

SUBMISSION

BY

MEDIA, ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS ALLIANCE

TO

**MINISTER FOR CULTURE & THE ARTS, SHEILA McHALE MLA
ARTSWA**

REGARDING

THEATRE FUNDING STRATEGY FOR WESTERN AUSTRALIA

NOVEMBER 2006



The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (Alliance) is the industrial and professional organisation representing the people who work in Australia's media and entertainment industries. Its membership includes journalists, artists, photographers, performers, symphony orchestra musicians and film, television and performing arts technicians.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance welcomes the opportunity to comment on the West Australian Theatre Funding Strategy. The Alliance congratulates the state government on adopting a strategic approach to policy development and planning in for theatre in Western Australia.

The arts – cultural activity, endeavour and engagement – require no justification other than their innate ability to move us, to excite us, and to enhance our lives. And Governmental support for culture should acknowledge that truth.¹

The Alliance supports:

- the creation of a separate production office to assist independent theatre producers in Western Australia;
- access to productions mounted in our major performing arts venues in a manner affordable to artists;
- the employment of West Australians on productions in receipt of West Australian state government assistance;
- the consideration of funding of theatre productions taking into account cast size and the fostering of larger ensemble pieces for the benefit of both performers and West Australian audiences;
- enhanced state government support for Western Australia's talented pool of local performing artists;
- funding for success, and

the Alliance fully supports the Theatre Industry Joint Vision Strategy for theatre in Western Australia.

INDEPENDENT PRODUCERS

The Alliance offers in principle support to the aims and objectives of Perth's independent professional theatre producers as articulated in their submission² subject to the caveat noted below.

In particular, we support the establishment of a production office to assist independent producers. Such an intervention would allow the many independent producers to save significant funds normally spent on administration and marketing. Given that the number of independent productions in Perth every year is equivalent to the out-put of two fully-funded theatre companies, financially underpinning an independent production office with at least two staff, with provision for on costs together with equipment and rental expenses would represent an effective investment for government.

An appropriate condition precedent to the establishment of such a production office, would be access by professional producers committed to engaging performers and

¹ Rt Hon Chris Smith, Director of the Clore Programme for Cultural Leadership, formerly British Secretary of State for Culture in speech delivered at *Valuing Culture* for the National Theatre Studio London on 17th June 2003, available on <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/File/VACUCSmith.pdf>

² Perth Independent Professional Theatre Producers, Submission supporting the progression of Stage two of the Theatre Strategy, November 2006.

technicians in accordance with the terms and provisions of the relevant industrial instruments.

The Alliance does not support the proposal by independent professional theatre producers in respect of a tiered membership system that includes companies remunerating employees only on a profit share basis.

AFFORDABLE ACCESS TO VENUES

Many West Australian theatre production companies and independent producers, both funded and commercial, have reported that the hire cost of Perth's major theatre venues is so expensive as to be hardly viable.

A circumstance wherein, culturally important West Australian theatre companies, two of whom have offices at the Playhouse and the Subiaco Arts Centre, cannot afford access to West Australian mainstage performing arts venues, is a disservice to the industry and the theatre-going public.

Some advise the cost of hiring venues such as the Playhouse comprises over 25 per cent of their total production budget. By comparison, venue hire for such as PICA and the University of Western Australia's theatres typically represents ten per cent of production costs.

The Alliance recommends that either special funding be allocated so that companies can afford venues such as His Majesty's Theatre, the Playhouse, Subiaco Arts Centre and the soon to be built New Performing Arts Venue, or that the venue managers be encouraged to establish a tiered system of venue hire payments.

This approach is not uncommon. For instance, local production companies, large commercial companies and overseas productions are charged differential rates by the Sydney Opera House.

The Alliance also supports changes to the way the government organises the management of the major West Australian performing arts venues. Specifically, a long-term contract with one company having oversight of the management of all Perth's major performing arts venues is not in the interest of the industry or the theatre-going public, nor consistent with competition principles.

WORK FOR WEST AUSTRALIANS

Over the past few years, many funded theatre productions have engaged few West Australian performers, and in one case, none.

While acknowledging the right of producers and directors to cast roles in the manner considered creatively appropriate, the Equity Committee of the West Australian Branch of the Alliance recommends that the government take steps to ensure that locally based performers are given genuine opportunities to work in their home state on productions in receipt of state government funding.

A policy similar to that in place at the South Australian State Theatre Company, which actively supports local creative talent, is recommended. The South Australian State Theatre actively aims to ensure that at least 70 percent of those involved creatively in a production – the performers, technicians and director – are resident

South Australians. Such a policy could easily be implemented as a condition precedent to funding.

Supporting local live theatre practitioners will build the talent base in the state and is consistent with policies implemented by other funding agencies such as ScreenWest.

LINKING CAST SIZE TO FUNDING

“I like the play but I can’t afford a cast that size” is all too often heard on the lips of West Australian theatre directors.

If West Australian theatre companies and producers can only afford to produce plays with small casts, a disservice will be done to theatre industry and its patrons. Apart from certain exceptions such as Perth Theatre Company’s *Soul Mates* and *Amadeus*, the average cast size of West Australian funded theatre is between two and three.

The paucity of available employment for West Australian performers means that many are driven to find work outside of their chosen field of performing arts, interstate or overseas and, regrettably, many are on Centrelink benefits.

