

Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts
House of Representatives
Parliament House
communications.reps@aph.gov.au

Wednesday 28 October 2020

Dear Committee Members,

Re: Inquiry into and report on Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions

This submission by the First Nations Performing Arts sector provides sector wide feedback to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions. As a collective of self-determined First Nations Small to Medium Performing Arts Organisations, Peak Bodies and Training Institutions we are: ILBIJERRI Theatre Company, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company, Marrugeku, Moogahlin Performing Arts, BlakDance, and National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA). It is intended to complement the submissions by Kimberley Aboriginal Law & Cultural Centre (KALACC), Theatre Network Australia, and Arts Front).

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry and encourage the Committee to implement a set of principles that embed First Nations cultural leadership within the frameworks that ambitiously develops more broadly Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions ethically and strategically.

According to The Bureau of Communications and Arts Research (BCAR) Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions are one of the most impactful and employment-intensive sectors, employing more than 600,000 people including 50,000 professional artists. That's significantly more than mining, retail, communications, IT, and utilities.

The focus of this joint submission is to broadly highlight our key contributions, concerns and recommendations.

FIRST NATIONS PERFORMING ARTS SECTOR

The First Nations small-to-medium performing arts sector is made up of self-determined arts companies nationally that are supported through Australia Council multi-year federal funding and include, ILBIJERRI Theatre Company, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company, Moogahlin Performing Arts, Marrugeku, and BlakDance. As First Nations arts leaders we have a responsibility to play a key role in the Australian Cultural Arts landscape. Our communities are the custodians of the most exciting and compelling stories globally. As a sector, we achieve a diverse array of objectives across dance, theatre and performing arts practice areas, we provide fundamental infrastructure and services over vast distances, with remits at local, regional/remote, national, and international levels.

Our outputs and outcomes include productions; employment; training and professional pathways for young people; economic development; international, inter-cultural, and inter-tribal collaboration; strengthened capacity in governance and leadership; audience development; intergenerational cultural transmission; performance and festivals; skills development; cultural enterprise; mentoring; engaging youth; keeping First Nations culture STRONG; and sharing First Nations culture with other Australians and on a global stage.

The creative industry was the first hit by COVID-19. Our event cancellations and venue closures were making front-page news back in early March 2020. The industry's self-generated income quickly disappeared this year, and yet a large proportion of companies and casuals were not able to access any stimulus or income support announced. Such damaging impacts necessitated a holistic cultural response. This did not occur. As a result, both the creative industries and the Australian economy as a whole will experience long-term, avoidable negative consequences – as will all Australians. These consequences have social, economic, and physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual impacts that are holistic to our cultural well-being. It's not too late to avert the worst of these.

While the peak arts bodies and service organisations across Australia were quick to outline the specific impacts and advocate for what's needed, as well as redirect some existing funds and/or fundraise for emergency and disaster recovery themselves, years of policy neglect and budget cuts combined with a developing First Nations performing arts sector has meant that we do not have the capacity to respond or liaise with government in the same way our non-Indigenous peer service organisations do. This means issues that are specific to First Nations performing arts are not included on the national agenda.

FIRST NATIONS PERFORMING ARTS SECTOR RESPONSE TO COVID-19

As the spread of COVID-19 gathered pace around the world and the first cases began to appear in Australia, despite limited capacity and minimal government response we drew on our collective experience and resources to respond in the following ways:

1. Identifying key priorities in our sector and communities through sector wide consultation (completed 20 March 2020)
2. Advocating at every level of government for our key priorities (ongoing)
3. Identifying the needs of independent artists in our networks by undertaking a First Nations led research and data collection (see results below)
4. Hosting regular independent, company to company, local and international online Gatherings to stay connected, supported and collegiate during COVID19 (ongoing)
5. Employing Elders to open and close online Gatherings to ensure intergenerational transference of knowledge during COVID19 (ongoing)\
6. Providing intensive grant writing support for artists (ongoing)
7. Providing crisis support and employment to artists and arts workers such as;
 - a. *Moogahl Live and Baiame's Ngunnhu Festival: BNLive*, maintaining community connections through creativity.
 - b. ILBIJERRI Theatre Company dispersed \$65,000 generously donated by an Anonymous Philanthropist to 25 artists for Professional Development or Project Development, sought out through an open EOI process.
 - c. Yirra Yaakin also instigated an EOI process, calling for artists to provide an outline of a project that would be funded via re-purposed funds. Nearly \$25,000 has been allocated to 6 different projects, involving 15 independent artists (ongoing)
 - d. BlakDance has written and submitted \$790,000 worth of grants on behalf of artists
 - e. Marrugeku produced a together/apart live streamed 'Reconnect and Refresh' dance development process employing 10 dancers, 4 cultural dramaturgs, and 4 technicians in remote and urban areas across 4 states
8. Paying out wages to artists and production teams on cancelled national and international tours: (Marrugeku has paid out 100% of wages on three cancelled international tours totaling \$110,000 funded by re-purposed funds)
9. Pivoting project outcomes from national or international to local community audiences and digital platforms, collectively investing an estimated \$467,000 of redirected funds to our local arts communities

