

# SUBMISSION TO SENATE STANDING COMMITTEES ON ENVIRONMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS' INQUIRY INTO THE NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY

Per Capita  
March 2023

*'I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art-forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.'*<sup>1</sup>

- Thornton Wilder, 1957

Per Capita welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications, for their inquiry into the National Cultural Policy (the Policy).

Per Capita is an independent public policy think tank, focused on building a new vision for Australia. One that promotes shared prosperity, social justice, and fairness.

Access to, and participation in cultural events is a social justice issue, for creative industry workers, and for the public. Australians living outside of capital cities, with lower levels of education, and lower household incomes attend cultural activities at a lower rate than their counterparts. Socioeconomic factors inhibit access to the arts, and thus, to the coinciding benefits the arts can provide to health, social cohesion, and community building.<sup>2</sup> This is recognised in one of the Policy's ten guiding principles: that '[a]ll Australians, regardless of language, literacy, geography, age, or education, have the opportunity to access and participate in arts and culture'.<sup>3</sup>

Per Capita has considered the Policy and is broadly supportive of its aims. The Policy clearly acknowledges the importance of the arts in Australia, and the essential role it plays in our sense of belonging and identity. The Policy seeks to restore funding to industries, horribly neglected by former governments, and pave the way for a much-needed restoration of our creative ecosystem. However, Per Capita submits that within the actions enumerated in the Policy, a stronger focus on audience access to live performance should be considered, to promote further access for all Australian to participate in arts and culture, regardless of socioeconomic status.

This submission will focus primarily on live theatre in Australia's desperately under-subsidised, publicly subsidised theatres, with emphasis on the fifth of the Policy's interconnected pillars: *Engaging the Audience – making sure our stories connect with people at home and abroad.*<sup>4</sup>

## Why live theatre?

Theatre is unique to other artforms, incorporating multiple disciplines into one. It is deeply intimate and unique in its *nowness*. As the fourth wall crashes down, audience and players are locked in a shared experience; where no two performances are ever the same.

Writing for the International Federation of Actors (FIA), Michael Crosby, Australian trade unionist and former general secretary of FIA, considered the important role of Actors as the storytellers of our society:

<sup>1</sup> Richard Goldstone, 'The Art of Fiction XVI: Interview with Thornton Wilder' [1957] (15) *The Paris Review* 36, 47

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, Australia* (Catalogue No 4114.0, 26 March 2019) Table 2,6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, *Revive a place for every story, a story for every place – Australia's cultural policy for the next five years* (Policy Document, January 2023) 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* 18.

*they are essential to the intellectual and emotional health of a society. They are the face and voice of a nation's culture. They tell a nation their own stories. They reflect what it is to be a citizen of that nation. They hold a mirror to society so that it can see its true nature. They embody the intellectual and emotional struggles going on in each of our societies.*<sup>5</sup>

But who is being reflected in this mirror? And who can view this reflection?

The economic and non-economic benefits of the Australian creative industries were well investigated by the 2021 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communication and the Arts inquiry into Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions.<sup>6</sup> However, without access to the stages where our stories are told, many Australians miss out on these benefits.

## Who is being reflected?

Diversity is front and centre in this report, and whilst language, literacy, geography, age, or education all contribute to socioeconomic disadvantage in our community, more emphasis should be placed on investigating and correcting barriers to access so that everyone can experience the social benefits (individual and societal) of viewing live theatre.

### Benefits of theatre

The economic and non-economic benefits of the Australian creative industries were well investigated by the 2021 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communication and the Arts inquiry into Australia's Creative and Cultural Industries and Institutions.<sup>7</sup> However, without access to the stages where our stories are told, many Australians miss out on these benefits.

Research published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, in 2021, found that attending theatre improves empathy, changes attitudes, and leads to pro-social behaviour.<sup>8</sup> In the first part of this study, researchers examined the effects on audiences of the play *Skeleton Crew*, by Dominique Morisseau, a play about the impacts on Detroit's auto workers following the 2008 financial crisis. It was a production which 'put onstage people of a race and class and type that much mainstream theatre might ignore or demonise'.<sup>9</sup> Results from the study showed that surveyed audience members reported:

*feeling more empathy towards factory workers in Detroit... [s]pecifically, they reported feeling more empathic concern for factory workers... were more likely to think that racial discrimination is a major issue; that the government should reduce income disparities; and were more supportive of corporate regulation.*<sup>10</sup>

What we put on our stages is important. It plays a crucial role in how we understand our wider community.

