

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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Dear Committee Secretary

Submission to the parliamentary enquiry into the Australia Council Amendment Act 2013

I write in support of submissions which propose an amendment to the "Functions" of the Australia Council Bill 2013, specifically to include the following functions:

- a. to recognise, respect and celebrate the centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures to the uniqueness of Australian identity
- b. to encourage community participation in arts practice and the shaping of our cultural identity and its expression
- c. to provide support to the arts that reflects the diversity of Australia
- d. to uphold and promote the rights of persons to freedom of expression in the form of art

While it may be true that the current bill does not exclude these functions, I believe that these fundamental principles should not be left for optional inclusion – rather they should be explicitly stated and become part of the obligations of the Australia Council. The Council would be free to pursue, enact and deliver this function through its own strategic plan, developed in dialogue with artists and producer.

My main concern regarding the shift that this Bill represents is that Australia's history as the world leader in contemporary art forms and art making practices, which blur the old fashioned lines on 'community' and 'professional' and 'elite' will not be protected for our future generations of artists, companies and Australian people.

I submit *The Baulkham Hills African Ladies* project (below) as a case study about the types of work, relationships and positive outcomes for individuals, presenters, and government that may be foregone in the future, if relevance and inclusion of all Australians is not reflected in our leading legislation.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Kotevski
Producer

The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe – case study

Funded by Women's Safety and Family Violence Branch- FAHCSIA, The Australia Council for the Arts, Parramatta City Council, Arts NSW, Sky Foundation, Belvoir, the NSW Service for the Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors, 14 individuals.

"Yarrie grew up in a refugee camp in Guinea. She is doing her HSC. Aminata was kidnapped by rebels in war in Sierra Leone. She is an ambassador for the UNHCR. Big Mama Rosemary fled domestic violence in Kenya. She is a community leader and she knows how to live. Yordy was a child soldier in Eritrea. Now she's the mother of four amazing kids. They are one half of *The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe* and they would like to welcome you into their worlds.

These marvelous women turn their extraordinary and sometimes harrowing stories of survival into a joyous theatre of humanity. With the help of four other African women – singers and dancers and actors – the ladies are going to take this great opportunity to be who they want, say what they want, and become as amazing as they can. This is how they celebrate a new beginning in a land of refuge.

The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is a celebration of women, human rights, laughter, and resilience. With a bit of sage advice on hair care."

Roll up, roll up....that is certainly part of the sell to audiences about this new little-big show. The show's name conjures images of African women's choirs, colourful dance groups, humour and fun. It belies the astonishing past, the painful and the triumphant stories the women carry with them every day.

The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is a new Australian theatre work based on the personal stories of four African women now living Sydney. The work examines the effects of trauma, and what it means to be a survivor of horrific sexual abuse and violence in both domestic and war situations—as the

women attempt to 'move on' and create new lives for themselves in a new country. Most of all it is a celebration of the resilience, courage and spirits of these remarkable women.

The abuse of women all over the world is still an important issue. Australian public discourse and understanding of these issues, in particular regard to African women, is still nascent. Violence against all women and girls in Australia is regarded as unacceptable yet persists at chronic levels that costs the community millions as recognised by the *National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022*. Internationally, the experience of gender-based violence, especially in conflict zones, mars the lives of women, children and their communities and their experience of peace and security.

In her landmark speech "*Women's Rights are Human rights*" (Beijing, 5 September 1995) Hillary Clinton issued a call to action, declaring that 'the issue of human rights for women is the issue of this century. It must be tackled now.' Despite all this, the statistics on violence against women globally continue to escalate. The issue appears to be so overwhelming, it is almost that there is a pervasive view that this is the way it is, and will always be.

Writer and director Ros Horin has long been an important force in Australian theatre. She established Playworks- the women writers' workshop, to help develop more female playwrights in Australia. For 12 years Ros was the Artistic Director of acclaimed Sydney theatre company Griffin where she was dramaturge/midwife to over 50 new Australian works and directed over 30 premiere productions herself, many of these now considered Australian classics.

