



Monday 22 August, 2022

via email: culturalpolicy@arts.gov.au

RE: Submission for a renewed National Cultural Policy

I provide this submission as a not-for-profit mid-scale arts organisation working in the musical theatre industry.

The 'Five Pillars' proposed as the basis of the renewed National Cultural Policy are laudable aspirations but they will fall short unless the mid-scale creative sector (Independents) is meaningfully involved in their implementation. The specific areas where the pillars will not be achieved are in "the centrality of the artist" (Pillar 3) and "strong institutions" (Pillar 4).

Current government policy and programs do not allow adequate equality of access to government support, or to decision-makers, to enable Independents to contribute fully to the aspirations of the Five Pillars.

THE PROBLEM

The Office for the Arts and the Australia Council have a deep understanding of and connections with the subsidised and high profile live performance industry, but neither of these bureaucracies actively connect with 'the rest' of us. It was only because of the particular circumstances of the pandemic that the Office for the Arts took steps to seek connection with the Independents and the commercial sector. This policy development provides an excellent and much needed opportunity to continue engagement with companies beyond the 38 National Performing Arts Partnership Framework companies and multi-year funded organisations.

The Independents are the cultural equivalents of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) of the business sector. In that way, they are the backbone of the sector. Like SMEs, the Independents of the creative industry are a major primary source of innovation, creativity and employment. Importantly, the Independents have an emphasis on presenting original and new performances of Australian stories and are the incubation hub for Australian theatre innovation.

Squabbalogic's plan to take its innovative and all-Australian musical *The Dismissal* on a major national tour is a practical example of the power and contribution of "a cultural SME". There are however no ready means of support for such ventures. At present:

- The major commercial producers focus on importing already successful overseas shows telling international stories such as *Hamilton* and *Come From Away*.
- The Australia Council has proved reluctant to support Independent initiatives such as *The Dismissal*.
- And, despite receiving government funding, State theatre companies have an increasingly poor record of supporting, encouraging and promoting Independents that often inform their programming. In fact, State companies have neither a mechanism or a desire for mutual collaboration and co-production and, when they have sought to engage, have shown poor respect for the intellectual property of Independents and their rights to compensation.

Innovation in Australian theatre has suffered as a result of this lack of support for Independent and smaller scale arts organisations. I would like to offer three recommendations to address this serious gap in our national cultural policy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There is currently no suitable or sustainable mechanism for collaboration and co-productions between government funded arts organisations and Independent arts organisations. To address this I recommend the Office of the Arts and the

Australia Council consider conditions of funding for the 38 National Performing Arts Partnership Framework companies along the following lines:

- A. In order to receive funding, each Framework company must create a mutually favourable, creative and financial co-production mechanism for projects with mid-scale and Independent companies. A template could be created by the consultant as part of Recommendation 3B.
- B. Framework companies are only eligible for all other grants, both State and Federal, when working in conjunction with a mid-scale sector company. This has a precedent. There was once a major/minor fund run by the Australia Council which followed a similar eligibility requirement.

2. There are barriers for mid-scale organisations in partnering with commercial producers. This includes casting barriers for Australian artists. The main issue is a perceived high-risk of Australian stories and using Australian artists. I recommend:

- A. Commercial producers are only eligible for government support when projects are done in conjunction with the mid-scale sector, utilising the same co-production mechanism. (As per Recommendation 1B for Framework companies).
- B. Incentives or funding for commercial theatre producers are put in place to ensure a percentage of Australian cast and crew are engaged. (As per the film industry).

3. The pandemic enabled the Office for the Arts to learn about large swathes of the live performance industry it had rarely engaged with. Part of that learning was a revelation about how little the Australia Council understands the ecology of the Australian theatre industry. The industry is greater than those already funded by the Australia Council. In order to ensure both bureaucracies can further develop their engagement with the mostly un-subsided parts of the industry, I recommend:

- A. The Office of the Arts and the Australia Council have KPIs measuring their engagement with the Independent sector and aimed to significantly lift the level of both funding support and interaction with government decision-makers. It is further recommended that progress with their KPIs be included in their public annual reports to Parliament.
- B. Within six months of the National Cultural Policy being released, the Office of the Arts be required to commission a consultant to produce a report compiling a comprehensive list of the organisations in the Independent creative cultural sector in order to facilitate engagement.
- C. Within 12 months of the National Cultural Policy being released, the Office of the Arts, the Australia Council and the Minister's Arts Adviser be required to conduct a nationwide roadshow to consult with the sector to facilitate Recommendation 3A.

I am eager to discuss any of these points further and wish to assist however I can in furthering consideration of Independent arts organisations.

Warmly,



Jay James-Moody

Artistic Director & Chair

Squabballogic Independent Music Theatre



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ABOUT SQUABBALOGIC

Sydney's boutique theatre company Squabbalogic is one of the city's most beloved and acclaimed independent theatre producers. Founded by Jay James-Moody in 2006, Squabbalogic pioneered a new small-to-mid scale sector of musical theatre through eclectic programming of local premieres of the best new international musicals, and bold reinterpretations from the classic canon of musical theatre.

Squabbalogic's early success filled a void by connecting with challenging work and writers often neglected by commercial or state theatre companies. This ambitious programming led to the company being a principal founding partner in establishing Sydney's prestigious Hayes Theatre Co, where our award-winning production of *The Drowsy Chaperone* was the second production of the inaugural season.

From 2014, Squabbalogic has been a resident company of the Seymour Centre where we presented annual programming until 2016. Since then, Squabbalogic's attention has shifted to the creation and development of new work, and expanding the repertoire beyond music theatre. Our work has garnered over 40 excellence award nominations, winning many, and prompting the Sydney Theatre critics' awards to create new categories for independent musicals.

Our aim is to provide an opportunity and platform for Australia's finest emerging artists to collaborate with industry professionals on a range of bold, unexpected, and dynamic productions, sharing with broad demographic audiences a high-quality alternative to large scale spectacles.

Previously we have enjoyed successful partnerships with New Mardi Gras, Darlinghurst Theatre Company, Seymour Centre's Reginald Season, Noosa Long Weekend, Royal Caribbean Cruises, City of Sydney, and Sydney Philharmonia Choirs.

Our lauded past work has included *Herringbone: A Vaudevillian Ghost Story*, *The Original Grease*, *Grey Gardens*, *Of Thee I Sing*, *Triassic Park*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Sondheim on Sondheim*, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, *Carrie The Musical*, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson*, *Ordinary Days*, *A New Brain*, [title of show], *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story*, *Forbidden Broadway*, *Reefer Madness!*, and *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*.

Squabbalogic's recurring Mystery Musical series is also a highly anticipated mainstay of Sydney's theatre calendar, where the audience does not know what the show is until it begins! Past Mystery Musicals have included presentations of the classic musicals *Nine*, *Kiss Me Kate*, *The Best Little Whorehouse In Texas*, *Hello, Dolly!*, and *Bye Bye Birdie*.

Squabbalogic has most recently been commissioning, developing, auspicing, or mentoring emerging authors in the creation of new Australian work. Productions currently in development include *The Dismissal*, a musical satire about the last days of the Whitlam government; *Good Omens*, a new musical based on the best-selling novel by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman; *The Day of the Triffids*, a terrifying immersive adaptation of John Wyndham's classic text; and *Caught Out*, a satire about the Australian cricket team cheating scandal.

Squabbalogic's work has been supported by The Russell Mills Foundation, Create NSW, the SBW Foundation, the Australian Government's RISE fund, and many generous individual donors.