### The Australian stage

Australia's first international export of live spoken word theatre was Ray Lawler's 1955 play *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*. This production dealt heavily with class, gender, race, and the Australian national identity. However, political theatre that deals with class issues is minimal in Australia. Even with reduced funding to the sector, the number of new and existing Australian spoken theatre texts performed professionally on Australian stages has increased, but the number of those productions which deals with class issues has decreased. This is presented in Figure 1.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Crosby, 'Reflections on the Challenge of Organising Actors' (FIA Document, International Federation of Actors, August 2020) 3 <[https://fia-actors.com/fileadmin/user\\_upload/News/Documents/2021/January/FIA\\_Organising\\_Actors.pdf](https://fia-actors.com/fileadmin/user_upload/News/Documents/2021/January/FIA_Organising_Actors.pdf)>.

<sup>6</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts, Parliament of Australia, *Sculpting a National Cultural Plan - Igniting a Post-COVID Economy for the Arts* (Report, October 2021).

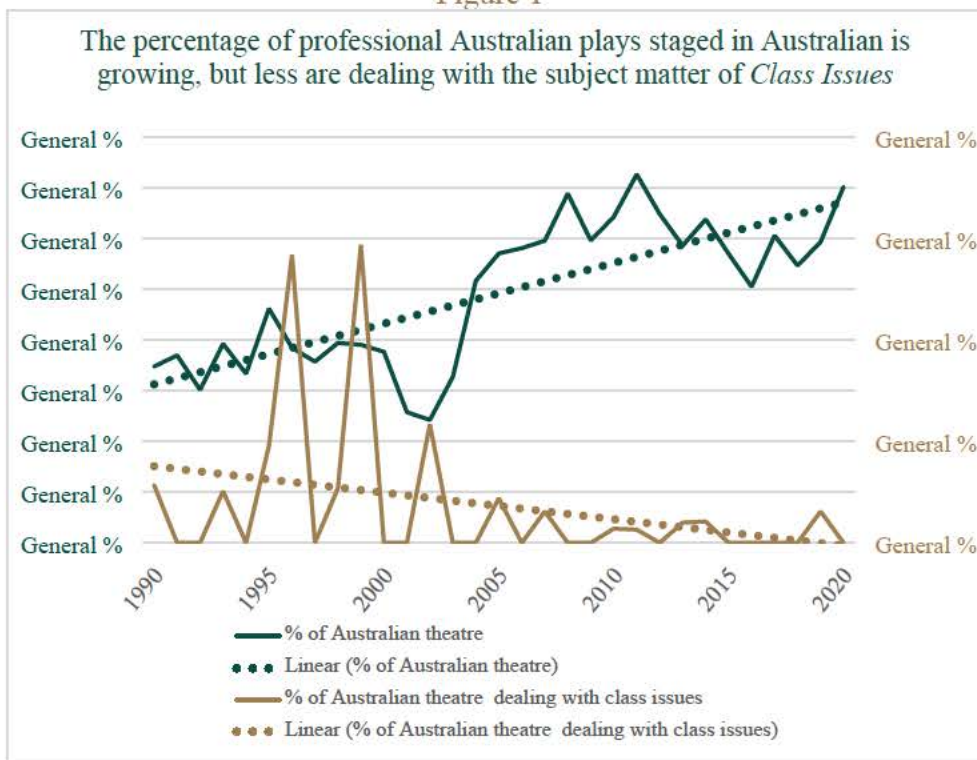
<sup>7</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts, Parliament of Australia, *Sculpting a National Cultural Plan - Igniting a Post-COVID Economy for the Arts* (Report, October 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Steve Rathje, Leor Hackel and Jamil Zaki, 'Attending Live Theatre Improves Empathy, Changes Attitudes, and Leads to Pro-social Behaviour' (2021) 95 (January) *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 3.

