

ENCOUNTER

National Cultural Policy Submission

August 2022

Encounter Theatre Inc (Encounter) is an independent theatre company based at Fremantle Arts Centre in Walyalup, on Noongar Boodjar. We nurture and tell moving stories about identity, belonging that share the power of theatre with diverse audiences. We work within a community-engaged practice framework and are committed to a leadership model that centres lived experience of our artists and audiences.

Encounter is a not-for-profit association incorporated in WA. Our objects are promoting the arts and advancing culture by:

- (a) developing, producing and touring creative works through collaborative, transformative and innovative artistic processes;
- (b) presenting creative works that prioritise representation, connection and inclusion to bring communities together through increased participation and engagement in the arts; and
- (c) empowering artists and cultural workers from diverse backgrounds to be leaders.

Working with a community-engaged framework allows Encounter to make use of multiple art forms and hybrid arts practices, and create the condition for collaboration and co-creation between community and professional artists – often around local or inter/national social issues or movements. The artistry of this approach is embedded in the process, rigour and relationships, which produce work that blurs genres, changes perceptions, and showcases new aesthetics and authentic stories.

Since 2019, Encounter has firmly built its position in the West Australian theatre landscape as a leader in community collaboration, intercultural theatre making, and equity advocacy. Following the premiere of *Children of the Sea* at Perth Festival 2021, which featured an ensemble cast who were all from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, we are developing two major new works, and have launched a pilot creative learning program for young people and families from diverse backgrounds to inspire the development of creative talent and nurture the lifelong appreciation of creative expression.

We are led by a Board and core staff who are all from cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds and continue to develop bold stories, expand forms and practices we use to create new work, support emerging to mid-career artists and producers, and pursue ambitious community engagement activities while strengthening sustainability practice.

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GENERAL SUBMISSION COMMENT

Artists are the most fundamental yet most undervalued and vulnerable participants in our arts economy. There is not enough support for artists to survive, let alone thrive and create more art for more audiences. It is vital to appropriately recognise and fund the currently unpaid and unacknowledged artistic leadership and cultural labour of independent artists and small arts organisations, and to attract and retain diverse creative talent in the sector.

ADDITIONAL SUBMISSION COMMENTS

Encounter acknowledges the experience and expertise on the National Cultural Policy Review Panels.

However, as small WA based organisation and performing arts company, we are concerned about the gaps in representation within the review panel structure, including:

- limited representation of artists based in Western Australia;
- limited representation of artists at differing stages of their career and artforms including theatre and performing arts (especially on the panel for pillar 2);
- limited representation of independent artists (especially on the panel for pillar 2) and smaller arts organisations (especially on the panel for pillar 3);
- limited representation of artists from culturally diverse backgrounds, queer communities, disabled people, and neurodiverse people (as well as limited representation of First Nations People on the panels for pillars 3-5); and
- limited representation of cultural workers at community-based organisations who are engaged in artistic and cultural practice as core activities, but may not be appropriately acknowledged and recognised as part of the sector (on all panels).

Further, we feel it is worth mentioning that independent artists and small arts organisations who rely on competitive funding programs to realise their goals might not feel safe enough to fully and frankly raise issues in submissions even if they were told they can remain anonymous.

We note particularly that due to factors around resourcing, financial security, capacity and burnout discussed in detail in our submission, smaller organisations and independent artists would likely undertake unpaid intellectual and emotional labour to work on submissions. As a project funded company, Encounter does not have capacity for such extra advocacy work, and our team has prepared these submissions on weekends and evenings while juggling other work as is necessary for artists and arts workers to make ends meet. Many others in similar circumstances may not have had the capacity to engage in the consultation process.

We hope the review panels are able to consider these factors as part of identifying gaps in submissions received, and we strongly encourage recommendations for further outreach and engagement initiatives that appropriately compensate people from marginalised parts of the sector for their time, and intellectual and emotional labour in making valuable and vital contributions to this consultation process.

