

# National Cultural Policy Submission

## The Blue Room Theatre

### Towards a national cultural policy 2022: National Cultural Plan Submission

*Submitted: On behalf of the not for profit arts organisation, The Blue Room Theatre's Board, executive, team and members.*

#### Acknowledgement to Country

The Blue Room Theatre is located on the traditional lands of the Whadjuk peoples of the Noongar nation. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

#### Introduction

In 2013 the Australian Government released Creative Australia, our first ever National Cultural Policy. Although short lived, the sector welcomed this inaugural policy as a beginning of a cohesive national framework and roadmap for the whole sector.

In 2022, the incoming government is revisiting its commitment to revive the framework, and in principle The Blue Room Theatre continues to support this. This submission responds to the five pillars that are being (distilled from the 2013 policy) and presented for consultation which are:

1. **First Nations first:** recognising and respecting the crucial place of these stories at the centre of our arts and culture.
2. **A place for every story:** reflecting the diversity of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.
3. **The centrality of the artist:** supporting the artist as worker and celebrating their role as the creators of culture.
4. **Strong institutions:** providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts and culture.
5. **Reaching the audience:** ensuring our stories reach the right people at home and abroad.

The Blue Room Theatre Board is tasked constitutionally with responding to strategic and sectoral policy initiatives and we do so based on our continuing conversations, consultations and engagements with staff, advisory groups, working groups and sub-committees. This submission does not aim to speak on behalf of all the diverse voices that make up The Blue Room Theatre, but rather is a sound and confident representation based on our ongoing processes. Below we will address the submission components for each pillar.

<p>1. <b>First Nations first:</b> recognising and respecting the crucial place of these stories at the centre of our arts and culture.</p>	
Context	<p>Since 2013 the Australian arts and culture sector has come a long way in recognising and celebrating First Nations stories. It is the one policy area that all sides of politics agree on, in principle. This government's centring a constitutional change for an Indigenous Voice to parliament furthers the necessity for a National Cultural Policy to begin with this.</p>
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Agree on the need to centre not only Indigenous stories, but ways of knowing and being across organisations and sectors</li> <li>● Increased senior paid roles in arts and cultural organisations</li> <li>● Encourage more centralised advisory (paid) bodies to ensure protocols are understood and followed by non-Aboriginal arts practitioners and leaders.</li> </ul> <p>To embrace the principles and practice across the nation's sector for:  <u>Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017)</u>  <u>National Indigenous Arts and Cultural Authority (NIACA) Consultations Protocols For Using First Nations Cultural and Intellectual Property in the Arts</u>  <u>United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act 2021</u></p>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Truly understanding what is meant by First Nations first</li> <li>● Giving up colonial power and enabling true First Nations leadership and control over stories - self determination</li> <li>● Demand (and exploitation) on First Nations people to educate and provide governance voluntarily - consider a <u>Pay the Rent</u> model</li> </ul>
Relevance to TBRT	<p>Like many organisations The Blue Room Theatre is committed to decolonising practices and has a range of actions in place to achieve this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <u>Pledge</u></li> <li>● Equity and Justice Advisory Group</li> <li>● Embedded commitment via the Strategic Plan</li> <li>● Equity and Justice Action Plan</li> </ul> <p>The purpose of The Blue Room Theatres commitment is to centre First Nations and diverse stories, artists, staff and leadership ensuring that the work we present and support reflects the plurality of voices from the communities we serve.</p>