Figure 1<sup>11</sup>



### Our analysis of state theatre companies

Per Capita researched four of Australia’s state theatre companies in four different states to analyse some of the trends in new and existing Australian works on publicly subsidised stages.<sup>12</sup>

Figures 2-4 show the types of works performed in our selection of state theatre companies. Whilst the percentage of new and existing Australia texts performed in each companies’ subscription/ mainstage season is increasing, these productions are more likely to have smaller casts, and be performed in smaller venues. This partly could be related to artist choice, but more likely, theatre companies are constricted in what they want to do, by what they have the means to produce. Means, which we submit should be provided by government.

<sup>11</sup> Author’s own calculations on figures taken from AusStage database: ‘The Australian Live Performance Database’ *AusStage* (Web Database, 2023) <<https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/browse/>>.

<sup>12</sup> Selected from companies in the *Confederation of Australian State Theatres* (Bell Shakespeare, Belvoir, Black Swan State Theatre Company, Circus Oz, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, State Theatre Company of South Australia, Sydney Theatre Company).



Figure 2<sup>13</sup>

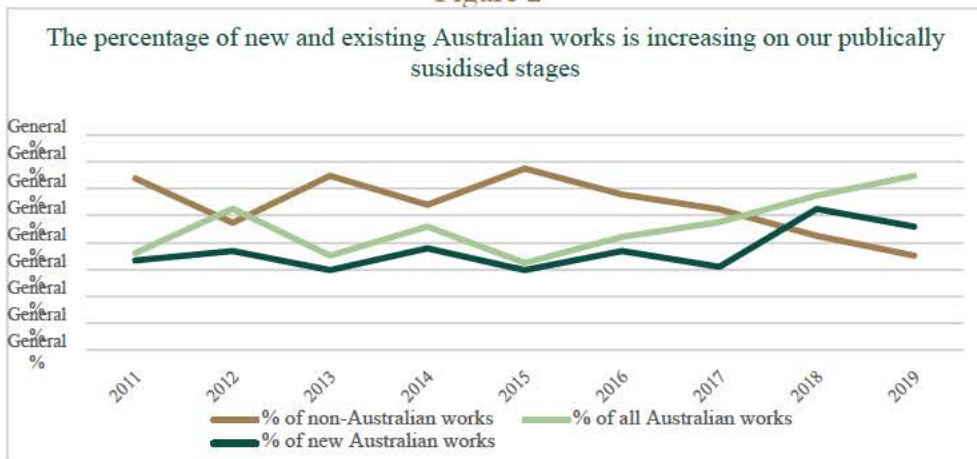


Figure 3<sup>14</sup>

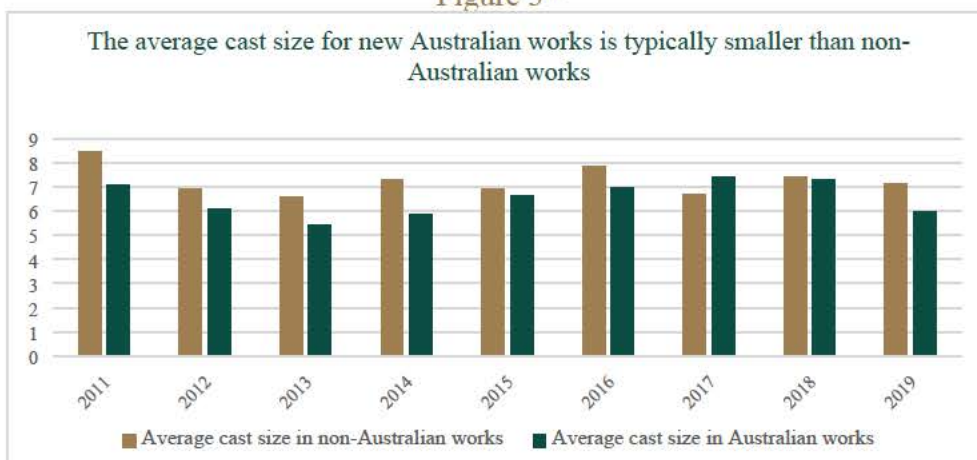
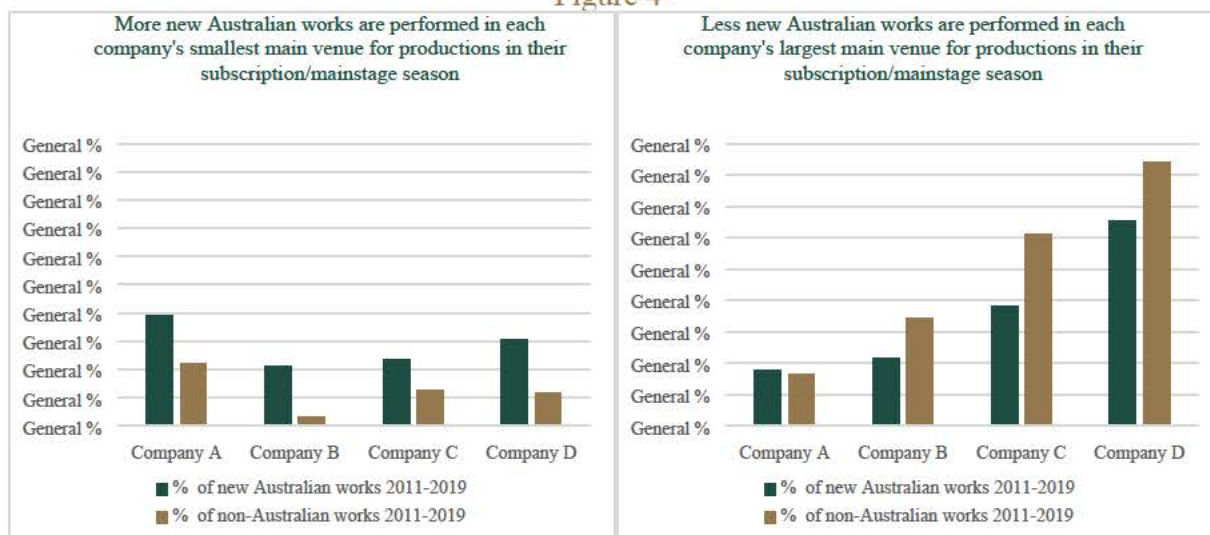


Figure 4<sup>15</sup>



<sup>13</sup> Author's own calculations on figures taken from annual reports from 2010-2021 of Melbourne Theatre Company (Vic), Black Swan State Theatre Company (WA), Queensland Theatre Company (Qld), and State Theatre Company of South Australia (SA) and AusStage database: The Australian Live Performance Database 'AusStage' (Web Database, 2023) <<https://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/browse/>>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.



## Who gets to view the reflection?

As early as 1856, Australian workers were rallying for the right to recreation. At the first Eight-hour day procession in Melbourne, workers led the procession carrying a banner which read *Eight hours labour, eight hours recreation, eight hours rest*.<sup>16</sup>

