

National Cultural Policy Submission

Terrapin

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

About Terrapin

Exploring beyond the borders of contemporary puppetry, Tasmanian company Terrapin exists to make Australian lives better through contemporary puppetry, arts and culture. For over 40 years we have focused on creating rich, unique experiences for children, families and intergenerational audiences. As well as performing in theatres, festivals, galleries and public spaces in Australia and around the world, we reach 10,000 – 20,000 Tasmanian primary school students each year with our in-school touring program.

Our national and international touring program has included working with the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Edinburgh International Children's Festival, the Vancouver International Children's Festival, De Betovering Festival (the Netherlands), A.S.K Shanghai, Aichi Arts Centre (Japan), the Taipei Children's Art Festival, the Lincoln Center (New York), the Kennedy Center, the Sydney Opera House, Sydney Festival and MONA FOMA. Terrapin is committed to developing and producing dynamic new Tasmanian work, providing a platform for emerging and established local artists and a medium for touring their work nationally and internationally.

What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you?

First Nations Australia has the oldest living continuous culture in the world and first pillar is the rightful place for First Nations voices in a national cultural policy. Further, it is through this first pillar the confidence Australia to become a world leader in art and culture will come. Self-determination is vital for First Nations artists. There is a significant opportunity through this cultural policy to work towards the support and further development of First Nations-led arts and culture companies in Tasmania. There are several organisations that have recently been established or are in the process of being established, such as Walantanaliny Palingina, Kutikina and Blackspace Creative, that well poised to take leadership of First Nations arts and culture in the state. While organisations like Terrapin have championed and produced First Nations stories when invited by First Nations artists to do so, ultimately this role is best played by First Nations led companies.

A Place for Every Story Australian stories are as diverse as the Australians that tell them. Through a new cultural policy that leads to greater investment in arts and culture, there is opportunity to tell more stories authored by, and presented for, communities of Australians that have thus far been neglected as audiences, but also as communities that produce artists. As a regional company, Terrapin sees this most acutely when it comes to funding for arts in regional and remote Australia.

We also endorse Theatre Network Australia's call for stronger youth arts institutions, supporting young people as artists and creators of culture. This will also support long-term pathways for developing artistic and administrative skills within the sector, creating invaluable pathways into creative careers.

The Centrality of the Artist A new national cultural policy must be centred on the artist as the keystone to all artistic and cultural activity. Just as the professional sportsperson (or team) is at the centre of professional sport, so should the artist (or ensemble of artists) be at the centre of arts and cultural activity. These artists need administrators, producers, technicians and others that facilitate arts and cultural activity. But this new cultural policy must put to an end to the most insecure profession in the arts being that of the artist.

Through championing the “Artist as Worker”, there is a significant opportunity to increase the stability of pay and conditions for artists, especially those working in the performing arts. Central to this is understanding that many successful artists are lost to the profession mid-career in their 30s and 40s through a need for a more secure income. This affects the industry as a whole through the loss of skills and expertise and affects the diversity of stories able to be told.

Strong Institutions Strong institutions, like the Australia Council, that advise government, initiate programs and support artists are essential in the practical application of a new cultural policy.

Larger institutions like major galleries, theatres and museums also play an important role in arts and cultural activity but it must be remembered that these large institutions rarely serve a significant number of Australians living regionally and remotely. Indeed, as soon as arts and cultural activity becomes limited to that presented in galleries and in theatres, a large section of the community is excluded from such activity as they do not attend such institutions. A new cultural policy must recognise the importance of activity that takes place outside institutions in non-arts spaces. This extends to arts and cultural activity in public space, work in schools, in aged care settings, at sporting events, markets and anywhere where people gather that presents an opportunity for an arts and cultural experience.

Similarly, training and skill development can be delivered both within and outside of institutions. While there is great value in tertiary training for performers, artists and arts managers, organisations should be supported to upskill young and early career practitioners. This would help address the critical skills shortage across all areas of the arts, which is particularly acute in Tasmania.

