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Committee Secretary Department of the Senate PO Box 6100 Parliament House Canberra
ACT 2600 Phone: 02 6277 3892 Fax: 02 6277 5706 covid.sen@aph.gov.au

To the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19

THE FIRST NATIONS PERFORMING ARTS SECTOR RESPONSE TO COVID-19

This is a submission by the First Nations Performing Arts sector to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19, outlining the measures the sector took to respond to the pandemic and to contribute to the broader Australian Cultural Arts industry response. It is intended to complement the Performing Arts Peak bodies submission; in particular, we support the call for a \$70m Stabilisation and Recovery fund for artists and non-profit arts organisations, to be funded through the Australia Council for the Arts.

First Nations performing arts sector

The First Nations small-to-medium self-determined performing arts sector comprises **Ilbjerri Theatre Company**, **Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company**, **Moogahlin Performing Arts** and **BlakDance**, supported through multi-year federal funding. We have a responsibility to play a leadership role in the Australian Cultural Arts landscape.

As self-determined First Nations performing arts companies, 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, national and international levels. Our outputs and outcomes include productions, training and professional pathways for young people; economic development; international and inter-cultural collaboration; strengthened capacity in governance and leadership; audience development; intergenerational cultural transmission; performance and festivals; cultural employment; 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.

First Nations performing arts sector responds

As the spread of COVID-19 gathered pace around the world and the first cases began to appear in Australia, we prepared to respond by:

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1. Identifying key priorities in our sector and communities (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 First Nations led research and data collection (in progress)
4. Hosting regular independent, 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 COVID19 quick responses (ongoing)
7. Providing online presentation opportunities for artists, such as *Moogahl Live* and *Baiame's Ngunnhu Festival-BNlive*, maintaining community connections through creativity.

Recommendations for self-determined First Nations COVID19 recovery

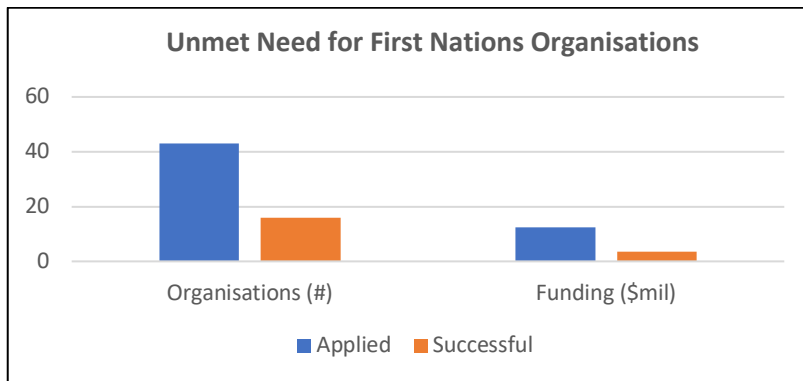
1. Resource and commit to establish a First Nations national cultural arts peak body that will provide policy, strategic and coordinated sector goals, research, cultural rights legal framework implementation, maintenance, preservation archiving and funding;
2. Resource a First Nations performing arts sector gathering to build a 10 year self-determined recovery plan;
3. Allocate 15% of existing Playing Australia funds for touring to First Nations programmers, First Nations curators and First Nations companies to self present;
4. Via the Australia Council, invest \$10 million dollars into the development of a small to medium First Nations dance sector over the next decade through the establishment of 8 new dance companies and investment into independent productions;
5. Via the Australia Council, invest \$10 million dollars into the capacity building of the First Nations theatre sector pathways, industry, and productions.

Unmet need, an emerging sector

While our organisations are financially robust, there is unmet need for support for First Nations artists and arts workers across Australia, as illustrated by the Australia Council for the Arts' analysis of unmet funding need for First Nations organisations:

"In 2015, the Australia Council received Expressions of Interest from 43 First Nations-led small to medium arts and culture organisations for multi-year funding that equated to a total request of \$12.5 million per annum. We were only able to support 16 organisations with a total \$3.5 million per annum, declining over 60% of the organisations that applied and leaving unmet demand of over 70% in terms of dollars – the demand far outweighs the funding available."

Australia Council for the Arts, Submission to the Closing the Gap Refresh (April 2018)



First Nations self-determined approach to COVID19

Self-determination is the key fundamental right for First Nations people and is central to addressing disadvantage.

First Nations-led solutions that empower our communities to utilise our cultural arts knowledge and build on our unique strengths are the most likely to succeed. This includes the need to sit with, in deep listen and work with our First Nations Elders, leaders, and to prioritise funding for First Nations-led organisations in sufficient sums to enable long-term planning for sustainability.