Since its inception, the Australian labour movement has understood that to advance the interests of the working class, unions needed to be involved in all activities that encompassed the of lives members and their families, not merely their mainstay struggle for better wages and conditions.<sup>17</sup>

In 1977, in its first resolution on the subject, the Congress of the Australian Council of Trade Unions declared ‘that there is an urgent need for the trade unions to become more involved in the arts and cultural life of the Australian people’.<sup>18</sup>

Why? Because as their 1991 Cultural Policy elucidates:

*Successful democracies need four common qualities: productive and inventive economies; highly skilled and well-educated work forces; highly developed social security systems and high levels of cultural involvement. Cultural involvement is a critical and supportive element to the other three qualities.*<sup>19</sup>

Bovell, Cornelius, Reeves, Tsiolkas and Vela’s *Who’s Afraid of the Working Class*, is play that puts the struggles of the working-class front and centre. This production forced the audience to consider pressing issues of everyday Australians, powerless in the face of growing inequality. As Melbourne theatre reviewer, Kate Herbert wrote at the time: it was a story about the ‘disfranchised underclass created by insensitive government policies and a shrinking job market’.<sup>20</sup>

In the introduction of the 2017 reprint of the play, director Julian Meyrick muses on the development, and importance, of this Melbourne Workers theatre production, first performed at Victorian Trades Hall on 1 May 1998:

*The choice of the aesthetic entailed considerable risk. It meant breaking with the upbeat, celebrational mood of so much Australian community theatre, a style with which the commissioning company, the Melbourne Workers Theatre, was partially identified. There was always the fear of being negative, regressive even, painting things as worse than they were. But how could they be any worse than what we saw, daily, around us? As rehearsals for the first season got underway it was easy to research the characters in the play. All you had to do was walk down the street.*<sup>21</sup>

