

Submission re Inquiry into the impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the arts

I am a performer, director and teacher of theatre who has worked largely in the small to medium sector for over twenty-five years. I have been employed by numerous theatre companies and organisations including Death Defying Theatre, Circus Oz, the Murray River Performing Group, Back to Back, La Mama, Playbox, HotHouse, the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, the Tasmanian Theatre Company, Blue Cow Theatre and Ten Days on the Island. I have worked as a freelance performer in television and commercial theatre in Sydney, Melbourne, Albury Wodonga, and currently in Hobart, where I now reside. In addition to my career as a performing artist I have worked as an academic teacher of Theatre and Drama at La Trobe University, Albury Wodonga and as a teacher and course coordinator of Live Production in the VET sector amongst many other casual and part-time jobs as a teacher, project manager and administrator.

Many, if not all, of the theatre companies and community organisations in which I have been employed have had some level of Australia Council funding over the years to enable them to make high quality work in which artists and technicians can earn something of a decent wage. Theatre is an art form that is expensive to make, requiring the collaboration of diverse creative and technical workers. Most of the companies mentioned above managed to make high quality work on annual budgets that represent a small fraction of the budget for ONE production by a Major Organisation such as the Australian Opera, but these budgets have provided vital work, experience and creative outlets for numerous Australian artists. Working in this sector has rewarded me with experiences beyond what an artist may expect in the commercially driven world of the larger funded theatre companies. This is the sector in which new Australian theatre texts are created, in which bold experimentation takes place, in which artists can respond to and work with diverse cultural groups, where young artists collaborate with experienced artists to develop their craft and discover new creative directions, where the next generation of renowned directors, designers and performers can cut their teeth. This is the sector that feeds the Major Organisations. More importantly this is the sector where many artists, me included, are happy to craft what is inevitably a sporadic career path because we are creatively drawn to the opportunities for collaboration and experimentation.

Recently Senator George Brandis' announced, via the 2015 Federal Budget, that he would be setting up a new organisation, the National Programme for Excellence in the Arts, administering a four year \$104 million budget for funding arts projects through his ministry. This money would be taken from the annual appropriations disbursed to the Australia Council. Senator Brandis made this announcement without consulting with the arts sector or the Australia Council. I am writing this submission to add my voice to those of many other Australian artists who are profoundly concerned about this decision. The facts surrounding this Inquiry and the implications for the Australia Council's operating budget are well known and I will not summarise them here but they can be found on the attachment to this submission. In short, the establishment of the NPEA is a deeply wrong-headed action with catastrophic implications for many arts workers and the potential to damage the cultural vitality of our nation for generations.

Firstly, establishing a new national arts funding body alongside the Australia Council duplicates the functions of an organisation which, while far from perfect in its operations, is nonetheless committed to the important principles of peer assessment and arms length funding. For forty years the Australia Council has distributed federal arts funds to thousands of organisations and individuals according to Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts Submission 14 these principles, seeking to nurture excellence across all art forms and at all levels of our national arts practice. Senator Brandis has not yet given any

details of how his new organisation will function but given his recent actions regarding the artists' boycott of the 2014 Biennale of Sydney and his partisan questioning of chief executive of the Australia Council, Tony Grybowski, at a 2014 Senate Committee hearing regarding the Council's rejection of a funding application for the Australian Festival Of Chamber Music in Townsville, it is reasonable to infer that Senator Brandis is simply setting up a discretionary fund to direct grant money according to his personal taste, political agenda and ideological leaning. This reveals a disturbingly authoritarian view of the function of the Arts Minister and the organs of government, more significantly it shows that Senator Brandis is deeply ignorant of how the Australian arts environment actually works.

