

National Cultural Policy Submission

Dancenorth Australia

Submitted: On behalf of a not-for-profit arts organisation

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:

First Nations

Dancenorth creates and works on the land of the Wulgurukaba people of the Gurumbilbarra and Yunbenun in Tropical North Queensland, where the desert meets the sea.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were Australia's first dancers. We are continuing to find ways to hand over space and share resources and capabilities with community to enable First Nations voices to be self-determined, visible and celebrated — from studio and venue space to artist employment, to new work creation, to artist residencies, to grant writing, human resources, IT and finance.

The making of *Dungarri Nya Nya Ngarri Bi Nya* in 2021 has shown us how we can support First Nations-led work. The two-year creative development was grounded in exchange and reciprocity and revealed how we could create and collaborate together. The process required all partners in the work to contribute significant resources, including time, and we would like to be able to do much more.

In the National Cultural Policy, we support the inclusion of the principle of First Nations first, recognising the important role and voices of First Nations people in our cultural life and in funding that supports that development. We would also welcome new ways of thinking about, and investing in, First Nations-led partnerships with major festival platforms and National Performing Arts Partnership Framework companies to enable new works to be realised through ongoing collaboration.

A Place for every story

The stories that Dancenorth creates and shares are infused with place and could not be made anywhere else. Grounded in regionality — emanating from the Torres Strait to the wide western and northern plains of North Queensland — our stories are infused with the different perspectives and lived experiences of the artists and arts workers who come together in Townsville to collaborate and co-create.

Research and development — the creation of new stories — is a priority for Dancenorth, and in 2021 we created and premiered six new works in Townsville. The stories are unique, and they translate to local, national, and international audiences. We see it as a priority, indeed a responsibility, to ensure these works are seen by as many people in as many places as possible.

Sustaining a company in regional Australia to create and present these stories is both a great strength and a challenge. Ongoing challenges include difficulty and expense in attracting skilled staff

and collaborators, smaller local audiences and box office revenues, high travel and freight costs, and fewer potential corporate partners and philanthropic donors. Even with the security of National Performing Arts Partnership Framework funding, we begin every year with a gap in resources that needs to be filled to keep our people employed and our doors open.

In the National Cultural Policy, we would welcome continued investment in regional stories in a way that acknowledges the unique conditions involved in making and presenting new works in and for regional Australia.

Centrality of the artist

In their work, dancers are asked to show up every day - physically, mentally, and emotionally. It's not easy for a dancer to hide or to have a quiet day. They bring with them all that they are, and they give everything of themselves.

At Dancenorth, we acknowledge the unique nature of this work by caring for our dancers and the arts professionals who work with us and holding them with respect. This is something that we hope could be translated to the broader community in the National Cultural Policy through a recognition of professional artists and arts workers as essential workers. They are workers who are highly trained in their technical fields and who are committed to their extremely difficult and demanding pursuits.

Creating and supporting jobs in North Queensland is a priority for Dancenorth and we are committed to sustaining a full-time Ensemble of dancers. Despite this goal being central to our vision, our biggest challenge is resourcing this — our core funding falls significantly short of the cost of employing seven dancers for 36 weeks each year and we make up the gap with project grants and touring fees. Without ongoing financial security, we risk losing dancers and staff to opportunities elsewhere. This is a story all too familiar in regional centres. Resolving this issue is essential for our company so that we can continue to nurture our people and create new work.

The health and wellbeing of our staff and collaborators is central to our ethos. We work diligently to advocate for the wellbeing of artists and people working in the creative sector, acknowledging both the unique challenges of this time as well as the propensity for burnout within the arts. We are conscious of continually adapting to industry change, promoting safe work environments, increasing diversity in the workplace and seeding future creative workforces via our artistic capacity and leadership, and professional development programs.

Beyond our core team, Dancenorth offers training, mentorships, professional and career development to a diversity of artists from around Australia and New Zealand through our Artistic Capacity and Leadership Development Program. Offering these opportunities for independent practitioners, makers and young dance artists has become an essential part of the work we do in developing our industry and our reputation as a national hub for creative research and artistic development. We are truly proud to be able to offer this from our home base in Tropical North Queensland.

In the National Cultural Policy, we strongly support the prioritisation of funding for, and mechanisms to support, the employment and wellbeing of professional artists and arts workers. For example, we would welcome funded programs to support professional training and career development for

artists and arts workers, and encourage consideration of the role of the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework companies in providing this industry support at scale.

Strong institutions

Recognition as one of Australia's major performing arts companies means Dancenorth now sits beside the other 38 leading companies with guaranteed stability of eight-year funding. We are thrilled to join the other new companies that have been invited into the Framework, all of whom represent unique and important voices.

We move into the coming years with a heightened sense of responsibility and gratitude for being able to do the work that we do and take seriously our role to support the health and vitality of our sector more broadly by continuing to find ways to offer opportunities to the many independent artists around the country.

Dancenorth thrives on the edge, geographically and creatively, embracing and celebrating the various guises of our 37-year history in Townsville. We recognise that companies, like individuals, transform over time and the current climate demands that we continue to evolve, to respond, to imagine. We embraced the period of pandemic disruption as an opportunity to thoughtfully ponder what is needed, for ourselves, our community, and our planet.

We learnt that at the heart of our thinking resides three central pillars of attention — body, nature and community. And we learnt we need to distribute our resources (financial, human, and creative) not only on what we are producing but perhaps more importantly on what we are contributing to the health of our creative ecology and the world we live in. With the right inputs (time, energy, people, space, place and heart), we can continue to build a company ecosystem — an institution where each activity undertaken supports and nourishes the others.