The first mount of *Who’s Afraid* received highly enthusiastic reviews and attracted large audiences.<sup>22</sup> With tickets at \$8-\$15<sup>23</sup> the cost to attend made up just 1.5% of the average weekly wage at the time.<sup>24</sup> Jumping forward to 2020, the average ticket price for all theatre in Australia is \$105.14,<sup>25</sup> almost 6% of the 2020 weekly average wage.<sup>26</sup> Live Performance Australia’s trends analysis shows a 82% growth in average ticket

<sup>16</sup> Peter Love 'Report: Melbourne Celebrates the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of its Eight Hour Day' (2006) 91 (November) *Labour History* 193, 193.

<sup>17</sup> Sandy Kirby, *Artists and Unions A Critical Tradition A Report on the Art & Working Life Program* (Australia Council, 1992) 8. Redfern, 1992 page 8

<sup>18</sup> Richard Walsham, 'Have a Cultural Bent' (1978) 59(4) *Journal of the New South Wales Public Schools Teachers Federation* 75, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Australian Council of Trade Unions, 'Cultural Policy' (Congress Policy Document, September 1991) (emphasis added) <[https://www.actu.org.au/media/349680/actucongress1991\\_cultural\\_policy.pdf](https://www.actu.org.au/media/349680/actucongress1991_cultural_policy.pdf)>.

<sup>20</sup> Kate Herbert, 'Who's Afraid of the Working Class?' *Kate Herbert Theatre Reviews* (Blog, 1 May 1998)

<<https://kateherberttheatrereviews.blogspot.com/1998/05/whos-afraid-of-working-class-may-1-1998.html>>.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew Bovell et al, *Who's Afraid of the Working Class?*, ed Julian Meyrick (Currency Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2017) vi.

<sup>22</sup> Glenn D'Cruz, 'Class' and Political Theatre: The Case of Melbourne Workers Theatre' (2005) 21(3) *New Theatre Quarterly* 207, 209.

<sup>23</sup> Bronwen Beechey, 'When the class is no longer working' (1998) May (317) *Green Left* (Online) <<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/when-class-no-longer-working>>.

<sup>24</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Average Weekly Earning, Australia* (Catalogue No 6302.0, 13 August 1998).

<sup>25</sup> Live Performance Australia, *Live Performance Industry in Australia: 2019 and 2020 Ticket Attendance and Revenue Report* (Report, 7 October 2021) 91.

<sup>26</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Average Weekly Earning, Australia* (Catalogue No 6302.0, 13 August 2020).



prices, from an average of \$43.87 in 2004 to \$105.14 in 2020.<sup>27</sup> In our analysis of state theatre companies, we found ticket prices had increased for concession and full fare from 19-24% from just 2015 to 2023.<sup>28</sup>

Who's afraid of the working class today? No-one. They can't get through the door.

### Barriers to access

According to statistics from the ABS, the attendance rate for theatre performances is lower for people with lower household incomes, lower educational attainment, and for people living outside of capital cities. Whilst attendance rate has reduced across the board, it has reduced considerably more for those in lower socioeconomic categories. This is shown in Table 1.

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<sup>27</sup> Live Performance Australia, Live Performance Industry in Australia: 2019 and 2020 Ticket Attendance and Revenue Report (Report, 7 October 2021) 91.

<sup>28</sup> Author's own calculations on figures taken from webpages and season brochures from 2010-2021 of selected theatre companies: Melbourne Theatre Company (Vic), Black Swan State Theatre Company (WA), Queensland Theatre Company (Qld), and State Theatre Company of South Australia (SA).

Table 1<sup>29</sup>

Year	Equivalised gross household income		Highest educational attainment		Region	
	Lowest quintile	Highest quintile	Postgraduate degree	Year 12	Capital cities	Balance of state/territory
2005-6	11.6 %	25.4 %	29.2 %	16.9 %	17.9 %	15.5 %
2009-10	10.1 %	26.6 %	231.8 %	14.0 %	17.6 %	14.1 %
2017-18	9.4 %	25.6 %	29.0 %	13.2 %	17.6 %	14.2 %
Difference in attendance rate 2005-6 to 2017-18	2.2 %	-0.2 %	0.2 %	3.7 %	0.3 %	1.3 %

## State theatre companies are doing more with less

Throughout rolling cuts to our cultural institutions, publicly subsidised theatre companies have been innovating and adjusting to ensure Australian stories remain on our stages. But the lack of funding is forcing them to rely more heavily on other revenue.