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1. First Nations	<p>Encounter endorses the submissions from the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA (CACWA) and Kate Larsen.</p> <p>Additionally, as an arts organisation which was founded to create space for diverse artists and stories that are not appropriately valued due Eurocentric cultural supremacy, and to engage in creative practice as a means to bring greater intercultural understanding and social justice, we also see a key opportunity for greater investment in collaboration between First Nations artists and those from settler-migrant backgrounds.</p> <p>Such collaboration can allow for us to make the most of opportunities that come from shared understanding and respect for intergenerational connection and cultural practices that go beyond the mainstream “canon”, languages, and form.</p>	<p>We look forward to opportunities to bring First Nations and CaLD artists and communities together through creative practices bringing a deep appreciation for storytelling that acknowledges First Nations artists as leaders who come from the longest continuing cultures in the world.</p> <p>As part of Encounter’s creative learning residency with Edmund Rice Centre WA in Mirrabooka, we have seen up close opportunities for greater intercultural connection, sharing and healing that can exist when young people from First Nations and settler-migrant communities have the space to to play and create together.</p> <p>This work is vital to ensure that settler-migrant artists and communities can effectively support the rightful centering of First Nations storytelling and leadership, and for creative practitioners to work collectively to share lessons, resources, tools and strategies to address common structural barriers faced by non-white artists, creative workers, and organisations in the arts and cultural sector.</p>
2. A Place for Every Story	<p>Encounter endorses the submissions from the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA (CACWA) and Kate Larsen, particularly in relation to greater resources toward independent practitioners and small-to-medium organisations, and in improving access and representation from audiences and participants, to artists and arts workers, leaders and Board members.</p> <p>As the only theatre company in Western Australia that is led by and centres stories created by people from culturally diverse and other marginalised and under-appreciated backgrounds, Encounter exists to fill a gap to provide legitimate professional pathways for artists from diverse backgrounds, so Australia’s arts and creative sector truly reflects the diversity of its people.</p>	<p>Bias, discrimination, and structural barriers that cause social and economic disadvantage have long limited access to opportunities and professional pathways in the arts and cultural sector. Leadership and resources are not equitably distributed throughout Australian society, and this has led to a lack of representation for artists and stories from CaLD and other under-resourced communities.</p> <p>There is limited capacity for creating and presenting intercultural artistic work and meaningful engagement and connections between communities, which are led by and for communities. This is due to lack of acknowledging and resourcing the time and specialist understanding required to engage in these activities; in WA distance with regional communities makes it even more pronounced.</p>

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	<p>Further, significant investment is needed to create space for diverse and community-engaged models of creative development that do not ascribe to eurocentric measures of success and value, highlighting the importance of the artistic process and the value of the time necessary to incubate and respectfully nurture cultural practices that have been marginalised as “community arts”, or even lost due to trauma, forced migration, and pressures of assimilation, or due to being appropriated and tokenised within mainstream artistic practices.</p> <p>Encounter sees a need for greater investment to appropriately recognise and celebrate the unpaid and unacknowledged artistic leadership and cultural labour that has been relegated to “community arts” and “ethnic” cultural programs. The term <i>community-engaged practice</i> is emerging as a contemporary alternative to <i>community arts and cultural development (CACD)</i> and other similar terms. It helps encapsulate non-artistic as well as artistic outcomes (even if those outcomes are achieved using art as a tool), avoids the negative connotations of ‘community arts’, and provides a distinction to organisations that are not majority-led or governed by the communities they represent or work-with.</p> <p>Australia’s CACD sector has changed significantly over the past decade and there is a significant opportunity for more investment to move away from a 40-year legacy of predominantly white practitioners leading activities for diverse participants, and towards self-determined, community-led and community-engaged practice led by practitioners who share lived experiences with the communities they represent and the artistic and work they create (‘nothing about us, without us’).</p>	<p>Encounter is one of the few organisations (and a leading organisation in Western Australia) that put a deliberate focus on CaLD community-led representation on all levels. Our Board and core staff are all from non-Anglo-Celtic backgrounds. This is a conscious focus that is intrinsic to our purpose, rather than an afterthought or tokenised exercise in order to comply with external expectations.</p> <p>Encounter has laid the groundwork to be well positioned to take a place at the forefront of the momentum to see more diverse voices in our creative spaces, and to take Australian community-engaged practice into an international context (which has been a weakness of the CACD sector in the past). Our current projects include collaboration with a diverse ensemble of Western Australian creatives and international partners in Canada and India. We’re also collaborating with international partners to design professional development and mentoring initiatives that address systemic barriers and create pathways for more artists from diverse backgrounds to bring their work to mainstages. It is a priority for us because WA is far removed from the cultural diversity movements and initiatives that we see on the east coast.</p> <p>However, we are not appropriately resourced to engage in this vital advocacy and sector-development work, and urge more investment in initiatives that are led by and for people from the communities that need to be empowered in this space. Structural lack of capacity means a few prominent CaLD artists and Encounter as the most prominent company are expected to speak for all and take on additional labour to advocate for better approaches in this space, taking up our already limited capacity for creative practice.</p>

