

National Cultural Policy Submission

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Submitted: As an individual

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Girls like me did not get to dream of being in the theatre. Women like me do not make careers out of it. Growing up, there never seemed to be a place for someone like me in the arts, a place for my story. And yet, I am here, as a playwright and theatre director, writing to you.

I could be writing to you in my capacity as a board member from the Australian Theatre for Young People (ATYP), or in my new role as Resident Director of the Melbourne Theatre Company, but I am not. I am writing to you as someone who has been a freelance artist for many years.

I am the product of the vision others – established artists, early-career peers, mentors, arts organisations, my loved ones – had for me. They saw something in me, a young Muslim woman of South Asian heritage from the suburbs, that I could not see, would not dare dream of. I could not see it because there were, and still are, so few examples of artists of culturally diverse backgrounds.

It is vital that we demonstrate, definitively, that there is a place for stories like mine, for artists like me, for audiences like my family and friends – the young, culturally diverse, those who have been historically marginalised.

My points below are my thoughts on how we might do this, with reference to my own experiences.

1. We resource youth theatres.

My very first training programs were with Canberra Youth Theatre and ATYP. ATYP and Shopfront Arts Co-Op in Sydney gave me my first commissions as a playwright for young people. These opportunities to learn my craft, to pick up teaching and facilitation skills, and to hear my words performed by other young people encouraged me immensely at a crucial, early stage of my career. My strong belief in the power of youth theatres led me to join the board of ATYP in 2018.

In support of Arena Theatre Company, Polyglot Theatre, Shopfront Arts Co-op, St Martin's Youth Theatre and ATYP, would also like to put my support behind their calls to:

- Prioritise “Young People's Engagement with the Arts” in the National Cultural Plan;
- Establish an ongoing, dedicated funding stream for Young People's Engagement with the Arts for companies whose core business is young people's engagement, administered by the Australia Council for the Arts;
- Establish targeted, cross-department streams of funding for Young People's Engagement to work with Health and Mental Health, Employment, Youth Justice, Regional Youth and Education – co-managed by the Australia Council;
- Establish Advisory Boards that represent the diversity of young Australians, managed independently, as ongoing standing committees for the Australia Council for the Arts and the Minister for the Arts.

2. We support the companies – both large and very small – that support wider storytelling, by and for diverse communities.

Another company that has had a significant, ongoing impact on my development as an artist is Contemporary Asian Australian Performance (CAAP). CAAP supported my training as a playwright back in 2016, and then as a theatre director in partnership with Sydney Theatre Company from 2018 to 2020. CAAP is an organisation that fosters and champions Australian artists of Asian descent, and if not for their targeted programs, I would not have been able to continue to grow my practice and build relationships with major performing arts companies that would go on to employ me.

There are also a number of companies in the suburbs, in places like Sydney's West and Melbourne's South East, that are championing stories told by culturally diverse artists for culturally diverse communities. One example is Nautanki Theatre Company, based in Parramatta, which is one man's mission to support storytellers and audiences from the South Asian community. The company works with artists who might work fulltime in a completely different field, who are often older migrants with families, and without a lot of professional theatre experience. These artists share stories that are about, and for, their communities. These works find their audience.

I was commissioned by Nautanki Theatre Company and chose to use an Indian fairy tale as a frame to tell a story of a young man in Australia, grappling with mental ill health and how to talk about it with his South Asian parents. I wanted to write a piece of theatre that would open up vital conversations between generations. Due to lack of funding, this play is still waiting for a premiere.

3. We build up independent artists and support them to reach and shepherd their audiences.

There are extraordinary independent theatre venues like Sydney's KXT Bakehouse in Kings Cross and Red Line at the Old Fitz, that create space for independent artists to try new things and to learn their craft. Without venues like this, not to mention the independent companies who produce the shows that go into these venues, artists would not be able to share stories that are important to communities. Yes, independent art can be a training ground for mainstage work, but it is so much more than that. It is somewhere where audiences can access the theatre without the often prohibitively high ticket costs in venues that are not as intimidating as traditional theatres. Independent artists have worth outside of mainstage opportunities.

Last year, I directed a play call Yellow Face for KXT produced by new independent company Dinosaur Productions, run by young artists and producers of Asian heritage. The show was sold out and received strong reviews, but most importantly, it brought Asian Australian community in Sydney together which felt particularly heartening in the wake of COVID-19-related racism. It was a show that mainstage companies would never have programmed; it would have been unthinkably expensive and risky. Nevertheless, it found its audience and was celebrated for it.

These independent artists, companies and venues require ongoing support in order to be able to serve their communities. The independents, the freelancers, the small-to-medium organisations, are all vital parts of a vibrant artistic community. They need time, secure funding, and space to take risks.

The performing arts are not just the shows we see on the Harbour, or in prestigious theatres in capital cities. The performing arts are also in pubs and pub theatres, in regional youth theatres that are resource-poor but full of heart, in migrant communities that come together for a night of singing in their own language, in garages or on streets where independent artists stage their work.

These are all things that lead to a culturally rich life, one that fosters community, encourages deep thinking, cultivates joy. The arts changed my life, making it so much richer than I could ever have imagined. My fervent wish is that everyone in Australia, regardless of where they live or what language they speak at home, can access and benefit from the arts, whether as audience members or as artists themselves. Perhaps then, young girls from migrant backgrounds in the outer suburbs will be able to dream a little more boldly than I once did.

Sincerely,

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