The National Cultural Policy could recognise the need for the sector — and the institutions within it to adapt and change with the times, rewarding and celebrating experimentation, and providing greater investment in a diversity of institutions across Australia, including in regional areas.

Reaching the audience

Dancenorth knows what it means to be a local, national, and global company. There is an ongoing challenge to balance our commitment to our hometown and home state audiences, with interstate and international touring to remain financially sustainable. We also know that passive modes of audiences engaging with artistic work is no longer enough.

The past two years has brought into sharp focus the increasing need to engage more deeply with our local community; to work with them, to learn from them, to include them, to dance with them. We are doing this by creating work and performance experiences that are increasingly concerned with the dissolving of traditional theatrical contexts and passive modes of consumption in favour of non-traditional site-specific locations and active participation. In this way, we are providing access to audiences who may not otherwise be able to, or want to, connect with the performing arts.

We are also consciously shifting towards deeper engagement when touring, with our intention being to spend additional day/s in each location we present work to connect more meaningfully

with each community via a suite of experiences. These include workshops and masterclasses, soft performances, lecture demonstrations, community feasts, Q&A's, schools shows, resource packs, facilitated sessions for local teachers / educators and genuine / general immersion within community. This approach highlights the increasing porosity and intersection between our professional ensemble and our Community Experience program.

Demand for Dancenorth's work is strong but resourcing for regional, interstate and international touring opportunities continues to be a challenge. Even so, it remains an important aspect of the work we do for myriad reasons including the need to share our work with our audiences beyond Townsville, both national and international. It is essential that we consider the value of the resources used to create our new works designed to tour and that all opportunities are explored to ensure there is a return on this significant investment.

In the National Cultural Policy, we would welcome continued investment in regional, interstate and international touring that recognises the resources required to build deeper relationships with audiences (not just fly in and fly out) and the important role that festival platforms such as the North Australia Festival for the Arts and Brisbane Festival, play in commissioning and presenting new work. We would also recommend ongoing investment in audience development, particularly in regional areas, in partnership with presenters and venues across the country

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why. Feel free to respond to any or all that are applicable to you:

First Nations

Queensland is uniquely positioned as the only place in the world that is home to both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their rich cultures providing significant cultural, learning and engagement opportunities for our whole community.

Our experiences in and with community remind us of the importance of different speeds and ways of working. We connect in countless ways including gatherings, exchanges, presentations, event hosting and many cups of tea.

It is our aim to be guided by our First Nations friends and community in Townsville and its surrounds, to work and walk together in changing the negative and often divisive narrative that has historically prevailed in this place. Together we will continue to connect and collaborate; to breathe life and build community strength.

A Place for every story

Dance, in all its forms, has the capacity to tell story like no other medium, Its transcendent qualities beyond the verbal intellectual - through the body — is inarguably its greatest power.

As a regional arts champion that has presented work in over 45 international arts festivals and venues around Australia and the world since 2015, Dancenorth implicitly understands and believes in the power of story, and the power of place.

We are deeply connected to our base in Townsville, North Queensland; our work simply could not be made elsewhere. Stories are shared via diverse performances and programs created for our global community of engaged audiences, from Townsville to Poruma Island, across Western and Central Queensland, Festivals in capital cities and venues around the globe.

Centrality of the artist

Artists are not just creators, they are a powerful workforce. In a place like Townsville, this kind of recognition and change in public perception would mean more young people might consider the arts as a viable career path, and more people might engage with and value creativity and decide to stay in the regions.

Townsville's young people continue to leave the regions for capital cities, where job prospects are thought to be more consistent. Projects like James Cook University's landmark Technology Innovation Complex — a new centre to be built for science, technology, engineering and mathematics study- as well as major infrastructure projects supported via 'Works for Queensland' may turn the tide by enhancing the reputation of Townsville and North Queensland attracting and retaining talent. These major investments must also be paired with investment in the cultural life of the state and the city to continue to attract and retain talent, and create liveable places that can offer a diverse range of experiences and opportunities for all people.

Strong Institutions

For each of the other four pillars to succeed, we need strong institutions, Strong institutions can provide not only secure work for artists and arts professionals but also safe, productive, and highly enjoyable creative environments in which to work and build careers. Not for profit arts organisations, such as Dancenorth, are powerful economic and social forces that can play an essential role as connectors of communities, magnets for tourism and major contributors to culture and wellbeing.

At Dancenorth we see ourselves as having a fundamental role to play in the health and sustainability of the growing arts and cultural sector in North Queensland. We will continue to work closely with the Queensland Government and Townsville City Council to support jobs, creativity and cultural development, education, community wellbeing and tourism in our city and our state.

Reaching the audience

When there is so much disruption and discomfort in the world around us, Dancenorth considers it a gift to be able to do the work that we do. The privilege of carrying the responsibility to take care of this extraordinary company; to serve the needs of our community, our artists, our peers and our

friends - in the hope that we can, in our own small way, contribute to the creation of (to quote Charles Eisenstein) 'the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.'

Our current line of creative enquiry is anchored around themes of nature, body and community, with a range of performances on the horizon which explore the intersectionality of these three facets of our existence. These newly imagined experiences will include progressions through bushland, site-specific participatory experiences, opportunities for shared food, conversation and dancing, reimagined workshops and open classes including outdoor offerings and sunrise performances set in nature. This is only made possible with the inclusion of community from the inception of a new idea right through to its premiere season.

Are there any other things that you would like to see in a National Cultural Policy?

The National Cultural Policy can spark an important and urgent discussion about environmental sustainability, climate change, and the arts sector. In particular, the sector needs to be supported in understanding the environmental impact of the work we do and supported to make the changes that will be needed to adapt to and mitigate for climate change.