



Submission to the Federal Inquiry into Broadcasting, Online Content and Live Production to Rural and Regional Australia

The Australian Ballet is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the conversation about the importance of broadcasting, online content and live production to rural and regional Australia.

Since 1962 The Australian Ballet has inspired, delighted and challenged audiences and broader community worldwide through the power and quality of our performances. Based in Melbourne, The Australian Ballet is a national major performing arts organisation with a strong local and international profile. Each year The Australian Ballet reaches more than 275,000 Australians in theatres; 22,000 via audience engagement activities; 10,000 when we tour internationally and millions in the digital space. The Australian Ballet performs for over 10,000 people in regional communities and engages a further 20,000 students and teachers in schools across the nation each year. The Australian Ballet is more than a cultural asset; the company delivers strong economic outcomes by employing a diverse range of creative professionals and self-generating 80% of our annual income.

VALUE

The Australian Ballet sees real value for rural and regional communities having access to diverse and vibrant live performance productions, high quality broadcasts and digital content.

More than 400,000 children aged 5 to 14 participate in ballet or dance classes each week across Australia. Most suburbs and country towns around Australia have a ballet school, alongside a footy club and swimming pool, as part of the social infrastructure. Ballet classes are as much a part of the Australian way of life as weekend sport. The ABS reports that for children aged 5 to 14 years dancing is the third most popular leisure activity ahead of AFL or netball; and the dance participation rate continues to rise, from 332,000 in 2006 to 418,000 in 2012.

The ABS also reports that more than 1 million young people across Australia attended a performing arts event in 2012. These young people and their families are less likely to experience live, world-class ballet if The Australian Ballet does not commit to touring outside of capital cities.

Australia's national dance company since 1962, The Australian Ballet exists to inspire, delight and challenge our audiences and the broader community in Australia and around the world.

To fulfil this purpose, The Australian Ballet tours rural and regional Australia annually, aiming to cover every state via a three year performance cycle. As a result, our performances reach more than 10,000 people across rural and regional Australia each year. Our rural and regional programs have included a targeted touring program *The Dancers Company* and our education program *Out There – The Australian Ballet in schools*. This year The Australian Ballet introduced a new program for children, *Storytime Ballet*, which will reach a further 20,000 children and their families in regional South Australia and NSW in 2016.

The Australian Ballet tours regional Australia to provide communities with access to world-class

ballet performances, at accessible prices (significantly lower than in metropolitan areas) and build enduring relationships between Australia's national ballet company and future audiences and dancers in regional Australia. In addition to the opportunity to experience high quality performances and learn more about this popular art form, which many people in rural Australia learn and practise, live productions showcase outstanding Australian talent and create career opportunities for regional communities. Many of The Australian Ballet dancers come from rural and regional communities and were inspired to pursue a career as a dancer as a result of live performances in their community.

"I can remember going to watch The Australian Ballet in Ararat as a young student and taking class with Mr Peasley [former Principal Artist of The Australian Ballet]. I dreamed that one day it would be me up there on stage! Now it seems like I have gone a full circle in returning to regional Victoria to perform." Amy Harris, Senior Artist, The Australian Ballet.

Without the Australian Ballet's rural and regional programs, young people and their families would have to travel to capital cities to experience live, world-class ballet.

Presenting high-quality live productions in regional communities benefits the local economy, supports education outcomes, stimulates culture, boosts civic pride, presents career pathways and increases social connectivity.

The appetite for live production in regional communities is high. In recent years The Australian Ballet performed to an average total capacity of 81% in regional venues.

"[The Australian Ballet regional tour was] one of our most successful [productions] both in attendance as well as quality. Our patron base really enjoys performances such as this. We sold out and had 40 on the waiting list! The show is large scale, affordable and of a high quality. The convenience of being able to see a performance like this 'at home' is significant." Venue Manager, Wangaratta

Off the stage, a valuable and important component of the company's regional touring program is to provide young dancers in regional Australia with the opportunity to train with The Australian Ballet. Local teachers, emerging artists and venues see the immeasurable value in our 'Open Classes'.

"Opportunities to engage at a professional level are rare and extremely difficult for regional dancers to access. The ability for these students to participate and engage with The Australian Ballet is vital to the ongoing development of dance students and practitioners in our regional area." Venue Manager, Port Macquarie

Additionally, we consistently receive reports from venues across the country that The Australian Ballet's visits leave a lasting impact on local professionals who gain access to the full calibre of talent that The Australian Ballet has to offer. As one of Australia's largest performing arts companies, employees of The Australian Ballet represent some of the best in the industry who take great pride in sharing their knowledge and expertise in marketing and PR, production and technical, medical and company management, whether our staff are on the road or providing support from our offices in Melbourne and Sydney.

The Theatre Manager of the Manning Entertainment Centre in Taree wrote: *"One benefit that I did not expect from [The Australian Ballet's] tour was the professional development of our theatre technicians. We regularly host professional touring companies but The Dancers Company*

expected the very best from our technicians and assisted them to achieve it. Our crew appreciated the experience as one of the highlights of their year.”

The benefits of touring to regional and remote areas for The Australian Ballet extend beyond deepening engagement with regional communities, building audiences, and instilling a love of performing arts in young people. Regional touring also provides valuable professional development opportunities to The Australian Ballet School’s dancers. On tour graduating students have an immersive experience of a paid, professional dancer on tour. For most, joining The Dancers Company on tour is their first experience of life as a professional dancer. Many of The Australian Ballet’s dancers toured with The Dancers Company as students.