SECTOR INSIGHTS

The latest Australia Council Research *Building Audiences, Showcasing Creativity and Creating Art Part 1* all highlight the need to break down stereotypical ideas about First Nations arts, among both audiences and presenters. The report also highlights the need to build opportunities for First Nations decision-making to ensure appropriate presentation of First Nations performing arts in Australia. First Nations peoples' self-determination must be central in theatre and dance-making in Australia, including greater opportunities for First Nations creative control. Conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this research provides vital insights that can inform the recovery and future sustainability of the First Nations arts ecology. Some key insights include:

- First Nations artists make a powerful contribution to the performing arts industry,
- There is a continuing need to challenge narrow perceptions of what constitutes First Nations theatre and dance, including broadening understanding of the diverse experiences of First Nations people and communities.
- Prior to COVID-19, the demand for, and impact of First Nations companies' work and role in Australian arts was growing.
- There is a skills gap in filling First Nations-specific stage management, design, technical production and producing roles.
- Connection to community is a vital and inherent characteristic of the work of First Nations artists. Community engagement requires investment in sustained effort.
- Touring work in First Nations communities can provide opportunities and pathways for the new generation of First Nations artists and arts sector workers.
- First Nations artists based in regional and remote areas face particular challenges in creating work and reaching wider audiences.
- International First Nations networks are strong and enable a range of opportunities for collaboration, exchange and touring.
- Prior to COVID-19, First Nations dance and theatre makers were touring work internationally to great acclaim.
- Tourism and corporate work are seen as opportunities for employment, self-direction and developing new audiences;
- Long-term funding is critical to developing a broad range of First Nations dance and theatre work, including riskier and more diverse work.
- Showcases and markets give First Nations artists valuable opportunities for networking, career development and getting work seen.
- First Nations control and agency over decisions to present and mount a work are essential.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS | FIRST NATIONS COVID-19 PERFORMING ARTS WELLBEING SURVEY

In June 2020, a survey was sent out through sector networks to gain knowledge of the impacts of COVID-19 on the First Nations performing arts sector. The following is a brief overview of the key findings.

Area of Practice

- **Over half** of First Nations artists surveyed **work in theatre** (53%) followed by multidisciplinary (47%) and dance (39%).
- Within the arts sector, **respondents occupy the role/s of actor (37%), dancer (35%), choreographer (33%), storyteller (33%), and educator (33%).**
- **As independent First Nations artists, most respondents generate their own work** (73%) or are engaged as contractors (61%).
- For a **third of artists, their main source of income is presentation** (i.e. tour as part of festival or programmed work (33%) followed by **schools or workshops** (28%).

Financial Impacts

- As a result of cancellation or closure due to COVID-19 restrictions between March-December 2020, **two in five** First Nations artists surveyed **39% lost an estimated or confirmed income of between \$10,000 and \$29,999**. In addition, **26%** lost between \$5,000 and \$9,999, **20%** lost between \$1,000 and 4,999 and **7%** lost \$1,000 or less.
- **Just 35%** of First Nations respondents **feel they have enough income/savings to support themselves** during COVID-19 and through to December 2020.
- **Half (50%)** of First Nations artists surveyed **are currently looking for work**.
- For First Nations respondents, **the financial impact of COVID-19 has resulted in the inability to:**
 - **purchase equipment/materials** for job (30%)
 - **pay bills** (21%)
 - **pay rent or mortgage** (16%) and
 - **support family** (14%).

