

Committee Secretary,  
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

I am writing as CEO of Restless Dance Theatre based in Adelaide, to outline the potentially devastating impacts on the company of the 2015 Federal budget decision in the arts.

I have a degree in Drama and Sociology from Birmingham University in Britain and have worked in the arts in Australia since 1973 variously as: an actor, writer, director, dramaturg, artistic director and arts administrator, I am well qualified to gauge the dimensions and the import of the impacts on the company of the changes in arts funding.

Restless Dance Theatre has been operating since 1991 and has developed into Australia's flagship dance company working with young people with and without disability. We work predominantly but not exclusively, with young people with intellectual disability and we deliver excellent workshop and performance opportunities with them. We also make great art.

The company is a Key Organisation with the Australia Council and has been receiving triennial funding from the Dance Board since 1999. Restless Dance Theatre has also received Annual Program funding from the Community Partnerships section of the Australia Council since 2008 and before that was regularly funded by the Community Cultural Development Board.

At a State level Restless is supported through Carclew and through Arts SA. The status of the company is attested by the fact that the SA government is currently fitting out a customised dance studio for Restless in a government owned, disability accessible building.

As a member of the small to medium funded arts sector the changes to arts funding make us extremely vulnerable.

Restless is recognised nationally and internationally as a leader in the field of disability arts. Over the 24 years of its existence the company has been able to grow its processes and practices: to hone the ways it goes about its work to a world class standard. We have only been able to do this with the on-going support provided by Federal and State arts funding bodies. Our success in obtaining Australia Council funding over the last decade has been vital to the development of the organisation as a consistent producer of high quality work.

Restless has evolved a model of working whereby its community workshop program supports its performance program and vice versa. Because we work predominantly with people with intellectual disabilities we do not use an audition process for new participants in the performance program. We have found auditions to be inappropriate. We rely instead on new participants being identified through the open access workshop program. Many of our participants are on low incomes and we subsidise the workshops with our arts funding. The cuts to the Australia Council's funds may well devastate our

workshop program and ruin the working model that has taken so many years to develop.

Disability arts is recognised (by organisations like The British Council for example) as one of the most dynamic, expressive and eloquent growth areas in the arts. There is intense interest in this work worldwide and this interest grows exponentially through the arts festivals that accompany the Paralympic Games every four years. The London festival: *Unlimited*, proved so popular that it is now repeated every two years. Our Artistic Director, Michelle Ryan performed her own work *Intimacy* at the *Unlimited* festival in September 2014. This has set the stage for a period of international development for Restless Dance Theatre. The changes in funding to the arts have imperilled the involvement of Restless in this international movement for, without a stable program we are unable to make the long term commitments necessary for international work.

Like all the small to medium Key Organisations, we were in the process of applying to the Australia Council for 6 year funding when the funding changes were announced. The orderly transition from 3 to 6 year funding cycles held out the promise of some stability in this inherently unstable industry. The prospect of 6 year funding enabled Restless to:

- Make contact with leading similar British companies (Candoco and Stop Gap Dance Company) to establish long term collaborations leading to the creation of new work both here and internationally
- Make contact with leading international disabled artists to invite them to make work for the company
- Develop a viable plan to sell the company's work to international presenters
- Envisage long term partnerships with key disability agencies in Adelaide
- Give shape and a rationale to the longer term artistic vision of the company
- Develop a framework for the growth and maturation of the workshop program

Instead, we are faced with a threat to our very existence and all of this long term planning has been junked. Instead, we have to join the disorderly scramble for the remaining resources at the Australia Council and start from scratch with an unknown set of processes at the Ministry for the Arts. Both outcomes are deeply uncertain. We can no longer engage in long term developmental planning. The changes have already been deeply destructive and have the capacity to severely disrupt the company's operations.

*Restless Dance is one of a handful of Australian companies which defy pigeon-holing. The work they do with performers of differing physical and intellectual abilities is useful and heart-warming : but the point is that the work itself is exceptionally beautiful and highly skilled, often funny, and always moving.*

Robyn Archer

*Expressive powers of this quality remind us of the transcending power*

*of the arts.*

The Advertiser

*Restless Dance is without question a leader in the field of youth dance and working with young people with and without a disability.*

Lowdown Magazine

*Restless changes our perceptions of people with a disability every time it performs.*

Noel Jordan

Another aspect of the proposed funding changes is the cancellation by the Australia Council of Initiatives. Over the past five years Restless has utilised funding through the Creative Education Partnerships – Artist in Residence program (CEP-AIR) Initiative. This has enabled the company to undertake three extended residencies in schools:

- 2010 Christies Beach High School
- 2011 -13 Riverland Special School in Berri
- 2014 -15 The SA School for Vision Impaired – this is still continuing

These long term residences have enabled extraordinary developments to be achieved by the students. The effects of the residency at the Riverland Special School was investigated by researchers from the School of Education at Flinders University. This is an extract from their report:

Extract from “From The Ground Up” Project Evaluation  
Conducted by Flinders University  
Dr Amy Hamilton &  
Dr Julie McMillan

#### Benefits Students

A range of benefits were perceived for students by all stakeholders including artists, teachers, families and students themselves. These benefits were organized into the categories of physical/health, social and emotional, cognitive and creative benefits.

**Physical/health:** Teachers observed physical changes in students. Artists and teachers reported that students got stronger and their balance, coordination and stamina improved; they were able to sustain physical and mental routines for a long period of time (e.g., the hour-long performance). The project also offered an active healthy lifestyle option that differed from sport; highly regarded in the Riverland.

