



President Jan Sardi Emeritus President David Williamson AO
5 Blackfriars Street Chippendale NSW 2008

t 02 9319 0339 f 02 9319 0141 admin@awg.com.au www.awg.com.au abn 38 002 563 500

31 July 2015

nationalexcellenceprogram@arts.gov.au

Senator the Hon George Brandis QC
Minister for the Arts
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

Re: Draft Guidelines for the National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA)

The Australian Writers' Guild (AWG) is the peak professional body representing Australian performance writers – playwrights, screenwriters, and writers of digital content and radio drama. The AWG represents 2,600 members across every state and territory and is the only national membership organisation representing Australian playwrights, with a membership density of approximately 95% of playwrights nationwide.

The AWG is pleased to provide the following response to the Commonwealth Government's proposed National Program for Excellence in the Arts (NPEA).

1. Linking cultural policy objectives to expenditure and outcomes

Across all aspects of government investment in our sector we strongly advocate for all investment of public funds to be measurably linked to the cultural policy imperatives that underlie and justify the expenditure, and we submit that the NPEA should seek to be an example of best practice in this area.

2. Context of Australian theatre and playwrights in the international arena

Our stage and screen industries are not only at the heart of Australia's cultural identity, they are also a vital and dynamic growth sector in the domestic and international trade of intellectual property. Although the AWG represents both new and well-established performance writers across all media including radio, film, television and online drama and documentaries, the Government's proposals for the Australia Council and the NPEA most directly affect our nation's playwrights and Australian theatre sector.

The funding priority in this sector needs to be directly and definably linked to the creation and presentation of new Australian works, and the development and promotion of a cultural canon

providing new generations with access to works that are both iconic and which display the highest examples of excellence.

Australian playwrights and theatres face a uniquely challenging set of circumstances when considering the Australian cultural obligations. Australian playwrights are generally writing within the vast Anglophone world of new and existing works, Australian theatre by its nature relies overwhelmingly on a relatively small domestic audience. Australian playwrights are expected to reflect, nurture and build on our nation's culture while competing for limited stage time with the enormity of the English language cultural canon, and the huge investment in script development and productions from the United States and the United Kingdom. Non-Anglophone cultures have a natural linguistic advantage in ensuring stage time for their local work, and playwrights are able to develop their craft both in original work and in creative translations and adaptations of English works.

The accessibility and affordability of international works with existing reputations, backed by development and marketing budgets which often dwarf our own, and while this creates a wonderful opportunity for developing the craft of other theatre practitioners, and financial returns to companies whose programmes contain many such works, it creates a clear market distortion to the detriment of investment in new Australian work, and in particular, a dearth of opportunities for Australian playwrights and the development of their craft. This necessitates significant public intervention to ensure excellence and audience reach and longevity for our indigenous theatre. It is therefore imperative that any public funding policies that affect the Australian stage take into account these unique circumstances.

3. Support for individual artists

The draft Guidelines preclude financial support for individuals. This would have the immediate effect of reducing by up to half the amount available to support the artists themselves, unless the Australia Council is to double the percentage of its remaining funds available to individual practitioners.

Given applications for funding can be made by organisations to both entities, it is highly likely that the most disadvantaged group in the restructure of federal arts funding is individual artists, and the most advantaged are those most skilled at, and sufficiently well resourced to make government funding submissions. The term 'grant surfer' is an ugly one, but it has not evolved without reason. The art of making good applications is not akin to making great art and those most adept at it are often not those most in need, nor those who will make the best use of the funds.

The possibility of duplication and concentration of funds in the current framework is highly likely and the AWG advocates for guidelines to be introduced that protect against this outcome.

4. Support for individual playwrights

Specifically for our constituents; playwrights choose to work in a collaborative medium and are therefore acutely aware that their work requires industry support and investment if it is to come to life. They do not seek grants as individuals in order to develop their work in isolation from the industry, rather, to bring to the industry scripts that they consider are worthy of their crucial role as the bedrock of Australian theatre production.

The staging of foreign work, adaptations and Australian classics does not provide the opportunity for playwrights to develop excellence in their craft as it does for the rest of the industry. If excellence is not fostered by investment in the original creators of the very works which must, of necessity, sit at the heart of any Australian cultural canon, rather than only in

industry investment in our sector it will not be meeting its stated policy objectives. It will be industry development policy, not arts.