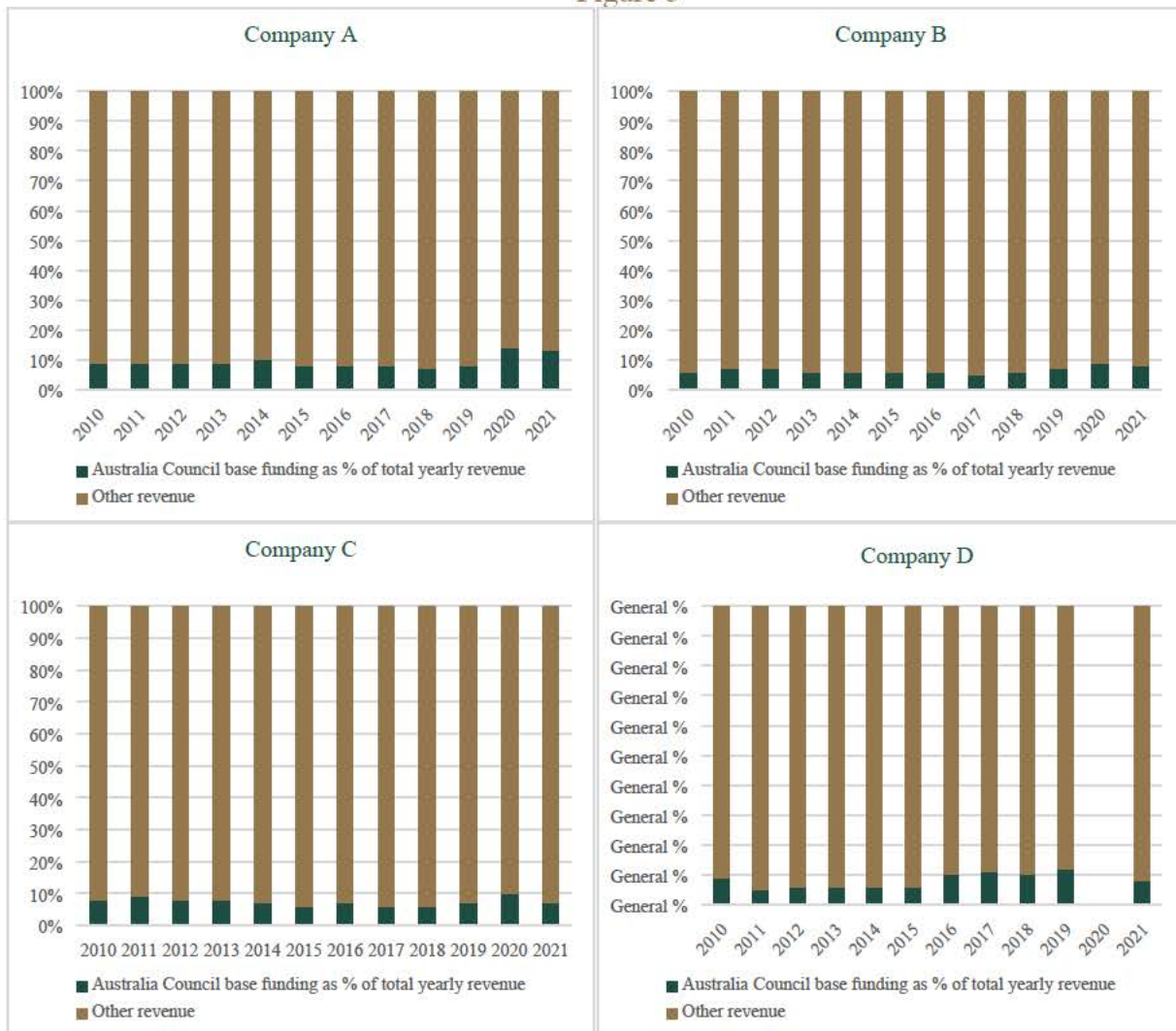
Figures 5-7, highlight the financial stress placed on these companies. Figure 5 looks at Australia Council base funding as a percentage of total yearly revenue, Figure 6 looks at all Commonwealth, State and Local Government funding as a percentage of total yearly revenue; and Figure 7 looks at a consolidation of four companies' Australia Council base funding adjusted by CPI.

