

# National Cultural Policy Submission

## Currency Press

### About Currency Press

Currency Press is Australia's leading publisher in the performing arts. Although known mainly as a publisher of plays, Currency also publishes screenplays, manuals and educational texts at primary, secondary and tertiary level, as well as certain trade books also related to the performing arts. Founded in 1971, Currency is Australia's second-oldest publishing house. We employ eight people in-house: two full-time roles and six part-time. The two full-time roles are the Publisher and the Marketing Manager, the part time roles include myself as Chair, our business manager, editor, bookkeeper and IT. Currency Press also engages a number of people on a freelance basis.

Although we are a niche publisher with a small staff, we publish 25 to 30 books a year. Roughly 80% of Currency's sales are educational.

We have over 400 titles now available, of which over 350 are plays or play collections. We are unique in Australia in subsisting on the genre of the performing arts.

**What challenges and opportunities do you see in the pillar or pillars most relevant to you? Feel free to respond to any or all pillars:**

### First Nations

Indigenous writing has played a crucial and ongoing role in Currency's success since publication of Robert Merritt's ground-breaking *The Cake Man* in 1978. Since then we have published award-winning authors such as Jack Davis, Eva Johnson, Jada Alberts, Meyne Wyatt, Nakkiah Lui, Tony Strachan, Jane Harrison, Leah Purcell, Wesley Enoch, Richard Frankland, Andrea James, Dylan Van Den Berg, David Milroy and many others.

Currency owes a great debt to these authors; it is no exaggeration to say that we would struggle without them. Plays such as Jack Davis' *No Sugar*, Jane Harrison's *Stolen* or Leah Purcell's *The Drover's Wife* are amongst our biggest sellers.

### A Place for Every Story

It may seem strange now, but it took many years for local theatre writing to be recognised as serious literature, however in 1998 Alma De Groen became the first playwright to win the Patrick White Literary Award – an honour subsequently bestowed on John Romeril (2008) and Louis Nowra (2013). In 2001 Hannie Rayson was the first playwright to be shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award. More recently, Mary Ann Butler's play *Broken* (2016) and Leah Purcell's *The Drover's Wife* (2017) won the Victorian Prize for Literature in consecutive years, the latter also winning the New South Wales Book of the Year.

In 1971, Philip Parsons, wrote:

"It is because we believe in the importance of what our new drama (and, in retrospect our older drama) has to say to us today, that we have set up Currency Playtexts – to enable a wider audience to discover them both through the bookshelf and the theatre."

Fifty years on, Currency Press remains committed to this same principle: to show Australia to itself, to record and to broadcast the voices and the stories of our time. In my view the existence of Currency Press itself has become an incentive to aspiring Australian playwrights.

The income that most playwrights make is not large. Many playwrights supplement their income, either doing television work or tutoring or through grants – it is very difficult to survive primarily on the income made by playwriting. Nevertheless, to have a play in print is a confirmation of their achievement and encourages further productions. A published play is an impressive calling card for an emerging writer that can impact on professional development.

### **The Centrality of the Artist**

At Currency we are acutely aware that the version of the play that exists in print by default becomes the 'official' text. It is the version that will be read by students, actors, directors, that will be held in libraries, both public and private. For this reason, we make every effort to ensure the published play is as close as possible to the play in performance. Often, authors may revise their play for subsequent productions and in response we usually revise subsequent editions of the play to conform to these changes. This also means that we cease to distribute any previous version of the play. For instance, Ray Lawler has revised *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* numerous times, and each time we have brought out a new edition of the play.

Conveying the clearest expression of the author's intention is our highest priority.

### **Strong Institutions**

Currency Press could not exist without the Australian playwrights who populate our stages, and the theatre companies – major, medium and independent – who realise their stories. And these playwrights and companies often survive because of the assistance they receive from state and Federal funding bodies. Generous support for the Australia Council is crucial to the health of our sector at every level, and increased funding would have a direct impact on the quality and quantity of Australian theatre productions – and ultimately on the quality of dramatic literature studied in schools throughout the nation.

Australia's strong copyright system is also crucial to Australian writing and publishing.

Currency Press pays a royalty to our authors based on sales, but it also receives payments from the Copyright Agency for copying and sharing of its publications in education institutions.

As part of contracts and agreements with all copyright holders, Currency Press shares these Copyright Agency payments with authors and other copyright holders. The share that playwrights receive from the Copyright Agency is often larger than their royalty on sales.

While it's true that the commercial value of a book is usually concentrated into the first few years after publication, this is not true of all works. For instance David Williamson's *The Removalists* continues to sell well more than forty years after it was written. But to write one hit, an author may have to write ten or twenty plays. They may have only one real hit in their career. So the return on that one work is really the result of an entire career of writing. Currency's practice of keeping plays in print also means that playwrights get an ongoing income from those plays, either through productions or through sales, or PLR and ELR payments.

Individually these payments may not be large, but for many writers they are very welcome, and spread over many works they can be a significant financial boost.

For Currency, Copyright Agency income makes the difference between profit and loss. Our cash flow is dependent on the school selling season, roughly October to January. Our leanest months are always mid-year. In June however we receive a large payment from the Copyright Agency that sees us through. It is impossible to overstate the importance of this money in running our business.

### **Reaching the Audience**

Currency Press was founded by Katharine Brisbane AM, then a theatre critic for the Australian, and Dr Philip Parsons AM, a lecturer in Drama at UNSW, in an attempt to capture the work of the Australian New Wave theatre. Brisbane and Parsons were motivated by an understanding that publication would help to disseminate these plays to a wide, potentially international audience, and in doing so they would be promoting Australian playwrights and Australian theatre more generally. It is my view that Currency's key achievement is the body of published work on Australian theatre that is now available to readers both in Australia and overseas, for the purposes of performance, reading, studying and posterity.

Unless a play is published, it is easy for it to disappear and for its author to be ignored. Over the years, the publication of plays by Currency Press has helped to connect the work of new playwrights to the literary community, and to resurrect significant earlier writers such as Louis Esson, Oriel Gray and Betty Roland, whose works at the time sometimes existed only in manuscript form in library collections and were unknown outside academic circles