Nationally, it is critical that there is immediate support given to the vulnerable survivors in the devastated Theatre for Young Audiences and Youth Arts sector. Pathways are severely compromised by underinvestment in this sector and Australian children, regardless of where they live or their wealth, have a right to participate in cultural activity made specifically for them as an audience. This sub-sector is the foundation of the broader sector in so many ways. Institutions operating in this space, many of whom have been operating for forty years or more, must be shored up immediately. They are underfunded and critically endangered. This should be a priority in the next six months. These institutions can't be replaced and their loss would be a body blow to the cultural sector.

Reaching the Audience Every Australian has an equal right to arts and culture and a new national cultural policy must lead to activity that reaches more Australians, no matter their age, their cultural background, their mobility, their income and where they live. A new national cultural policy should lead to more activity that reaches non-traditional audiences in places where they already gather. An increase in arts and cultural activity in public spaces (or spaces where people gather for other reasons such as sporting events), also leads to more activity for diverse, inter-generational audiences.

Here, too, we endorse the recommendations from Theatre Network Australia to establish a Young People and Culture Framework, prioritising young people around Australia as a key audience now and into the future.

Further, a new national cultural policy should recognise the importance of Australian cultural activity overseas as an instrument of soft power and cultural diplomacy. This is especially true of work for young people, as it reaches a multi-generational audience that may not be accessed by work that is just for adults. Australia is recognised as a world leader in work for young audiences with significant demand for this activity overseas.

Please tell us how each of the 5 pillars are important to you and your practice and why.

First Nations A strong, self-determined Tasmanian Aboriginal cultural sector led by Tasmanian Aboriginal arts and cultural organisations is vitally important to Terrapin. This would lead to a stronger sector with greater opportunities for collaboration, audience and artist development.

Terrapin would look forward to collaborating and working closely with these companies in its experience creating work for intergenerational audiences in theatres, schools and public space.

A Place for Every Story Terrapin is committed to developing stories that appeal to a broad inter-generational audience in Tasmania and beyond. Terrapin is one of the few producing companies located in regional Australia and though Terrapin has significant reach in Tasmania, most work that tours through regional Australia is authored or made by artists living in metropolitan areas. A national cultural policy that leads to increased investment in artists living in regional and remote Australia would facilitate work that appeals directly to the audiences and communities in which the work is authored.

The Centrality of the Artist Terrapin sees significant opportunities in prioritising engagement with Tasmanian artists, especially those in the early stages of their career. With more opportunities to employ regionally based artists, Terrapin would seek to provide long term engagements to artists through an ensemble program. This evolution of company structure would be transformational in both retaining young artists in Tasmania and attracting artists to the regions with secure and sustained employment. In doing so this would also contribute to benefits experienced through Pillar 5.

Strong Institutions The greatest opportunity in this new national cultural policy is to re-define what an institution is and to look beyond the conventional definition of ‘bricks and mortar’ institutions like large galleries, theatre companies or museums. A regional company like Terrapin is considered an institution because of its service to three generations of Tasmanians. Yet the company does not have a ‘bricks and mortar’ theatre. In regional areas, long-running companies such as Back and Back Theatre and Dancenorth are institutions similarly because of their longevity in the regions they practice in.

In making ‘Strong Institutions’ a pillar of a national cultural policy, it is vital that we look broadly at what defines an institution and be aware of emerging institutions in the making.

Reaching the Audience Terrapin exists to make Tasmanian lives better through arts and culture and we aim to give every Tasmanian an opportunity to see our work, no matter where they live. This sees the company place particular importance on presenting its work in schools, aged care centres, at community markets and in public space. In schools the company is able to reach children who have never had an experience with the performing arts before, developing audiences of the future. In aged care centres, the company is able to provide a continuity of performing arts experiences for those who may have enjoyed arts and culture all their lives. In public space, the company brings intergenerational audiences together in a shared performing arts experience, building community cohesion.

A new national cultural policy must commit to an expansion of programs that deliver on every Australians right to arts and culture.

Reaching the Audience through Terrapin
info@terrapin.org.au