



Sydney Opera House submission to National Arts and Disability Strategy review

The Sydney Opera House appreciates the opportunity to provide input into the review of the National Arts and Disability Strategy. In keeping with its role as a “meeting place in respect of matters of international, national or local significance” under its enabling Act, the Opera House takes seriously its leadership role in developing cultural participation and engagement for the whole community. The Opera House is committed to accessibility in all forms, finding solutions to break down attitudinal, social and environmental barriers, and promoting social equity and inclusion. Its Access Strategic Plan sets out the Opera House’s goals to improve access to the building, site, facilities and cultural experiences for people with disability or mobility needs.

Embedding presentations of artists with disability across all programming

Offering audiences works that are performed by artists with disability, informed by the lived experience of disability (and reflecting this experience to audiences), creates discussion and engagement between disability and broader communities. Presenting these stories on a main stage provides exposure that can lead to new opportunities for the artists. The Opera House’s aim, outlined in its 2018-21 Artistic Strategy, is to embed works by artists with disability and stories that examine their experiences across all core programming genres, with programming based on artistic excellence. The Opera House provides a platform to build artists’ reputation, reach a wide range of audiences and support their works’ commercial sustainability. Examples of 2018 programming highlights include:

- The Children, Families and Creative Learning program presented the circus, *Kaleidoscope*, which showed the world through the eyes of Ethan Hugh, a 13 year old with Asperger’s Syndrome;
- The newly launched *Unwrapped* series that presents contemporary Australian performances included a season of Jodee Mundy in *Personal*, which tells the story of growing up as the only hearing child in a deaf family. Jodie also appeared on a well-attended *Inclusive Cultures* panel with performance makers with disability; and
- As part of *Antidote*, a festival of ideas, action and change, Liz Jackson spoke about the skills that disabled people harness in everyday life to navigate a world not built for them.

Supporting development opportunities for artists with disability

Professional development opportunities can be limited for artists with disability, and are often delivered by disability access organisations. Whilst this remains important, artists with disability need access to all arts organisations. As a strategy for inclusion and supporting access, the Opera House, in tandem with strategic partners, offers occasional development opportunities, including access to facilities, networks, artistic and production support and mentoring. These initiatives also develop Opera House staff’s knowledge, experience and competency in working with artists with disability. For example, *Club Weld*, a 2017 collaboration between Autism Spectrum Australia (ASPECT)’s music studio and the Opera House, supported artists on the autism spectrum and several Vivid LIVE artists to compose and record their own music with the support of professional audio production staff in the Opera House’s Recording Studio.

Opportunities for arts management professionals and practitioners

Providing arts management opportunities enables arts professionals with disability to develop the skills and knowledge required to build their careers. The Opera House has identified mid-career

professionals as a key area of focus, and in 2018 is partnering with Create NSW on its *Creatability* internship program, which provides a paid opportunity for arts practitioners with disability. Critically, the discussions with the successful candidate have been about the Opera House listening to what his career goals are; discussing the skills he needs; and creating an opportunity for him to highlight his areas of expertise that will add value to the Opera House's work in order to tailor the experience specifically to him. These opportunities need to focus on creating a meaningful, two-way relationship where both sides learn from each other's experiences and knowledge. There is an opportunity for the National Arts and Disability Strategy to encourage and enable arts organisations to collaborate with support service organisations to facilitate and embed practitioners in the arts.

Attendance and participation in the arts

There is much discussion around the lifelong process of creative ageing, acknowledging that if a family engages in a tradition, such as regularly attending arts and cultural activities, that tradition will continue as youths grow into adults. To enable this participation in the arts for people with disability, integrated and independent access to the arts for people of all ages is central. This requires the modification to existing, and development of bespoke programming and infrastructure, to ensure that there is adequate support available to facilitate engagement in numerous forms. Central to this are four elements:

- Understanding audience needs;
- Tailored programming experiences;
- Empowering patrons;
- Enabling technologies; and
- Appropriate physical infrastructure.

