

National Cultural Policy Submission Panel

To Whom It May Concern:

Before we begin:

“Attention, all the children in the room. I have something important I need you to know I am dedicating this story to you.

Actually, no I’m not. Start that again. Attention, children: I am dedicating this story to you and also to some other altogether more... unfortunate creatures. Creatures who walk among you. Creatures who are right now probably not even listening to this dedication, but instead thinking about some cursed things like... paperwork, or renovations, or that most treacherous of enemies: car-parking! Creatures more commonly known as grown-ups.

Dedicate this story to the grown-ups?! And yes, children, I know, but you see... these grown-ups would do well to hear a story such as this – a story that will take them, and you, so far into the deepest parts of outer space, indeed the deepest parts of yourself, that you will re-emerge right back where you started. A story that will remind them, children, of the wisdom you already keep.

And so, if to dedicate a story to someone is to say to them: this is my gift to you, then... yes. I was the right the first time. This story is dedicated to all the children in the room – to you, and you, and you – and perhaps most especially the children from which your grown-ups grew. For all grown-ups were children once. Although few of them remember it.

And with that done... we may begin.”

Excerpt from *The Great Un-Wondering of Wilbur Whittaker* by Dan Giovannoni and Luke Kerridge.

Barking Gecko Theatre is based in Western Australia and creates theatre for children and their families. We are honoured to make our work on Whadjuk Country, the ancestral lands of the Noongar people. Barking Gecko has a global reputation for crafting theatre of ambition, sophistication and scale. The stories we tell on stage fuse big ideas and questions with timeless, imaginative worlds. We speak to children in the here and now – to their inner lives and experience of growing up in a complex world.



Let us begin with children and young people.

Children and young people who are courageous, creative and culturally engaged. Who attend, participate in, create and tell incredible stories. Whose agency and capacity are recognised. Who are spoken to as a whole person, in the here and now. Whose voices are heard and where we look at the world from their point of view, and that perspective is built into the art and culture that we make. Now imagine these children and young people live in a world where curiosity is the beginning of all creativity. That the world leans into the unknown to discover new ideas. That the world celebrates the unusual, the wonderful, the 'other', and is curious about other perspectives, other stories, and other possibilities.

Now how far away from this goal are we and how will a National Cultural Policy bring us closer to this goal?

In any National Cultural Policy there must be something for the smallest, the youngest and the ones whose voice is the quietest. The policy must affect change across the whole of government to embed change in the processes, policy and procedures that impact the cultural lives of children and young people be they from the back streets of Boulder to the main street of Sydney.

At various town hall meetings, the Minister for the Arts spoke about quotas for television and streaming services especially children and young people's programming – how can this also be applied to the live performing arts sector? Currently there are three federally funded organisations who make work with or for young people. There is not one in Western Australia. Are these three federally funded organisations expected to do the heavy lifting when it comes to servicing the children of Australia?

How do the unfunded companies continue to be diverse, strong institutions that create pathways for stories, for employment pathways, for education pathways? That ensure theatre is accessible to the broadest range of young audiences, that strengthen the theatre industry and its artists and that inspires and encourages creative learning in teachers, students and the broader community.

How do we not stray to the commercial realm of the creative world where stories are churned out for the masses and do not reflect the children and young people in the world – who yearn to see themselves and their stories?

Without a dedicated funding stream for Children and Young People's companies we will continue to struggle in funding rounds where we are compared to theatre and performing arts companies for adults.

Barking Gecko Theatre
Whadjuk Country
1/28 John St, Northbridge WA 6003
PO Box 23 Northbridge WA 6003

T 08 6184 4905
ABN 23 052 424 683

barkinggecko.com.au



Without companies dedicated to the unique skill of making work for and with children and young people how will these stories be served? How will the next generation of performers, directors, designers, technicians and managers be born?

Outside the well-trodden argument of “arts for art’s sake” the economic and social impact of this sector and the wider arts sector must be measured correctly, in a way that is accepted by government at all levels and is more importantly useable by the sector.

Recognition that the sector may not turn everyone into an employee of the sector, but it does create employees in other sectors that think creatively and employ creativity to undertake their employment. Recognition that other sectors like Health, Justice, Youth and Education often turn to the Arts sector to provide solutions to problems and barriers in the sectors that they serve. Recognition that whilst we recognise the benefit of the arts on mental and physical health, wellbeing, connection and understanding we shouldn’t be expected to become health workers to justify our existence.

Current funding models force many companies to become “everything to everyone”, when these companies should be “something to everyone”.

Current federal funding models make it almost impossible for Western Australian stories to be seen in Eastern Australia and to have advocates in the East who have experienced Western Australian work when it comes time to decide during a panel or in a funding round.

In the funding of and looking at the output of organisations dedicated to children and young people recognition that their work and associated expenses, cost the same as adult performing arts companies – if not more, but we can only charge at most half the price of the ticket or registration fee.

In the words of Gough Whitlam “It’s Time” – it’s time for a change in the way the sector is viewed – to be taken as seriously, instead of as a nice to have. It’s time to re-evaluate how the sector is funded and supported. It’s time to realise this includes all levels of government, venues, producer’s, artist, technicians, administrators and community. It’s time to build what could be instead of retro fit what is.

Kind Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ryan Taaffe", written in a cursive style.

Ryan Taaffe
CEO and Executive Producer
Barking Gecko Theatre
ryan.taaffe@barkinggecko.com.au

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