Producers and directors should be able to choose (and create) plays according to their quality, not forever dictated by the need to minimise the size of the cast. The Alliance recommends that funding allocations address the need for productions with a diverse range of cast size and accommodate the possibility of ensemble productions being presented in West Australia.

PAY FOR LIVE THEATRE PERFORMERS AND TECHNICIANS

The art form can only suffer when those upon whom it relies – the artists – are unable to earn a sustainable income from their creative work. Most end up seeking employment outside the arts to live.

The work commissioned by the Australia Council and undertaken by David Throsby and Virginia Hollister, *Do Not Give Up Your Day Job* in 2003, analysed income levels for artists for the financial year 2000–01.

For the year 2000–01, actors’ total median income was a paltry \$31,000 with the median income earned from their creative work a mere \$10,500.

As Throsby and Hollister observe, “although some artists do quite well financially, the great majority are clustered in the low income categories”.³

Regrettably, comparable research on the incomes of live theatre technicians has not been undertaken. However, from designers who need to work across film, television, live theatre, opera and dance to lighting technicians who work across live events, live theatre and in live music, few are able to sustain a living from live theatre alone.

Sadly, too many are lost to the eastern states and overseas where employment opportunities are often superior to what is on offer here. Like performers, they would all benefit from a more robust live theatre environment in Western Australia.

³ *Do Not Give Up Your Day Job – An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia*, David Throsby and Virginia Hollister, Australia Council, 2003, page 47, available online at www.ozco.gov.au

The Alliance is also of the view that the community would benefit from access to more performing arts.

Given this, state government funding for theatre production should be conditional upon agreement that those engaged for the production will be afforded rates of pay and terms and conditions no less than that set out in relevant entertainment industry industrial agreements.

REGIONAL TOURING

The Alliance considers a useful state government intervention would be to work collaboratively with local government to establish touring lines for smaller companies utilising existing infrastructure such as local government owned theatres and halls and educational institution owned theatres.

If the government were able to develop “touring tracks” and support small ensemble companies presenting a repertoire of new and existing work, employment opportunities for artists would be enhanced and it would contribute significantly to the social well-being of communities across the state – including communities within urban areas.

VALUE OF THE ARTS

Recently, the results of a University of South Australia led three-year study, *Children’s Voices*, were announced. Between 2003 and 2005, 140 five to twelve year olds attended theatre performances presented by the children’s theatre company Windmill Performing Arts.

According to the report, “The most noticeable impact was the children’s marked gain in literacy.”

School principals also reported that the children showed more empathy and kindness as a result of their performance experiences.

“The social justice issues tackled in the performances gave all children understanding and, according to another principal, ‘a greater appreciation of the background and difficulties faced by other students who came from another country and could not speak English on arrival.’⁴

The findings of *Children’s Voices* support a large body of anecdotal evidence that arts programs and access to the arts foster creativity and development. The role that performers play in cultural celebration, social cohesion and community healing has long been understood by the community.

FUNDING FOR SUCCESS

Many successful productions, government subsidised or otherwise self-funded, are often unable to capitalise on their own success. Productions can play to full houses and critical acclaim, only to find they are unable to extend the season – other bookings obviously taking precedence for the venue – or immediately move to

⁴ *Children’s Voices: Children’s responses to live performance: A longitudinal study (2003 – 2005)*, Government of South Australia, Department of Education and Children’s Services, Windmill Performing Arts, University of South Australia, August 2006, Executive Summary see online at <http://www.unisa.edu.au/news/2006/110806.asp>

capitalise on their success by gearing up (with the necessary financial assistance expeditiously granted) and touring.

To this end, the Alliance supports any initiatives that might assist in the funding and support of success. The stop-start cycle that typifies the throughput for too many companies is a recipe for subsistence only.

Whilst investment in infrastructure is important, more important is the content – the productions that will fill existing venues and the artists who will present them.

The Alliance believes that any funding strategies must be underpinned by the principle of funding for success.

In this regard, the story of Cirque du Soleil is illuminating. Formed by two stilt walking buskers, given a space by the city of Montreal and funding by the Quebec Government, public money was invested in their talent in 1984. Rather than submitting detailed business plans the new company was funded in a manner that accepted it might encounter a bumpy road and suffer patchy box office performances in the early years.

In 1987, the Quebec government provided the company with C\$1.5 million to purchase equipment. In a breathtakingly bold decision, the company's founders, Guy Laliberté and Daniel Gauthier, risked it all on one make-or-break performance at a Californian arts festival for no fee and only the promise of top billing. As Laliberté explained, "When first we went in LA, you know, we had no money to put gasoline in our truck to come back if we failed down there ... We went through our last penny in order to go down there, and we risked everything."⁵

It paid off and the rest is history. Today, the company employs more than 2,500 people, has four touring companies, is a mainstay of the Las Vegas experience and by 1999, on any given weekend 50,000 people saw a Cirque du Soleil performance somewhere in the world and more than 23 million had seen one of its twelve productions.⁶

CONCLUSION

The Alliance would like to see a similar level of bold decision making in our own environment.

Given the importance of culture to the health of our community, it is not reasonable to expect that its delivery continue to be undertaken by the working poor – a consequence of the funding envelope being unsustainably low.

⁵ Interview with Guy Laliberté, for PBS, see online at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june01/cirque_03-19.html

⁶ *From Nascar to Cirque du Soleil: Lessons in Audience Development*, Western States Arts Federation available online at http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june01/cirque_03-19.html