5. Correcting market failure for funding of new Australian work

New Australian work provides the greatest financial risk to companies and is the most important to meeting policy objectives. The risk is not because of audience responsiveness; it is because of the additional costs of commissioning and development of the script, and the lack of name recognition in the absence of international market or local name recognition. There are so few commercial opportunities for professional script development, and most of the companies themselves have such limited funds, that the development of excellence in our field, as the intended outcome of the establishment of the NPEA is impossible where the playwrights themselves have no opportunity to develop their craft. Companies cannot invest in any more than a minimal way in the development of artists and their scripts outside of the development of their annual programmes. Large companies do not accept unsolicited scripts or invest in commissioning undiscovered untested writers. Small companies cannot afford anything more than the bare minimum of development or pre production workshopping of even programmed work. The excellence, which this initiative seeks to foster and promote, is simply impossible to achieve for playwrights and therefore the indigenous theatre sector if there is no investment in the playwrights themselves. This is where the market failure lies in our sector, and it should be where the investment is focussed. If the decision not to invite applications from individuals is not to be reversed, then investment in companies must be linked to investment in the creation of new Australian work. Compliance with this measure must form part of publicly available annual reporting.

6. Small to medium companies are the breeding ground for excellence

The AWG is concerned that small-to-medium theatre companies will continue to be under recognised as the breeding ground for excellence in production ready work.

The condition of protection of funding for major organisations, combined with the additional obligation to be solely responsible for funding individual artists from a budget reduced by 50% will leave very limited funds for the companies which provide the opportunity for artists to develop their craft in front of small audiences, at low cost, and with already very little reward. Excellence in Australian scripts for production by the major Australian theatres requires playwrights with the experience of seeing their work performed, working with directors, and actors and composers, and most importantly with audiences. Excellence in scriptwriting cannot be developed in a vacuum; it cannot be developed behind a desk; and the size of the audiences and budgets in the major companies requires excellence, and the industry and the public deserve it. Without excellence in the script we will not have excellence in new Australian work and it will not survive among the plethora of international work. Excellence needs a breeding ground and the small and medium sized companies are that breeding ground.

The restructure provides an opportunity for a renewed focus on these companies and their crucial, irreplaceable role. The companies have been languishing, and in fact many have not survived in the face of reduced funding over many years. Without a viable small-to-medium sector, the large commercial companies will inevitably be starved of original proven material and of professional playwrights upon which Australian theatre depends.

We urge the NPEA to ensure these companies are considered a priority.

7. Accountability and review

The AWG urges the NPEA to include strict guidelines to assure transparency in the granting of taxpayer funds, and transparency in the funding recipient reporting on tied cultural outcomes.

A restructure of this size clearly requires a commitment to a public review of the guidelines after year one, and of both the guidelines and early outcomes after year two. Commitments backed up by practical, prescribed and freely available guidelines, protocols and rules properly implemented by an independent body are therefore essential. We consider this must be in addition to any internal departmental review and to the in-built accountability of the Minister to the Australian taxpayers.

Transparency and built-in review will assist policy makers and industry in measuring success and making adjustments as required. It will also provide the basis for an informed contribution from artists and their representatives.

8. Efficiency

Playwrights are more aware than most of the economics of their profession and industry. They acknowledge that funds are limited, and we therefore urge that NPEA guidelines for funding Australian theatre ensure funding is directed to where it is most needed. This includes the guidelines to ensure organisations that require public funding for their administrative existence should not be funded at the expense of artists and their work, and public funds should be demonstrated to be leveraged to achieve funding from the community itself. Organisations that duplicate or compete with what is occurring organically in the marketplace should not be funded at the expense of artists and their work.

In the case of the NPEA and the Australia Council it also requires that arts funding be cohesive across multiple funding bodies and that priceless cultural capital not be allowed to drain away through cracks in the funding system.

9. Conclusion

The funding priority in the theatre sector needs to be directly and definably linked to the creation and presentation of new Australian works, and the development and promotion of a cultural canon providing new generations with access to works that are both iconic and which display the highest examples of excellence.

Sincerely



Jacqueline Elaine
Executive Director