With such little funding, it's difficult to describe them as public, state or subsidised theatre companies at all.

<sup>29</sup> Author's own calculation from figures taken from ABS, 2013-14 missing relevant figures: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, Australia, 2017-18* (Catalogue No 4114.0, 26 March 2019) Table 2,6-7; Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, Australia, 2009-10* (Catalogue No 4114.0, 21 December 2010) Table 2,7-8; Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Attendance at Selected Cultural Venues and Events, Australia, 2005-06* (Catalogue No 4114.0, 25 January 2007) Table 2,8-9.

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Figure 5<sup>30</sup>



<sup>30</sup> Author's own calculations on figures taken from annual reports and financial reports from 2010-2021 of selected theatre companies: Melbourne Theatre Company (Vic), Black Swan State Theatre Company (WA), Queensland Theatre Company (Qld), and State Theatre Company of South Australia (SA). Data missing from Company D.



Figure 6<sup>31</sup>

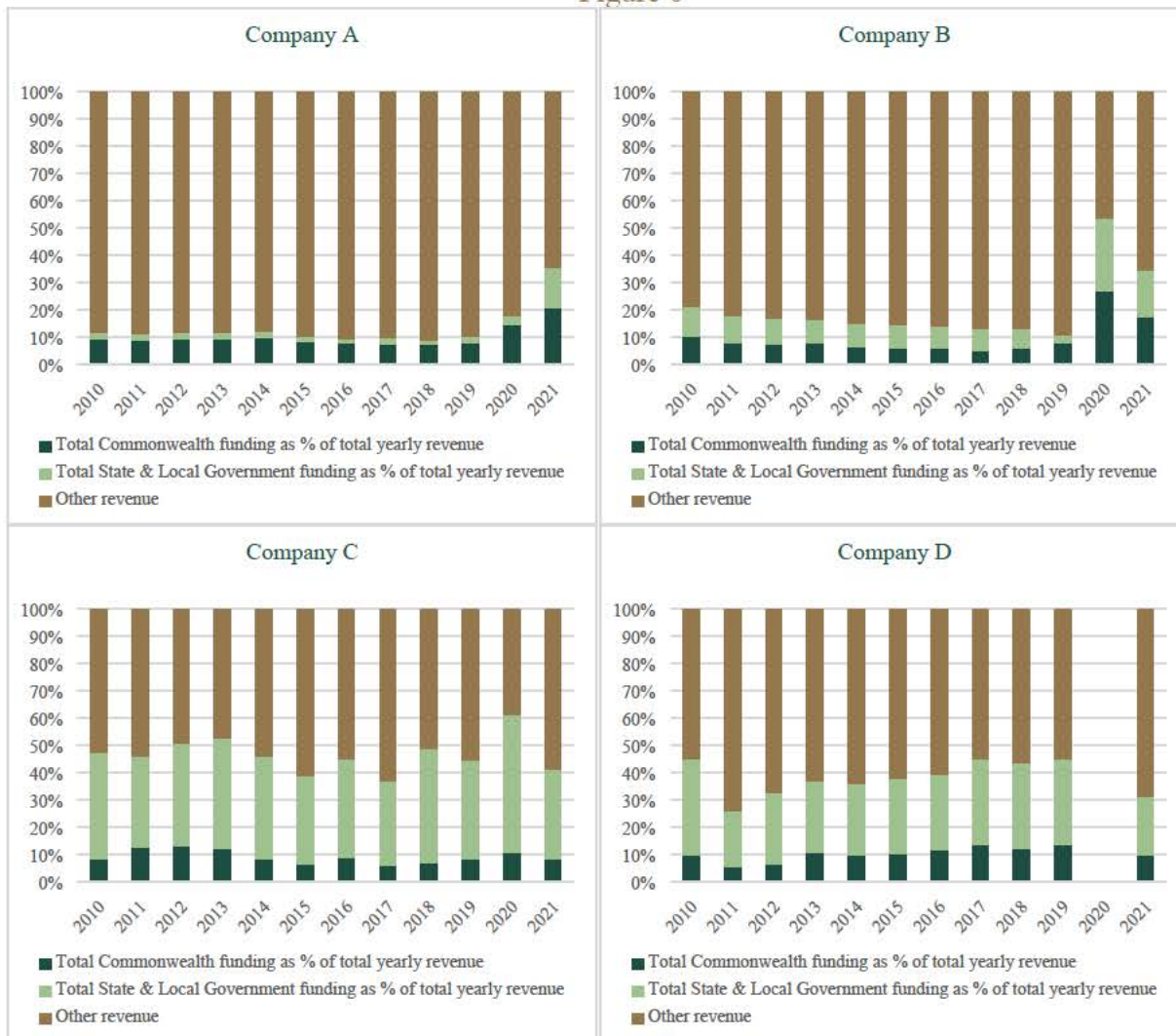
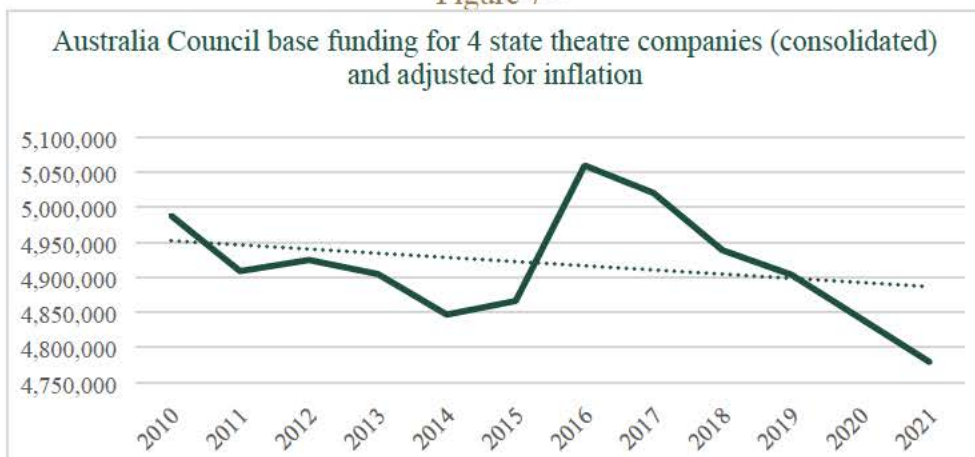