<p>2. <b>A place for every story:</b> reflecting the diversity of our stories and the contribution of all Australians as the creators of culture.</p>	
Context	<p>The increased need for diverse voices in the arts and access to the arts has been a growing priority across the sector since 2013. This was clearly demonstrated in the Parliamentary Inquiry report into <u>Sculpting a National Cultural Plan</u> in 2021. In addition, Diversity Arts Australia has now become the peak body funded by the Australia Council with the sole purpose of supporting the sector's stages, pages, airwaves and gallery walls to look, sound and feel more like our buses, trains, schools and shopping centres. This is clearly represented in their report, <u>Shifting the Balance</u>, and Beyond Tick Boxes. As these reports demonstrate, we have a long way to go.</p>
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Resourced, longer term, creative and community led practices</li> <li>● Resourced organisational improvements for accessibility for all Australians</li> <li>● Focus on breaking down areas of discrimination across race, culture, disability, sexuality, gender, and socio-economic status to ensure access to work participation and leadership roles</li> <li>● Nationally led and resourced cross-sector, cross artform, and cross cultural opportunities and programs.</li> <li>● Increased touring infrastructure to ensure regional Australian voices are shared and audiences have access to new work</li> <li>● Increased digital infrastructure that is affordable to maximise access for all Australians, particularly those with disabilities and who live regionally</li> </ul> <p>To embrace the principles and practice across the nation's sector for:  The <u>National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS)</u> and the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA)  <u>Australia's Disability Strategy 2021–31</u>  <u>Article 31, United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child</u>  Regional development plans, organisations and authorities</p>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Resources</li> <li>● Institutional power and structures at local, state and federal levels</li> <li>● Inhibiting collaborative responses from arts organisations with limited funding</li> </ul>
Relevance to TBRT	<p>As with Pillar One, The Blue Room Theatre is committed to decolonising practices and has a range of actions in place to achieve this:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <u>Pledge</u></li> <li>● Equity and Justice Advisory Group</li> <li>● Embedded commitment via the Strategic Plan</li> <li>● Equity and Justice Action Plan</li> </ul> <p>The purpose of The Blue Room Theatres commitment is to centre First Nations and diverse stories, artists, staff and leadership ensuring that the work we present and support reflects the plurality of voices from the communities we serve.</p>

<p>3. <b>The centrality of the artist:</b> supporting the artist as worker and celebrating their role as the creators of culture.</p>	
Context	<p>Respecting the value of the independent artists is central to a thriving sector and creative economy. This value must be equal to and competitive with positions within companies within the cultural sector and beyond. This value must be recognised through wages, training, employment conditions, K-12 education as well as academic pathways. In the Australia Council's <u>Re-imagine: What next? Consultation</u> report, much of what is possible is outlined. We agree with the premises of these findings in particular, those related to Theme 1: Survival and resilience.</p>
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Living wage for artists via a universal basic income model</li> <li>● Support in grant application and creative work in the JobSeeker compliance framework</li> <li>● An overhaul of the continued culture of overwork, busy-ness and poor remuneration</li> <li>● More grants to provide self-sustaining equitable careers and pathways (ie: long-term fellowships)</li> <li>● Innovative accessibility via digital technologies that provide creative avenues, increased capacity building and wealth creation opportunities</li> <li>● Intellectual property protections for artists work</li> <li>● Addressing systemic inequities, social justice issues and cultural safety across the sector</li> <li>● Pathways to arts and culture introduced in early education, resourced in schools and valued through to higher education</li> <li>● Government funded work placements in arts and cultural institutions for artists and arts-workers who are studying arts and creative/cultural industries at tertiary and tafe level</li> </ul>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Capitalistic and colonial structures preventing systemic change</li> <li>● Resourcing constraints within competing priorities (such as health / education, homelessness)</li> <li>● Institutional power and structures at local, state and federal levels</li> <li>● Inhibiting collaborative responses from arts organisations with limited funding</li> <li>● Increased higher education fees for arts and humanities worsening an already existing barrier to entry into the cultural and creative industries for artists and arts-workers</li> </ul>
Relevance to TBRT	<p>The Blue Room Theatre's core business is to support the development of the independent artists, arts-workers and their practice. Through COVID the impact of the livelihoods of independent artists/arts-workers was stark, yet many kept working (unpaid) and many lost the opportunity to show their work after enduring thousands of hours in creative development. The collective impact on artists/arts-workers should be considered from a work health and safety perspective. Where it is the systemic environment and conditions of work that need addressing as a priority. The Blue Room Theatre has a range of strategies to offset these pressures and challenges, however the cost of doing so is left to the organisation, which essentially reduces the resources spent on paying independent artist and building sustainable capacity pathways. This issue requires urgent systemic change.</p>

