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National Cultural Policy Submission

Castlemaine State Festival

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

First Nations

Challenges

Generally presenting works with talented First Nations artists has not been a struggle for us in the past with over 10% of any given festival program being representative of artists identifying as Indigenous it is a priority for us and we ringfence resources to ensure this continues. We would like to be involved more in developing the creative expression and experience of our local Indigenous community, the Dja Dja Warrung There are fine artists among them, and the tribe is inherently creative but the highly organised clans of the Jaara are currently, quite rightly, more focused on land rights, land management, and law. To work in a meaningful way with our traditional owners more we would encourage the commitment of more resources to allow for time to create and ideate would be needed at the individual and institutional levels.

Other challenges are that the Aboriginal artists we present, and showcase tend to be based in the eastern seaboard metropolitan areas. We would love to be able to present and engage with more remote communities around the country but often the costs involved are enormous and therefore prohibitive.

Opportunities

The opportunity is that cultural output and cultural representation are strong in regional Australia. Engagement and communications between whitefella and blackfella are as common in the creative studio as they are at the local supermarket. This is a generalisation but overall, something to leverage from and grow. An opportunity here is that with resources and some key institutions connecting the dots First Nations' creative practice and culture could be enshrined into the daily lives of most regional communities. Deeper investment into regional communities to autonomously drive their own creative development should serve to increase career viability for these artists and their mobility as they share their work with metropolitan Australia and the world.

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A place for every story

Challenges

Regional artists and audiences are extremely diverse across a myriad of social, cultural, linguistic, economic, and identity/ideological lines. This statement would be no surprise to the government given the increased reportage and demographic studies done on the regional context in recent years and the dominance of regional Australia in providing Australia's great wealth from the primary industries. In addition to this is a renewed trend seeing more and more people moving to regional Australia for lifestyle reasons accelerated by the recent pandemic. Regional Australia is more vibrant than it has ever been and yet presenting and promoting those voices has great difficulty around it. Art from the regions is still underrepresented in our metropolitan theatres and galleries and touring networks around the world. Cultural organisations and in our case festivals across regional Australia, especially regional Victoria are drastically underfunded compared to their metropolitan counterparts but arguably provide greater cultural impact for their communities and are stronger at driving socio-economic benefits for their regions through visitation and employment.

Opportunities

The opportunity is that despite underinvestment regional Australia is dotted with brilliant and cutting-edge organisations that presented amazing things day in and day out. Many are highly dependent on volunteer community largesse for their existence, recent studies and anecdotal experiences show us there has been a persistent decline in volunteerism in this country which adds to the daily struggle these organisations face. Many must professionalise or perish. Given these overlapping contexts in even the most tight knit of regional communities, the lines between amateur and professional can be blurred. This has its challenges but if the desire was there to promote and invest in creativity at this grassroots level look no further than regional Australia because the frameworks are already there. Regional organisations, such as ours, are ripe to be invested in deeply for long-term outcomes around promoting and presenting local voices across multiple contexts. And present these works to a very broad spectrum of society.

The centrality of the artist

Challenges

From a regional perspective, artists are not incentivised to live and work in regional Australia beyond the broader personal benefits of proximity to nature, and cheaper housing. Often the work opportunities remain in the metropolitan area and the artist must traverse these two contexts or forgo ongoing employment for the limited offers within the regional space. This has been touched on earlier but artists and institutions in the regions are ready for deeper investment and better creative infrastructure to bolster local creative careers and make their place of residence more viable. Currently, we at CSF only have a small ability to commission new work and work long-term with artists despite having the will and the space to do so, we just do not have the resources to facilitate these projects beyond a handful. Conversely, artists

do not have the risk appetite to eschew work from the metropolitan for projects locally that are marred with uncertainty due to insufficient support at each phase of a given project's development.

Opportunities

With the right investment and infrastructure, regionally based cultural institutions could place artists even deeper at the centre of what they do and investment into regional artists would allow them to situate themselves in their regional homes at the creative development stages of their work from point of completion the opportunities can be endless as to where the work can travel.

Strong Institutions

Challenges

Many institutions, particularly in the bush, have strong and beloved brands with long histories, such as we do, but the strong presence belies the lack of financial certainty within its income streams or key confirmed unrestricted funding providing a sufficient fulcrum from which further monies can be leveraged. For example, 50% of all our income at CSF comes from unconfirmed sources often from fluctuating project grants and limited philanthropy. It takes up an enormous amount of our resources which could be spent on unearthing opportunities in the areas of these 5 pillars.