Figure 7<sup>32</sup>



## Recommendations

Within the Policy we believe there is space for further development to improve audience access and promote Australian content in Australia’s state theatre companies. The COVID-19 pandemic, along with bringing our

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid; adjusted for inflation using CPI (2010 =100).

creative industries to a jarring halt, intensified divisions in our community. We believe the creative industries can play a role in repairing these fault lines.

Our analysis shows that state theatre companies will do what they can to get Australian content on our public stages. We are therefore not recommending content requirements, like that needed in other arts disciplines. We applaud the return of funding to the Australia Council but make recommendations about additional funding to ensure that Australian stories on our public stages can be seen by a wider section of our community.

1. Introduce additional or conditional funding for state theatre companies for subsidising tickets to encourage attendance from lower income Australians.
2. Undertake further research into the demographics of audiences with a particular focus on the demographics of theatre attendees at free or discounted productions at state theatre companies.

## Conclusion

The Policy outlines ‘a place for every story, a story for every place’. Per Capita submits that it should maintain a focus on a third tenet: *a place for every Australian*.

We acknowledge the decades of campaigning by creative industry workers, and the Australian public, who have fought for a restoration of our creative industries and demanded it be on the government’s agenda. We acknowledge the Albanese Labor Government, who has listened and acted in developing this Policy, along with all the contributors from across Australia’s creative industries. We thank the members of the Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications for their consideration of this submission.

Publicly subsidised theatre companies should be subsidised for the benefit of the entire public. If not, we risk publicly funded arts being only accessible to the privileged elite and lose the benefits of social cohesion that come with our stages showcasing stories about our diversity: race, gender, sexuality, and class.

This is how we democratise the arts in our country. This is how we create a true class act.