<p>4. <b>Strong institutions:</b> providing support across the spectrum of institutions which sustain our arts and culture.</p>	
Context	<p>Over the last 9 years we have seen the systematic undermining of the Australia Council for the Arts. As an arms-length institution the sector has been reminded of its critical place in the national ecology. The divisive cuts to the Australia Council impacted the full spectrum of institutions and run-off industries as well as independent artists (who felt it the most). The fall out saw the almost collapse of youth arts (in particular theatre) space impacting the opportunities for a generation of artists whose visibility and creative nurturing has been lost. The true impact of this policy debacle will be analysed in years to come. This cultural policy initiative is an opportunity to strengthen institutions in ways that they can sustain political attacks regardless of the government of the day.</p>
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Resources, resources, resources</li> <li>● Reposition the Australia Council in a way that is innovative, accessible and representative of the National Cultural Policy pillars.</li> <li>● Increase digital technology across the sector for streamlining administration, reporting and measuring impact</li> <li>● Invest in research of arts, culture, justice, equity and impact</li> <li>● Demonstrate the economic value that arts and culture contribute to society, and embed this recognition in policy across government institutions</li> <li>● Ensure equity across states and regions in access to Australia Council and Canberra based initiatives.</li> <li>● Drive and support ethical partnership development across the sector by encouraging new partners from green and renewable industries to formally connect with the arts and culture sector - through frameworks and co-funded initiatives.</li> <li>● Develop strategic, national initiatives that bring together arts and local government programs encouraging the development from the regions and to the regions.</li> </ul>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The diminished capacity of the Australia Council and institutions generally mean that recovery is the first step, and to get to thriving is another challenge.</li> <li>● Multi-agency support for arts and culture is imperative for this pillar to progress at any level. The <u>ANA has proposed a plan</u>, which we support towards the achievement of this.</li> <li>● Pillars 1-3 are dependent on this pillar being achieved.</li> </ul>
Relevance to TBRT	<p>The Blue Room Theatre has directly been affected by the defunding and strangulation of the Australia Council for the Arts. In 2020 The Blue Room Theatre lost their Four-Year Funding after many twenty years of supporting the production of new work and the development of artists. This has impacted the viability of a 33 year old organisation that was started by independent artists and exists to serve (and employ) independent artists. The necessity to address this issue is at the forefront of our advocacy.</p>

<p><b>5. Reaching the audience:</b> ensuring our stories reach the right people at home and abroad.</p>	
Context	<p>This pillar can be used to address a range of inequities from accessibility, new and underrepresented communities to new audiences experiencing new artforms in different ways. Sometimes this is seen as public value because we know that arts and cultural benefit us in our daily lives: our mental, physical and emotional health improve; as communities we have increased social cohesion, we are a more reflective and compassionate society when we see, hear and experience stories that both reflect our similarities and open us to difference. Lastly, strong audiences spend money and not just on the arts, but on hospitality, tourism and our local economies.</p>
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Address specific gaps in audiences - for example as discussed by <a href="#">Theatre Network Australia's</a> submission where they encourage the investment in a Young People and Culture Framework.</li> <li>● To develop a digital strategy that includes audience engagement and participation post COVID</li> <li>● To broaden people's notions of what constitutes arts and culture</li> <li>● To create cultural equity so that communities see themselves as welcome within arts and cultural institutional spaces</li> <li>● Where possible and relevant, include local community-led events and decision making that connects people to the art</li> <li>● Increase opportunities for community to be art makers as a means of sharing in story creation and breaking down the barriers of the elite arts perspective as discussed in <a href="#">Reimagine: What next?</a> Report by the Australia Council for the Arts.</li> </ul>
Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Competing priorities - what to address in what order</li> <li>● Resourcing</li> </ul>
Relevance to TBRT	<p>The Blue Room Theatre is committed to increasing its audience engagement by addressing systemic colonial and racist structures and practices; breaking down ableism; and honouring First Nations first. As a development organisation we welcome a structure and pathway that supports young people and early-career artists to feel supported, included and encouraged to take creative risks and push boundaries of their creative work..</p>
Additional comments	<p>Like all other organisations we need to recover from COVID and restabilise. We have used the time well, and look forward to hitting the ground running with cohesive, collaborative ideas that are generated and shared across the nation. It is time for the creative inspiration to be celebrated by our government and our society.</p>