Understanding audience needs

To understand the needs of patrons, partnership with community groups and regular data collection and evaluation are essential. Meaningful relationships with targeted community groups and organisations result in greater participation and outcomes for scheduled events and programs. For example, the Opera House provides group discounts on tickets to community organisations participating in certain initiatives, which also provides the Opera House with information on the groups' access requirements. With increased data and knowledge, the Opera House is able to provide a tailored experience that is refined through repeat visits and enables meaningful engagement. Data is a powerful tool for organisations to understand and meet their patron needs. The new National Arts and Disability Strategy presents an opportunity for the sector to develop consistent and appropriate ways to gather and manage sensitive information and report against service delivery goals, in a way that meet privacy obligations.

Tailored programming experiences

Understanding audience needs allows venues to tailor their programming to provide accessible elements across all programming genres. For example, the Opera House's work in this space includes:

- Auslan Interpretation, Audio Description and Captioning services, which enable patrons of various abilities to access content;
- Offering relaxed performances for many children and families' performances, making modifications to sound and lighting to be more suitable for children on the autism spectrum;
- Since 2014, the centrepiece of the annual Vivid Sydney festival, the Lighting of the Opera House Sails, has been live audio-described for patrons who are blind or with low vision. This event has been particularly popular with an older demographic of visitors and was live-streamed for the first time in 2018, with the video accessed more than 23,000 times;

- For the 2018 Vivid LIVE, the Opera House's contemporary music festival, the Opera House acknowledged that individuals with disability might be prevented from attending because they are unable to secure or afford a carer to attend with them. In response, the Opera House partnered with 'Gig Buddies', pairing people with learning disabilities with volunteers to attend contemporary music events; and
- The annual *Dancing Connections* program has been developed in collaboration with Dance for Parkinson's Australia, focusing on addressing Parkinson's Disease-specific concerns of balance, flexibility, coordination, gait, social isolation and depression. Launched in 2015, the program works to empower participants to explore movement and music, working with dance companies Mark Morris Dance Group (founders of the program), Kibbutz Dance Company, The Australian Ballet and the Michael Clark Company.

With funding opportunities and industry partnerships, the Opera House considers there are significant opportunities to increase the number of meaningful engagement projects that directly address the needs of specific groups.

Empowering patrons

Services supporting patrons' visitor experience, including the journey to and from an event, need to be carefully planned and consistent, which requires a significant investment in resources (people and cash). For example, all events on the Opera House's website include information regarding potential noise or content sensitivities to ensure that patrons can make informed decisions about their experience. The Opera House provides a courtesy bus to its site from Circular Quay and a complimentary shuttle service across the Forecourt from the drop off point, and courtesy wheelchairs for loan. A recent addition to these services is the creation of an additional accessible drop-off zone in the new loading dock during peak performance times combined with the establishment of a dedicated Welcome Team to assist patrons to their venue. Continued innovation is vital in this space as patrons' needs evolve and attendance at arts and cultural venues increase.

Enabling technologies

The rapid rate of technological change in the past decade and its continued acceleration has had, and will continue to have a profound impact on how people with disability navigate and engage with the arts. Leveraging the opportunities that technological advances presents requires focus and investment.

The Opera House continuously invests in technology to improve accessibility. Hearing loops in the Joan Sutherland Theatre, Studio, and Drama Theatre were recently replaced, as was the audio description system, to enable an inclusive environment for patrons with hearing and vision loss to attend performances. The Opera House also makes a wide range of programming available to people unable to physically access the precinct. Both live streaming and podcasting make an Opera House experience available to Australians in their own homes, or at local venues. For example, the *Satellite* program livestreams select Talks and Ideas events from the Opera House's *All About Women* and *Antidote* festivals to participating arts and cultural venues across NSW, Australia and internationally. In 2018, these sessions were broadcast with Auslan interpretation. In 2017, the Opera House trialled a tailored digital initiative for children in Starlight Rooms across Australia, connecting children and their families with actors and story-tellers for a storytelling masterclass and digital excursion.

