

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

15 July 2015

RE: Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Lucy Guerin and for the last 13 years I have been the Artistic Director and CEO of a contemporary dance company in Melbourne, Lucy Guerin Inc. I began my arts practice over three decades ago as a dancer in the small to medium (SME) and independent sectors and spent many years as an independent choreographer before setting up my own company. This sector of the arts is being threatened by the proposed budget changes and I want to draw the committee's attention to its importance for a relevant and sophisticated arts culture in Australia.

Lucy Guerin Inc is one of the most prominent touring companies for contemporary dance in Australia. We have performed in most of Australia's major arts festivals and have toured to over thirty international festivals and venues including Brooklyn Academy of Music New York, Southbank Centre, London and Theatre de la Ville Paris. I have been invited to create dance pieces for many companies around the world including Mikail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project (USA), Lyon Opera Ballet (France) and Rambert (London). This reputation has only been possible due to consistent triennial organisational funding from the Australia Council and other sources that have allowed us to strategically develop our program. This has been absolutely key in building the company's management structure and could not have happened with intermittent project funding. The insecurity of our current situation brought about by the current budget changes has already had a damaging affect on our program of creation and on our international touring.

In our travels we regularly connect with major performing arts presenters around the world. Through feedback from these presenters, it is clear they are predominantly watching and booking works produced in the small to medium and independent sector in Australia. Australian dance has grown a reputation internationally, the bulk of which rest with the SME sector and independents. There have in the last few years been a number of 'Australian focus' festivals in dance and the bulk of the work comes from the independent and SME sector. The Chaillot Theatre, one of Paris's foremost theatres for dance recently presented a season of Australian dance with shows drawn exclusively from the SME and independent sector. Of course the majors are important too, but they do not have the flexibility, reach or impact internationally of the independent and SME sector where new talent, new ideas, and new audiences are being forged. This is what is building our reputation as a nation with a unique and engaging artistic position.

From my observations and involvement in the dance scene in Australia over the last thirty years, there has been a clear and inspiring growth in the depth and calibre of Australian dance. Slowly, I have watched the independent dance sector grow from a small, intermittent presence to a strong, inspiring community of intelligent, talented artists producing outstanding and original work. When I began my career as a dancer I moved overseas because of lack of opportunities here in Australia. There were a small number of dance companies that employed dancers full time, but few other avenues to pursue a career in dance outside of these formalised structures. Today there is a complex and exciting range of dance work in Australia and dancers and choreographers can establish their careers here outside major companies without looking to emigrate.

The independent and SME sector now feature strongly in competition with the major organisations. Look at this year's Helpmann Award nominations. Three out of the four nominations for the award for Best Ballet or Dance Work are for shows created by independent artists and small companies. This is the pre-eminent award for the performing arts in Australia and increasingly these awards for excellence are going to the sector that this change in funding will decimate. If these changes are implemented it seems extremely unlikely that artists such as myself, and companies like ours can have any sort of future. I fear not only for our organisation but for the incredible emerging talent and energy I see in younger artists who should have the opportunities that I have had. We cannot afford to lose these artists overseas or to other professions because they don't have access to support. The new draft guidelines for the NPEA clearly state that individual artists cannot apply. With this limitation and the decimation of funds for individuals and SME companies from the Australia Council, our performing arts culture will simply not survive.

I believe its essential to have an arts council at arms length from government. Having been involved in the peer review process for the Australia Council I would like to support the transparency and integrity of that process. Peer reviewers take their jobs very seriously and there are clear criteria in place that must be addressed. On panels there are artists and panel members from vastly different backgrounds and aesthetic positions. They often don't agree or particularly like each other's work and there can be fierce debate about which artists are supported. More often than not, reviewers put aside their personal preferences to support the aims and objectives of the Australia Council guidelines. Comparatively, the NPEA lacks this robust reviewing system and decisions are not necessarily made accessible to the public.

Excellence in dance is spread throughout the independent sector, the SME companies and the majors. It is a delicate yet thriving ecology that is interconnected and creates clear career pathways, not only for dancers, but for designers, composers, producers, directors, choreographers and arts management workers.

I implore the government to become fully aware of the state of the arts in Australia. Don't make this decision without talking to respected artists and producers in order to understand the importance of the SME sector and independent artists to the health of the arts in Australia and to our society as a whole. The wealth of the arts in Australia is an indication of our strength and maturity as a nation. Lets not slip into naivety and ignorance. The research and imaginings of artists contribute thousands of unpaid hours to the richness of our society. There is also a huge and hard working population of artists in Australia outside the major organisations that are employed and generating a significant industry.

Please re-instate the funds withdrawn from the Australia Council. Artists outside major organisation are the life's blood of this country's cultural identity. They are central to the arts, to a progressive society and to our international standing as a nation.

The opportunity to express my views is much appreciated and I wish you all the best for a fair and affective inquiry.

Sincerely,

Lucy Guerin
Artistic Director and CEO – Lucy Guerin Inc