Secondly the sequestration of \$104 million from the four year budget of the Australia Council will have, indeed is already having, a dire effect upon thousands of Australian arts workers and arts organisations. Having been directed by the Ministry that Major Organisations funding is to be quarantined from the slice of money demanded of the Australia Council, the Council has been forced to apply cuts to the already woefully inadequate pool of money that had been allocated for small to medium organisations and individual artists. This sector feeds the whole arts ecology. It is in this sector that risk is taken, new Australian stories are told, young artists develop skills and innovative work is created free of the constraints of commercial imperatives. Over the past decade or so a number of reports (available through the Australia Council website) have highlighted the importance of the small to medium sector in various areas of arts practice. The recommendations of these reports have been largely ignored, at least in my particular field of practice, theatre. This has meant that many theatre companies have withered due to funding inadequacy or uncertainty, bold projects have remained as unfulfilled concepts, and artists have lost hope of earning even a small, regular income for their skills and talents as sources of funding or employment have contracted. In short the small to medium sector is already struggling with only one in five applications receiving ANY level of funding from the Australia Council. Funding policies have tightened to the point where there is no long term security for most small to medium companies, with concomitant insecurity and unpredictability in the lives of associated artists, technicians and administrative workers. The current proposal to create a Minister's discretionary fund will suck even more money from an ever-shrinking pool and increase the despair of an already desperate sector.

There is much that needs to be done to change our society's view of the arts. A common stereotype is that the arts and artists are variously elitist, self-indulgent, profligate and/or pretentious. In my experience this is far from the truth. Most artists I know work extremely hard in their art-form, putting in long, unpaid hours and exploiting themselves to achieve successful outcomes on inadequate budgets. Artists are frugal with their limited budgets and almost always undercharge for their services. Artists in theatre are realistic about commercial imperatives and work hard to produce work that will "put bums on seats" within the constraints of the various funding criteria that apply. I personally know many talented and dedicated directors, writers and performers who have contributed hugely to the cultural expression of this nation over decades who, in their 40s and 50s with the skills and experience that would place them as senior executives in any other industry, are living on their credit cards and casual employment in retail or hospitality. Nonetheless, many Australians resent the idea of public money being spent on the arts without recognising a) that Australia's arts funding is a tiny amount of the federal budget and compares pretty poorly with many other advanced nations and b) that federal and state governments direct far greater amounts of money in various forms to support many other industries, businesses and individuals. Nor do most Australians understand that many of Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts Submission 14 our renowned and respected actors, musicians, performers, writers, designers and directors have achieved their success due to the direct or indirect support of the Australia Council's funding for small to medium companies. Furthermore

those Australians who have a genuine appreciation and interest in performing arts, for example, often have a narrow conception of the whole arts ecology, their vision of the sector being limited to commercial (usually old and foreign) musicals, the output of “classics” or successful overseas works from state theatre companies or the relatively tiny number of Australian actors who make a career on the international stage.

My fear is that the National Programme for Excellence in the Arts is simply a personal fund established by the Arts Minister, playing on the above misperceptions, to subvert informed assessment and facilitate his own extremely limited view of what is “excellent” in the arts. The NPEA will effectively suck funds from the most vulnerable artists in our community, threatening the existence of numerous companies and leading to increased insecurity and uncertainty for those organisations artists who are most deserving of support. All of the above does not address perhaps the most important issue arising from cuts to the funding for small to medium organisations and individual artists; the effect upon our Australian community as a whole. For decades it has been the small to medium sector that has most effectively connected with the diverse cultural groups that make up our pluralist society. In my own experience I have made theatre with and for groups ranging from regional youth, prisoners, housing commission residents, remote communities, Aboriginal communities, youth at risk, addicts in rehabilitation, mine workers and their families, and people with physical and intellectual disability, to name just some. It is funding for the small to medium sector, specifically organisations such as Back to Back, Death Defying Theatre (now Urban Theatre Projects), The Murray River Performing Group (now HotHouse), Blue Cow and the Tasmanian Theatre Company, which made many of these projects possible.

Senator Brandis’ action is already affecting the capacity of such companies to continue their work. In my own life, for example, the result of the Australia Council cancelling the June round of touring grant submissions for *Playing Australia* has been to leave a proposed interstate tour of Finegan Kruckemeyer’s comedy *Simon’s Final Sound*, produced by Blue Cow Theatre, in doubt until seven months before the proposed tour, already supported by over twenty presenting venues, is due to commence. I, and the other artists and technicians involved in this tour, must now put all other plans, work offers and schedules on hold until an application can be submitted and assessed in the September round, with a decision unlikely before November.

I am no longer young enough to believe that theatre changes the world but I still sincerely believe that it can make a change in people’s lives – even if it is only for one day or a few hours. I believe this because I have observed it over many years in many different contexts with people of all ages and backgrounds. Australian theatre makers are already exploiting themselves in an environment which has been dying from a thousand cuts for some decades. I fear that Senator Brandis’s recent proposal will knock an already staggering sector to its knees. The result will not just be the loss of income for thousands of arts workers, it will mean a very real diminution of our culture. I fear the loss of ten thousand stories, hundreds of thousands of creative visions, a million imaginative encounters and the silencing of voices which speak for diversity, inclusivity, community and critical dialogue.