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<p>3. The Centrality of the Artist</p>	<p>Encounter endorses the submissions from the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA (CACWA) and Kate Larsen in relation to addressing the need for greater income stability to alleviate the stressful and harmful precarity facing artists. In addition, there is a significant need for meaningful investment and resources to address the underlying social, cultural and economic barriers that limit pathways, opportunities and cultural safety for artists and arts workers from both First Nations and settler-migrant backgrounds. This is even more greatly needed for those facing other additional structural barriers to participation, including sexuality, gender identity, and disability.</p> <p>The current system of project funding and competitive funding models do not support the values of collaboration and creativity but rather forces competition, isolation, and financial precarity where artists and creative workers are forced to do unpaid work to find funding and philanthropic support, and manage with short-term project-based contracts and while taking on multiple jobs to make ends meet.</p> <p>If the Australian arts and cultural sector is to truly celebrate and centre artists as well reflect diversity and allow for engagement of artistic practice to achieve greater social outcomes, it is vital to acknowledge the structural barriers that have prevented diverse voices from entering and remaining in the sector.</p> <p>With more resources will come a stable ground from where artists can build a collective and shared cultural identity that enriches our lives and communities. As well as longer-term stability that could come from increased resources for artist-centred funding (such as fellowships), Encounter supports the investigation into universal basic income (UBI) and working models can come from 'intermittent model' in France, where artists are on UBI and have the space to "create art, not admin".</p>	<p>Artists are the most fundamental yet most undervalued and vulnerable participants in an arts economy that exists within institutions and executive management models that mimic corporate structures. Artists and their art must be meaningfully valued and supported, acknowledging that art and creative practices cannot be judged within standard lenses of profit/loss or revenue.</p> <p>There are not enough support systems in place for artists to survive, let alone thrive and create art, and there is not enough investment focused on attracting and retaining diverse creative talent in the sector.</p> <p>These challenges are exacerbated where we seek to work with brilliant artists at the intersections of communities and groups without access to intergenerational financial support or high-net-worth networks to tap into for philanthropic support, specifically First Nations people, first and second generation settler-migrants, migrants from humanitarian pathways who face further barriers due to the trauma of forced displacement, queer and gender-diverse people, disabled people, neurodiverse people, and artists in based in regional WA.</p> <p>We face significant challenges in our practice to find CaLD artists and creatives for our projects due to structural limitations on pathways and resources for talent development. For <i>Children of the Sea</i>, Encounter's Artistic Director Jay Emmanuel worked for many years without appropriate resourcing scouting for and nurturing talented young people and community-based artists who had not previously had professional performing arts experience. Additionally, artists we have worked with are often not able to continue the journey for our long-term creative development projects as there aren't enough opportunities to justify the time and investment to become established in the sector, or unavailable as they cannot take time off from their "day jobs".</p>

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		<p>Encounter has taken a leadership role in addressing these issues as they are central to our purpose and values, but the limitations and precarity of project funding mean all of this advocacy work is unpaid, underappreciated, unacknowledged and unsupported.</p>
<p>4. Strong Institutions</p>	<p>Encounter endorses the submissions from the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA (CACWA) and particularly endorses Kate Larsen’s call for “strategic and significant increase in arts funding – at all levels, but particularly multi-year operational, administrative and capacity-building support”.</p> <p>Especially for independent artists and small-to-medium project-based companies, the expectation to rely on in-kind or volunteer work for fundraising, philanthropy and administrative or operational activities traps the sector in a vicious cycle of unpaid labour, burnout and attrition.</p> <p>More investment is fundamental to alleviate burdens on artists and smaller arts organisations to comply with insurance and other regulatory obligations, potentially including resources and shared-services support for digital infrastructure and equipment, professional development, communications and marketing, and the overwhelming administrative workloads that steal time and energy from artists’ capacity to engage in creative practice.</p> <p>Additionally, there needs to be comprehensive investment in disaster preparedness and planning for underwriting risks arising from working and creating art in the face of environmental and public health uncertainties.</p> <p>We also strongly endorse Kate Larson’s submission under the <i>A Place for Every Story</i> pillar, that “organisations that demonstrate a commitment to community-led practice at both governance and</p>	<p>As a relatively young company Encounter had the opportunity to start from a clean slate with a board and governance approach that was not weighed down and held back by institutional baggage and “this is how we’ve always done it” mindsets that may limit the success of other, more established organisations.</p> <p>However, the lack of resourcing and investment in small organisations to manage operational and administrative workloads has forced us to rely on significant unpaid and volunteer work as well as to limit the scope and scale of the creative projects, community engagement, and sector-development advocacy initiatives we are able to deliver.</p> <p>Appropriate resourcing to increase capacity for operational activities, investment in professional development, and solutions focused on the reduction in administrative and compliance burdens and workloads would allow us to significantly expand our creative output and increase our innovative and unique approaches to creative development, community engagement and sector development initiatives.</p> <p>More resourcing and acknowledgement of the time and effort it takes to dismantle systemic barriers and engage in innovative leadership practices is vital for increasing outcomes that will benefit the wider sector and communities more broadly.</p>