Self-determination means First Nations people have the right to make decisions concerning our own lives and communities; the right to retain their culture and to develop it, and the right to be full and equal participants in the construction and functioning of the governing institutions under which we live.

It can be easy for policy-makers to overlook questions of culture as a marginal concern in the recovery effort. By contrast, for many First Nations communities, culture is at the core of community life and our aspirations for a healthy and productive future. Self-determination has to be the starting point in any serious efforts to recover from COVID19.

Consolidated, targeted investment in First Nations performing arts would increase opportunities for the growth of our emerging sector during the recovery period. Building our ecology through sustained investment into self-determined industry calls for immediate increases in our capacity to self-present or engage with First Nations programmers to present our work through a self-determined framework. The last decade we focused on building First Nations producers, our greatest challenge is now building First Nations venues, programmers and curators, with adequate investment to enable buying and selling. Additional investment into pathways and First Nations skill development for lighting, production, costume, set and sound designers is critical.

Research

Findings from two recent Australia Council research projects—Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts (2015); and Showcasing Creativity: Programming and Presenting First Nations Performing Arts (2016) highlight a range of opportunities and challenges to be addressed by the performing arts sector. In particular, they note national mapping of the programs of 135 Australian presenters found First Nations performing arts are under-represented in Australia’s mainstream venues and festivals. They comprised just 2% of the almost 6000 works programmed in 2015 seasons.

The Australia Council’s 2014 national Arts Participation Survey found nine in ten Australians (92%) believe that First Nations arts are an important part of Australia’s culture, and 64% have a strong or growing interest in First Nations arts. Yet only one in four (24%) attend, and less than half (46%) agree that First Nations arts are well represented in Australia. These findings highlight an opportunity to further develop audiences for First Nations arts in Australia, including ensuring that Australians have access to a variety of high quality First Nations arts experiences.

There is significant opportunity to increase the amount of First Nations work presented as venues and festivals look to their local communities for new work during the recovery phase. However, as First Nations work is already perceived as ‘risky’ there must be an identified strategy to ensure the continued programming of First Nations work, curated or presented by First Nations peoples.

Championing First Nations performing arts for their intrinsic value and developing recovery strategies that are confident in the ability to self-determine our future is vital for Australia’s performing arts long term vibrancy and cultural impact. Enabling participation and connection will grow the social well-being of our society post COVID19.

Snapshot of the sector reach of First Nations small-to-medium self-determined performing arts sector:

Artist Development Platforms include:

Moogahlin Performing Arts

- Koori Gras (GLBTQI)
- Baiame’s Ngunnhu Festival (Regional/remote and land-based)
- Ngarra-Burria First Peoples Composers

BlakDance

- BlakDance Residency Program
- Performing Country
- BlakDance Producer Development Program
- BlakDance Presenter Series

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company

- ILBIJERRI Ensemble
- Blackwrights: commissions and Masterlabs
- PLAYKING Artist Support Quick Response Creative/Prof. Dev. Grants
- Health Works

Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company

- Yirra Yaakin Metro Writers Group
- Yirra Yaakin Regional Playwrights workshops
- The Next Step Program
- Yirra Play Club
- Which Way? First Nations Poetry Workshops
- Solidarity Project Series - Artist Development
- Moorditj Wirla Workshops
- Ngalaka Daa Youth Ensemble
- Auslan Kaaditjin

Productions include:

Moogahlin Performing Arts

- The Visitors
- The Weekend
- Blacktown Native Institution Performance; manui jam ya murong (footprints in the sand)
- Broken Glass
- This Fella, My Memory

ILBIJERRI Theatre Company

- Black Ties
- Blood on the Dance Floor
- Heart is a Wasteland
- Jack Charles vs The Crown
- Beautiful One Day
- Health shows: VIRAL and Scartrees

Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company

- Hecat
- Ice Land a Hip h'Opera
- Bilya Kaatijin
- Djinda Kaatijin
- FIFO - Fit In or F**k Off
- Dating Black

BlakDance

- SILENCE
- Cosmology Across Country
- Preparing Ground

National platforms we collectively deliver:

- Dana Waranara (2015, 2021 WIP)
- Yellamundie Festival; National First Peoples Playwriting (2013, 2015, 2017, 2019)
- National Indigenous Dance Forum 2017
- National Indigenous Theatre Forum 2015
- The Original Peoples Party, APAM 2018
- First Nations Dialogues New York 2018, 2019
- Tri-Nations Gatherings 2016-2020 (ongoing)