Guy Hooper

September 2, 2015

Attachment A – from: <https://visualarts.net.au/artist-files/2015/artists-heart/>

The Facts

- In the May 2015 Federal Budget, the Government announced that **\$104.8M over four years will be removed from the Australia Council**.
- Instead these funds will be used to establish a new '**National Programme for Excellence in the Arts**', which will be **run by** the Federal Government's arts department, the **Ministry for the Arts**.
- This redirected funding will **support Creative Partnerships Australia** with an extra **\$5.2 million** over three years starting in 2015-16 to foster private sector support for the arts.
- In addition there will be a **transfer** of the Visions of Australia and Festivals of Australia programs and the Major Festivals Initiative (with support to be doubled to \$1.5 million) **to the Ministry for the Arts**.
- Two other **cuts** are being made by the Government to the Australia Council's appropriation:
 - **\$7.3M 'budget efficiency measure'** over four years; and
 - an extra **\$6M** over three years will be extracted to establish the **Australian Book Council**.
- The Australia Council has announced that its total funding for 2015-16 is \$184.5M. These funds will be used to deliver the **Major Performing Arts Framework, Visual Arts and Crafts Strategy** (which has been renewed for the next 4 years), **Playing Australia, Contemporary Touring Initiative** and **Contemporary Music Touring Program**, on behalf of the Australian Government.
- The Council's **discretionary funding** of \$62M is **\$23M less than expected**. These funds support the Australia Council's current Key Organisations, national and international development activities, capacity building, research and operations.
- In response, the Australia Council has announced that:
 - The six-year funding program for organisations has been suspended
 - Current contracts of multi-year funded organisations will be honoured until their conclusion at the end of 2016
 - Existing applications can be assessed within the September round, which will include multi-year project support for individual artists and arts organisations
 - The ArtStart, Creative Communities Partnerships Initiative and Artists in Residence programs will not be offered in the future.
- The **Australia Council** has **not made** any public **commitment** to supporting multi-year operational funding for **small to medium arts** companies.
- **State and territory** arts agencies are also yet to confirm any commitment to multi-year operational funding for the **small to medium** sector.
- The Federal Arts Budget announcement has created enormous uncertainty across the arts industry.

The Issues

- There has been **no consultation** with the Australia Council and key arts industry stakeholders in making this radical change to the arts funding process.
- The Arts Minister, Senator Brandis has failed to provide anything other than anecdotal evidence to justify his actions, nor has he been able to confirm that the arms' length principle and genuine peer assessment processes would apply to the 'National Programme for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA)'.
- **Small to medium arts companies are in serious danger.**
- If the proposed changes are implemented, the axe will fall on grants to small to medium arts organisations (S2Ms) and individual artists. Current government announcements show that the NPEA will not provide multi-year operational funding for S2M companies.
- This move comes just months into the implementation of the new Australia Council strategic plan that Senator Brandis publicly launched last August. Initiatives like NPEA have no strategic connection to the new plan and seriously undermine the capacity of the Australia Council to deliver it.
- Under its new strategic plan the Australia Council had allocated **\$30m** to the vitally important six-year funding program for organisations.
- Australia Council data () shows that in the trial of the six-year funding model with the 11 Key Producer companies (2008-2013), these companies leveraged on average an additional **\$8 of income for every \$1 invested** by the Australia Council. Without the security of six year funding from the Australia Council this leveraging is not achievable.
- If the **\$30M investment** by the Australia Council in six-year funding for small to medium companies does not go ahead as planned, what is actually at risk is **\$240M/year of leveraged funds** or a staggering total of **\$1.44 billion** over the next **six years**.
- This equates to **thousands of lost jobs** in communities across the country.

Key Concerns

- There has been **no policy development process or researched evidence** for the change or assessment of its potential consequences.
- Other **public and private sector support** for the arts is now in jeopardy
- This move goes **against the principles** of **arm's length** funding and **peer assessment**.
- There will be **administrative duplication** and a **waste of taxpayer's money** in setting up a parallel structure.