Opportunities

Achieving adequate funding does not mean funding our institutions entirely but a 20% increase in confirmed support that we can be confident in immediately gives space to discover further income opportunities and grow and strengthen. Many organisations in regional Australia are strong but not strong enough to meaningfully invest in the areas these 5 pillars prioritise with a moderate increase across the sector real steps could be made. A recent study commissioned by CSF from Project Partners Advisory shows that the festival and its adjacent capital projects at current levels of funding derive a benefit-to-cost ratio of 1.02. Further meaningful but strategic support would mean this BCR is even higher and our impact greater.

Reaching the audience

Challenges

During the pandemic innovations and inroads were made in digital communications such as streaming both live and pre-recorded. Exciting overlays to the technology were closed captions, audio description/translation, and Auslan. Contactless technologies in the Augmented Reality space are also promising around public art, wayfinding, payments, and crowd data. The challenges are that this area is extremely costly and does not demonstrate

any immediate return. Audiences are slow to tune into a paid live stream in great numbers and organisations cannot market these happenings to a wider online audience. Often, we found that the internet speed in people's homes particularly those of aging people was not good enough to access this option nor was there adequate literacy around using the new technology.

In the live event space, ticket prices are steadily increasing as costs grow and margins for surplus shrink. For example, our ticket prices are on average \$15 cheaper than the same performance being held in the city but continuously declared "too expensive". This creates something of a barrier to lower-income audiences particularly those from younger demographics which are an essential element of concern for our aging core audiences.

Opportunities

The opportunities are the support and expansion of the digital offering for cultural organisations for wider access and reach. The audience still needs to be developed in this space, so a long-term approach needs to be taken. Free and low-cost programming especially large-scale is beloved by all and a wonderful gateway to the art for many. It is also very costly and often subsidised by high ticket prices elsewhere. The social good that these outcomes provide must trigger deeper public investment into this kind of offer if it is not the first type of project to be removed during lean times.

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

First Nations

Presenting First Nations artists at our festival has always been key to how we program and in response to our audiences' interests. What is becoming more important to us and would appreciate support in is furthering representation within the organisation, governance structures and throughout the artists we commission and develop for major new pieces of work. It is important to be culturally aware and contribute meaningfully to the reconciliation process.

A place for every story

While committed to demonstrating the breadth of often intersecting diversity through our programming and producing we also have a geographical overlay to consider. Regional voices communicating both regionally and in the metropolitan context is very important to us. Also recognising that regionally based events bear a greater pressure to create spaces for all levels of creativity to find expression across nearly all age groups.

The centrality of the artist

Placing the artist at the centre of the organisation not only makes great art but also makes regionally based creative career more viable and less dependent on metropolitan

employment. This translates to sustainable creative careers in all sorts of places which has a good socio-economic impact on towns and regions as the money remains locally circulating.

Strong Institutions

We are driven by a core need to be as financially secure as possible. This dictates much of what we do each day for better or worse. The stronger we are and the more confident we are in our future the greater impact we can have on the widest possible element of society.

Reaching the audience

We pride ourselves on reaching a wide audience. Audiences from both Melbourne and our local region join people from across the state and the country at each edition. We need to keep our ticket prices as low as possible to not become a barrier to many. Also, it is an exciting time for the use of technology in reaching new and extant audiences, but little support has been forthcoming in this important area.

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

- CSF would appreciate a clear commitment to vital funding streams such as Festivals Australia and a broadening of its remit, application, and ability to make multi-year agreements. We support a broadening of the Australia Council of the Arts multi-year funding to embrace festivals and believe this will provide a huge impact to artists and their communities.
- CSF believes a commitment to stronger investment into regional Australian creativity, cultural institutions and cultural infrastructure would be appropriate at this time to bring the best out of these highly representative communities.
- Specifically, we hope to see a focus on deeper investment from the Federal Government in festivals with an emphasis on regional festivals that lift communities and drive visitation and tourism.
- CSF also hopes to see in such a policy the emergence of support, platforms, and pathways to sustain and promote regionally based creative careers both for artists and creative workers.