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	<p>executive levels should be supported and adequately compensated for their valuable cultural labour and best-practice example”.</p> <p>There is also a need for greater recognition of the value of lived experience and transferable professional skills in leaders of community-based organisations outside of traditional arts management pathways for evaluating leadership capabilities in order to allow for more effective and timely renewal of leadership structures at large institutions.</p>	
<p>5. Reaching the Audience</p>	<p>Encounter is committed to leadership in the sector in creating art with our communities and audiences, as well as creating opportunities for artists from communities whose stories are not seen often enough on main stages. Increasing cultural and creative engagement with wider audiences from diverse backgrounds (that will in turn benefit the sustainability of the entire sector) relies on capacity building and investment to address structural barriers to participation and more diverse creative practices is vital to expand the cultural and artistic landscapes to better reflect our multicultural society.</p> <p>At a sector level, there is a significant lack of genuine consultation and engagement with diverse communities who are potential new audience members for artistic and cultural works. The challenges are exacerbated by a legacy of mainstream attitudes that have failed to acknowledge and respect the artistic and cultural excellence that has been marginalised and under-resourced through siloed funding programs for “ethnic” cultural activities for decades.</p> <p>There is also inadequate acknowledgment of the unpaid intellectual and cultural labour of CaLD artists reaching diverse audiences. There needs to be more resourcing and investment in community-led initiatives for these conversations and advocacy, particularly in a performing arts context. There is a risk that diversity becomes an add-on and box ticking exercise for white-led organisations without</p>	<p>Encounter and our team prides ourselves on our community-engaged creative practice and our commitment to creating work with and for our audiences, especially those who may not feel they belong and are welcomed in mainstream artistic and cultural spaces. We do not see audience engagement as a marketing and revenue-focused exercise. It is a core facet of our creative approach and purpose to create world-class performing arts works that accurately reflects the many and interconnected stories that connect us all.</p> <p>We use artist-led theatre making processes in a dialogue of sharing and reflecting, connecting artists and audiences who see themselves in our productions, melding multiple artistic forms and storytelling techniques. There may be ad-hoc initiatives focusing on “diversity” and “inclusion” in reaching audiences within larger and more established organisations, but it is often tokenised (if such initiatives exist at all).</p> <p>It is necessary to reset expectations on a small cohort of well-known artists from diverse backgrounds to do unpaid community engagement work and participate as the “token” POC representative on panels or promotional initiatives. Encounter and our team have often found ourselves being asked by white-led organisations to connect with our culturally diverse communities and networks, make casting call outs, and contribute to the</p>

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	<p>appropriate recognition of, meaningfully collaborating with, and respecting, existing leaders in the so-called “ethnic” or “multicultural” and “community arts” space.</p> <p>It is vital to acknowledge and properly resource the labour (including the emotional labour) that goes into community engagement work to connect with culturally diverse communities as audiences and participants, especially where those communities do not have the economic and social stability, time and resources needed to participate in the mainstream arts and cultural sector.</p>	<p>development of “diversity / equity / inclusion” initiatives, without being offered appropriate resourcing to undertake this specialised work.</p> <p>While we want to support such initiatives as much as we can, for the reasons detailed above regarding lack of resourcing for both artists and small organisations, this cannot sustainably continue without adequate and appropriate investment and acknowledgment of artistic leadership by people from diverse cultural backgrounds.</p> <p>We note discussions about structural barriers to engagement and participation for audiences from CaLD communities also applies to people from communities who are often excluded from the sector and wider society including First Nations, gender-diverse, disabled people and neuro-diverse people.</p>