinary work under conditions that would make most professionals call Fair Work before lunch.

A Universal Basic Income for Artists in Australia would not be about giving artists a free ride. It would be about giving artists a fair chance. A chance to develop properly. A chance to stay in the industry long enough to become excellent. A chance to make work from imagination rather than desperation.

Because what Ireland has proven is very simple: when artists are given time, stability and dignity, they do not make less.

Right now, too many extraordinary artists leave the industry before they ever reach their full potential - not because they lack talent, discipline, or ambition, but because they cannot

financially endure the years required to build sustainable careers. We lose voices before they mature. We lose innovation before it arrives. We lose entire bodies of work because someone looked at their bank account and thought, "I simply cannot keep doing this."

And then, five years later, the same industry says, "Where are all the mid-career artists?"

They are working in corporate jobs that weren't their first choice, but they had no other option. How can it be that in one of the most privileged nations on earth we have anyone who lives without choice? For these artists, it was either dinner on the table, the chance to raise a family or any other number of 'normal' Australian things vs. the chance to be an artist. You can see why so many quit. But we don't have to accept this dichotomy as the status quo.

If society values art, it must value the conditions required to make art possible.

We already produce some of the best work in the world across theatre, film, music, literature, visual art, dance, design and performance. We already have the talent. We already have the hunger. We already have artists willing to give their lives to this work.

What we do not have, yet, is the courage to support artists before they are successful.

That is what a Universal Basic Income for Artists would do. It would not wait until an artist has won the award, sold out the season, been reviewed in the national papers, or been retrospectively declared "important." It would support the years before that. The years of development and risk. The years where an artist is becoming the person who might one day make the work this country is proud to claim as quintessentially Australian.

Because that is the part no one sees. They see the opening night. They see the profile. They see the production photo. They see the award. They do not see the 17,000 unpaid hours. They do not see the late-night notes, the train rides between rehearsals, the invoices, the panic, the compromise, the quiet heartbreak of wondering whether the thing you are best at is also the thing that will make your life impossible.

I was lucky. I was given time before I had to leave.

And look what happened.

So my question is very simple: how many other artists are we losing because they were never given the same chance?

Australia should not be waiting politely at the back of the room for someone else to lead. We are a country obsessed with telling ourselves we punch above our weight. Fine. Let's prove it. Let's become the country that does not just celebrate artists once they have survived, but helps them survive in the first place.

A Universal Basic Income for Artists should not belong to the left or the right. It should belong to anyone who has ever been changed by a song, a film, a painting, a book, a play, a dance, a

story. It should belong to anyone who believes that a nation is not only measured by what it extracts, builds, sells or exports, but by what it imagines.

Everybody needs art.

Therefore, everybody needs artists.

And artists need time (and money).

- *Margaret Thanos, director*