**Social and emotional skills:** Students worked better in groups, demonstrated empathy for peers, worked in teams and were supportive of each other. Some teachers mentioned an increased ability to communicate with each other and with teachers. A teacher reported: “I’m now able to have conversations with students that would offer no conversation.”

It was observed that the students were more inclined to 'jump in' and help each other and there was obvious teamwork. Teachers said they were amazed at the way they didn't need much prompting to be kind, positive and encouraging to each other which showed just how much they could achieve if given the opportunity.

Some students seemed to be able to overcome social issues such as appropriate touching, where in the past they couldn't manage to hold hands but they learnt to overcome this. They showed improvements in self esteem, confidence and felt a sense of belonging; they clearly enjoyed the experience. Some saw it as an empowering experience for the students;

"...getting a whole bunch of students new to dance, excited by dance and performance and let them take ownership and leadership of a project" (ARTIST).

Most respondents mentioned how much the students enjoyed the process and how much they learnt about themselves that they can look back on and say "I did that!" They can look at the video of the performance and see how well they did.

"...hopefully that will transfer across into something new if they're a little bit hesitant to try something new, just reminding them how well they went with Restless Dance and that often will just be the little boost that will help them over a hump just to try something different" (TEACHER).

**Cognitive:** Teachers noted improvements in cognitive skills such as learning and memorization of complex moves, actions and routines. Students learned to notice detail, to look more closely at themselves and others, and to communicate ideas. It was felt that they had developed a degree of open mindedness as they made decisions. They developed greater peripheral vision, attention to detail and concentration; they knew what they needed to do and what the others had to do. Several participants mentioned leadership skills and creative decision making in the students. They took ownership of the project and had a real sense that they had contributed to something big.

"(It) is not just about people like (student) who is stepping up now and showing leadership skills and taking responsibility but other less able students who we thought at first,... well it was just one of those things that was a surprise that they were really wanting to be in it, but now they're just showing a tremendous improvement in thinking through things, in following instructions and directions, in coordination so it's just been fantastic" (TEACHER)

**Artistically/creatively :** Students learned to be creative, understood the freedom to think creatively; not to worry about wrong answers and try things out/take risks. They learnt to improvise (think on their feet) and to express emotions and ideas in alternative ways they had not considered before.

"And we had people doing things that they would not normally have volunteered to do at all. I mean the (student), if you recall she had the –

she stood up and she was calling out names of people in sequence and they did something. That's not the usual (student), that was something quite spectacular.”(ARTIST)

Dance offered an opportunity for students to express their ideas, emotions and memories in ways they had not before. It allowed them to express themselves in unique ways, and they were able to make artistic decisions that involved creative thinking. The focus is so often on what students with disabilities cannot do; it was seen as exciting to be able to focus on what they can do. Through the arts, the students began to realize that they could be themselves and there was no pressure to be right or wrong; it was about being creative and self expression.

“...we were just absolutely amazed at how our guys just pick it up and go with it and show such talent and that the creative arts really do let... it doesn't matter what ability or disability, it seems to be something that they can shine in and show that they are as capable as anyone else. I think it just knocks the barriers down...” (TEACHER).

**Career opportunities:** The project offered new opportunities for future employment for the students as they learned to perform and understand performance principles such as stage, costume and spotlighting. Some of these skills and understandings were unexpected achievements and opened up strong possibilities for future development that could lead to employment or life-long learning opportunities and interests for the students.

One teacher summed it up:

“Wonderful developments for each kid; every single student. It's as if they are different students, they developed into dancers. They started as Riverland Special School (RSS) kids who were learning to dance and turned into dancers.”

**Parents and caregivers**

For the parents and caregivers of the students from RSS the performance was an opportunity to witness their child doing something they had never imagined. Most were excited and proud about being able to see their child having their moment on the stage. Some parents stated that they were 'gob-smacked' by the way they (students) were talking and listening at home. There were new discussions at home about the performance with increased ability to communicate ideas and opinions, as well as their obvious enthusiasm and enjoyment of the process. Several parents suggested it was a positive option for the students other than sports and it built creative thinking in the students. Some parents used participation in the project as motivation to improve behaviour at school.

**Teachers**

Teachers reported a sense of pride in their school, fellow staff and students. Some said they witnessed a new way to work with students; a gentle, creative option. Others felt that it was an opportunity to connect with students who could be difficult to engage in learning. It

was noted that the students developed a work ethic through dance classes and became more able to focus; even simple things like being able to sit at a table for longer. For those teachers who were fully involved in the project, it was felt to be beneficial in terms of developing their own personal confidence and skills in teaching dance, but also a better understanding of students' learning capacity. The project led to a leadership role for one of the teaching staff and as she felt that it changed her relationship with students. She began to understand and practice flexibility, and use adaptations when working with students with disabilities. In terms of her own dance skills, this teacher did things she didn't think she could, and has developed a passion for dance teaching. This new passion has led to further professional development for her and another local, regional artist. According to the principal, the dance program has made her reflect on the creative arts in the RSS program. There is a desire to integrate the arts across other learning areas, particularly in teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy. She is investigating creative arts programs in other schools with a view to future possibilities for RSS.

This work was only made possible through the Creative Education Partnerships – Artist in Residence program (CEP-AIR) Initiative. The arts funding changes have destroyed the opportunity to do more of this work. (See also the Submission to the Senate Committee by Skye Jones, a Teacher at the SA School for Vision Impaired concerning the impact of the funding changes on her students.)

On behalf of Restless Dance Theatre and the entire small to medium arts sector, I urge the Senate Committee to recommend a reversal of the recent changes to arts funding.

Nick Hughes  
Company Manager  
Restless Dance Theatre