Wellbeing Impacts

- **First Nations artists are profoundly concerned about the social and cultural impacts of Covid-19** on their lives, especially on gathering to practice culture (78%) and caring for elders (72%).
- They are also **concerned about their wellbeing and mental health**, with **many experiencing depression, anxiety, isolation, and stress**. As one person shared:
“My mental health has been greatly affected by the disruption of what was going to be a secure, exciting and very full year. The added workload of rearranging projects, and finding more opportunities to replace those lost has put an immense amount of pressure on my personal life therefore also affecting my ability to deliver at a high level.”
- Other respondents mentioned the **negative impacts of disconnection during this time**, especially not being able to practice their art or collaborate with other people:
“[I’m] missing dancing. Missing being able to perform and rehearse” and *“The isolation from my peer group and developing work in a cooperative way.”*

Practice Impacts

- **Many First Nations artists have had to change the way they make or present works online during the pandemic**, primarily turning to Zoom or YouTube to create digital content or to teach classes:
“I am using mostly Zoom and sometimes Microsoft Teams and FaceTime for meetings and teaching classes, workshops and for early stages research and developments of new works.”
- **Other First Nations artists, however, have not turned to online platforms** during this time because they do not have the skills or desire to do so, as one person shared:
“I am not an online artist, and believe I should leave that online world to those who have always specifically created content and art for that medium I long for live theatre.”

Impacts on Future Plans

- Many First Nations artists surveyed feel **the decreased budgets in 2020 and 2021** (for venues, programmers, organisations) **will gravely impact their plans for presenting work in the future**. As one respondent said:
“[It will have a] considerable impact. If orgs don’t employ me to do incursions or online work due to reduced/cancelled group workshops my contract work will be considerably depleted....”

Another respondent shared a similar sentiment:

“My work will not be produced. My work will not have avenues to be produced and the skills developed will be absorbed into other areas of artistic endeavours. It will be absorbed into screens.”

Avenues for Support

- Going forward, respondents would like companies like ILBIJERRI, Yirra Yaakin, BlakDance, or Moogahlin to **provide more employment opportunities** for First Nations artists through workshops or training courses, as one person shared: *“Prioritise two way win win employment of deadly First Nations peoples in your employment policies that include mentorship and training opps.”*
- Other First Nations artists mentioned the need for these companies to **continue sharing resources, offering mental health support and services, and lobbying local, state and federal governments** on behalf of the sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the wider arts sector, we are aware that the submissions are calling for urgent and long overdue increases of funding to the Australia Council. The following recommendations are specific the First Nations Small to Medium sectors needs within this broader call:

1. **Increasing the Australia Council appropriation by \$25 million a year for the Australia Council and \$2.5m a year for the regional arts fund**, and removing the efficiency dividend requirements.
2. That the government undertakes the **development of a new cultural policy** framework based on a cultural impact statement (using recently developed impact assessment methodologies).
3. The 2020 Closing the Gap agreement prioritises Aboriginal and Torres strait Islander cultures. To achieve this, **Indigenous funding should predominantly go to Indigenous cultural arts organisations** and an additional allocation of a minimum of \$20 million a year should be provided via the Australia Council for the Arts to Indigenous culture and arts, in addition to the resources required to establish a national Indigenous cultural arts policy and service organisation (NIACA).
4. That there be an urgent Government response through **targeted initiatives to ensure impacts of the virus on First Nations Elders are minimised** and ensure ongoing cultural leadership, to maintain the arts as a key source of economic empowerment and cultural maintenance for First Nations people, and to ensure survival of the world’s longest continuously living culture.
5. That due to ongoing concerns about mental health and increased risk of suicide and self-harm, **Support Act and similar organisations be funded to develop and embed First Nations protocols, counselling, and strategies for engaging First Nations artists and arts workers.**

6. That **support for First Nations culture remains central across portfolios in the policy response**. Culture is the foundation of First Nations health and wellbeing and is now more important than ever.
7. That the Commonwealth Government invests in First Nations cultural arts development by the **implementation of the national Indigenous cultural arts peak body (NIACA)**.
8. That **research be undertaken to establish baseline data on the economic contribution of First Nations creative and cultural performing artists and industries** and our contribution to GDP.
9. That government commissions **a feasibility study into the needs and opportunities for digital sovereignty in live performance** for First Nations artists, festivals and companies.
10. That resources be made available via Australia Council to the First Nations performing arts sector to gather to build a **10 year self-determined recovery plan**.
11. Allocate **15% of existing Playing Australia funds towards small-to-medium and independent First Nations programmers, producers, and companies** to self present and tour.
12. Investment of **\$10 million a year via Australia Council towards the development of a small to medium First Nations dance sector** over the next decade through the establishment of new dance companies and investment into independent productions, practitioners, and practice development laboratories
13. Investment of a further **\$10 million a year via Australia Council for capacity building of the First Nations theatre sector training and career pathways**.

We thank the Inquiry for the opportunity to express our views.

Yours sincerely

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company
Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company
Moogahlin Performing Arts
Marrugeku
NAISDA
BlakDance