Broadcast and digital content has increased The Australian Ballet’s reach exponentially. In 2014 126,000 people tuned into the ABC TV broadcast of The Australian Ballet’s The Nutcracker on Christmas Eve, and a further 14,000 tuned later in via iView. The Australian Ballet is a leader in social media with more than 150,000 Facebook followers, 76,000 Instagram followers, 35,000 YouTube subscribers and over 6 million YouTube views. Our Facebook followers shared our content with over 3 million people worldwide in 2015.

CHALLENGES

The Australian Ballet, and other large-scale performing arts companies, face a number of challenges that currently limit the presentation of live productions in rural and regional Australia.

Income

The Australian Ballet aims to cover our performance costs, whether metropolitan or rural/regional, from a number of income sources:

- Ticket income
- Sponsorship
- Philanthropy
- Government funding

The Australian Ballet’s ticket income from performances in rural/regional Australia is lower than metropolitan performances due to smaller venues, less seats and lower ticket prices (the average regional ticket price was 40% less than for a metropolitan performance in 2015).

Sponsorship is available and The Australian Ballet has been successful in securing a long-term partnership with Telstra which includes support for our annual rural/regional touring and a three year partnership with Samsung to support our education activities.

Philanthropy also offers us a source of income to cover costs of rural/regional activities; and The Australian Ballet Society of Victoria regularly supports our national regional tours (not just the Victorian portion) and The Australian Ballet’s experienced philanthropy department raises funds from individual donors to support rural/regional activities.

Funding for rural and regional activities is available from the Australian and state governments through a number of touring funds, including:

‘Playing Australia’ - Australia Council for the Arts

‘Performing Arts Touring’ - Arts NSW

‘Touring Victoria’ - Creative Victoria

The Australian Ballet's base government funding, provided under our three year quadripartite agreement with the Australia Council, Arts NSW and Creative Victoria, and which makes up just 20% of our total annual income, does not require the company to perform in rural and regional Australia but to 'demonstrate commitment to engaging with audiences in regional communities'.

With no allocated portion of our base funding to support regional touring costs, MPA's such as The Australian Ballet who choose to tour and present work in rural and regional Australia can apply for the special project funding, as listed above, which is available annually. These funds are limited and the application process is highly competitive. Funding is not guaranteed and as a result a company of The Australian Ballet's scale, which plans activities three years ahead of current time, cannot guarantee and secure our regional programs, leaving much doubt about the ongoing future of each program and in many cases, inadequate time to plan and execute a tour if/when funding is made available.

Expenses

Due to the large number of dancers required to present the major classical ballet repertoire, a regional tour includes many performers and creative personnel, sets, costumes, production and technical equipment as well as staff to manage the tour. The Australian Ballet adapts productions for regional theatres (e.g. by reducing performer numbers and production scale) however, our touring parties are large compared to other art forms and companies which present in regional centres. The sheer distances travelled during a rural and regional tour also add significantly to costs as dancers, production and technical staff are transported by plane or bus between venues and sets and costumes travel by trucks. As a result, freight, travel and accommodation costs, and travel allowances for regional touring are high and cannot be recovered from ticket sales in regional theatres. Regional venue capacities can vary from 200 to 1,200 seats. Box office earnings vary dramatically, yet overheads for a production are constant. Regional and remote venues are limited by the extent to which they can afford to program multiple large scale works. We work with the theatres to keep prices lower and more accessible than city prices for our regional performances.

Results from 25 years of regional touring indicate that the various above-mentioned funding sources do not fully cover the costs of our rural/regional productions/performances and that The Australian Ballet must therefore subsidise these activities.

Regional Venues

While some regional centres are fortunate to have excellent facilities for presenting high-quality, traditional ballet, many rural and regional communities do not have theatres with the capacity or resources required to present large-scale live productions. This limits the touring schedule of The Australian Ballet. Furthermore, potential to receive live broadcast performances in a regional cinemas is generally low due to the need for infrastructure.

OPPORTUNITIES

Given the strong demand for high-quality, full-scale live production in rural/regional Australia and the reality of costs associated with such regional touring, funding challenges should be addressed.

Increased Federal government funding for regional performances would remove the need for performing arts companies to have to subsidise regional activity and subsequently remove the risk of regional touring being cut back.

Provision of funding on a multi-year basis would save administrative time, remove uncertainty, allow for forward planning and facilitate additional opportunities for deeper audience development and community engagement. The inclusion of funding for regional activities in the base triennial funding of major national companies such as The Australian Ballet would enable more effective planning and ensure full national coverage as well as reduce costs and uncertainty.

Given the limitations of venues, distance and cost, opportunities to digitally connect with rural/regional locations when we are unable to physically deliver performances should be explored. The New York Metropolitan Opera's ground-breaking series of live, high-definition performance transmissions to cinemas around the world is one example of successfully reaching wider audiences in this way. Similarly, National Theatre Live broadcasts the National Theatre's performances live from the London stage via satellite to over 2,000 cinemas in more than 40 countries around the world.

Initiatives that support infrastructure to deliver digital broadcast for world-class Australian productions to (and from) rural/regional Australia would advance the inevitable growth of this means of arts exchange and audience development. In order to extend our digital reach and truly harness digital technology opportunities, we aspire to having state-of-the-art broadcast facilities in-house, to increase public access to The Australian Ballet and enable the regional, national and international experience of our activities and expertise. Housing multimedia/broadcast facilities at our Southbank headquarters would enable The Australian Ballet to digitally connect with even broader rural and regional audiences, dancers and schools and facilitate new and remote creative collaborations. As The Australian Ballet is situated in Melbourne's Arts Precinct, these facilities could also be accessed for use by other local creative industries.