The National Arts and Disability Strategy is an ideal opportunity to examine a framework that will support and incentivise organisations to invest into the future. There are many technologies being trialled and tested around the world that have the potential to be rolled out in Australia, but require

the right infrastructure and financial support. For example, the new phone application GalaPro is being used on Broadway to create the most accessible performance seasons in its history by making captioning available for every performance; and The Globe in London is leading the way in integrating the best of recent technology into a unique and historically significant arts venue to allow greater inclusivity.

Appropriate physical infrastructure

Ongoing investment in capital works to upgrade building accessibility is central to enabling equal access for all patrons. The cost of such works are often prohibitive without valuable government support. The Opera House's status as a State, National and World heritage listed icon means that the physical changes required to provide equitable access need to be done in an innovative and careful way to minimise the impact on significant heritage fabric. The key challenge for the Opera House, as for other heritage listed arts venues, is to make changes so that they look like they belong, rather than being identifiable as later additions. The Opera House works in close consultation with advisory committees including the Conservation Council and Design Advisory Panel to achieve this. In 2015, the Opera House prepared an overarching Accessibility Masterplan, which provides guidance and a high-level program of works to establish equitable access. The Opera House is halfway through its Decade of Renewal, which includes \$273 million worth of works, \$228 million of which has been provided by the NSW Government and \$45 million invested by the Opera House itself. Improving accessibility is an integral part of these works.

Under this program, the Joan Sutherland Theatre temporarily closed for seven months in 2017 to undertake essential upgrades, including improvement to the venue's accessibility, which will provide independent paths of travel for people in wheelchairs to the venue, and access to the stunning northern foyer for the first time ever. Planning continues on proposed upgrades to the Concert Hall, which will include the creation of more wheelchair positions, 'no-step' access to the circle and boxes, and new handrails through the auditorium and foyer spaces.

While these planned works will greatly improve access to its two largest internal venues, there are still many other opportunities to make the Opera House a welcoming place for all people. This includes initiatives such as improving access to other venues; improving facilities, amenities and wayfinding for people with disability; upgrading back-of-house spaces to provide better opportunities for people to work or perform at the Opera House; and removing physical impediments around the site to achieve equitable access.

Investment and quantifying impact

The Opera House considers that it is vital to create infrastructure in the arts industry for practitioners with a disability to be able to make commercially viable works, which in turn creates a sustainable practice. As outlined below, the Opera House faces two challenges in this space, which would be shared by many other organisations.

High-impact engagement programs, including those tailored towards people with disability, are expensive to produce and deliver, and often cater to small numbers of participants. Despite the profound impact on the emotional and social wellbeing of participants, as witnessed by carers, performers and producers, this impact is difficult to quantify in traditional Return on Investment (ROI) terms. Without a proper framework for addressing impact, projects rely only on measuring quantitative impact. This provides an unhelpful framework for decision-making about resource allocation. It also fails to consider the value of the interaction, the social and behavioural impact, the sustainability of the relationships formed as a result of the project, or the value of the program for long-term research and program planning. While these more qualitative impacts can be captured in case studies, it makes alignment with traditional business case frameworks difficult. The Opera

House sees an opportunity for governing bodies to research and develop a more appropriate framework for quantifying the reach and impact of engagement projects for people with disability.

This framework would enable more focused and compelling advocacy to secure funding and support for future projects. Seed or matched funding arrangements (e.g. government/philanthropic/corporate partnerships) are particularly valuable to enable organisations to embed works by artists with disability into core programming.

Employment, awareness and workplace culture

The National Arts and Disability strategy provides an opportunity to encourage arts and cultural organisations to commit to employment and cultural initiatives that support social equity and inclusion, build awareness and break down attitudinal and social barriers to access. Training should occur across all areas and levels of the workforce to embed principles of equity, engagement and access in the organisational culture. This increases the commitment and capacity of organisations to attract and retain staff with disability. It would also benefit employers if resources and information was available about support programs and funding that is in place to assist with placing an employee with disability into a role.

Further information

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