Ros is passionate about women's rights and has been associated with Australia for UNHCR and Amnesty International Australia for many years.

As a writer and director Ros has in the last ten years decided to focus on marrying her passion for human rights and pressing social issues with her theatrical expertise. In 2005 Ros instigated and went on to write and direct the watershed Australian work *Through the Wire*, which charted relationships between every day Australians and male refugees in detention centres. In 2010 she turned her attention to her recurring concern for women's human rights and began this project.

Theatre has the ability to touch people, rouse empathy and effect social and personal change. As a cultural practice, theatre can take into and onto itself some of the difficult realities that exist in our society. Theatre "turns them over" in our collective heads, gently probing what we think, feel and do. This can help us reconsider how we chose to respond in our daily and collective lives. Whilst legislation and policy change are powerful civic instruments, perhaps theatre is much more powerful and better at engendering and tending to what we will always need – empathy and care, cultivating a living, breathing culture of human rights.

Driven by this understanding of theatre, and a desire to see "meaty" contemporary work that has a strong theatricality, Ros and her team set out to make work that is passionate, innovative, pushing form and exploring content that needs to be heard. It is a work that is honest, challenging, passionate, and joyfully alive, created by a strong female team, and truly reflects women's sensibilities and voices.

The initial research for the women's project led Ros to the NSW Service for the rehabilitation and treatment of torture and trauma survivors (STARTTS), based in western Sydney. STARTTS have from the outset been champions of this project and continue to be a significant partner. Through STARTTS Ros met many different women who had survived terrible violence and she met with many workers and experts in the field of torture and trauma, refugee and women's services. Ros recorded many of her interviews with women

through this process. A recurring theme that came up in these discussions and interviews was the culture of silence that pervades the issue of the abuse of women, particularly in African Australian communities.

'Out of all the recent arrivals to Australia, we've seen very little about Africans on our main stages and films, let alone anything created by and with African women about their lives.' - Ros

Approximately 48,000 Africans have come to Australia in the last decade through our Humanitarian program, and Africa remains one of the target regions of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship.¹ Some settle in NSW and of those, most in western Sydney, where significant numbers of African Australian women already live.

According to recent statistics from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (BOCSAR), western Sydney Local Government Areas made up 8 of the top 10 Sydney metropolitan regions ranked by rate of domestic assault incidents in 2010². BOCSAR also estimated DV is under-reported by as much as 39%. The bottom line is that African women are less likely to seek and get appropriate help in relation to violence against them than almost any other group of women.

The consequence is that African women who've experienced violence are less likely to achieve the key indicators of successful resettlement than others. Every aspect of life is affected- physical and mental health; economic wellbeing; independence; social participation and sense of belonging in Australia.

It is specifically this silence, and the feelings of shame around sexual violence, that

¹ Chapter 8, Africans in Australia, House of Representatives Committee Reports, June 2011

² Campbelltown, Blacktown, Penrith, Wyong, Holroyd, Liverpool, Auburn, Hawkesbury, Fairfield, Parramatta.

The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is intent on breaking. The courage of Aminata, Yordy, Yarrie and Rosemary to speak out is not insubstantial. Prior to telling their stories to Ros and each other, these women had never been able to tell their stories to anyone, not even their own families. No one wanted to know. Despite their initial fears, these women have developed a steely determination to speak out publicly, and turn their experiences- and the challenge of sharing their stories- into a force for change, to help other women and girls. For these women the show is just one step in their journeys to bring about safety and healing for other women.

'Before I came to Australia I didn't know rape was wrong. I thought it was normal.'

-Yordy

In 2011 a core group of four African women survivors and other African professional artists formed a "troupe". Ros began working with the troupe one evening a week over four months. The focus of these workshops was skills development, music, improvisation as well as creative exploration of experiences and ideas at the heart of the work. Ros began to develop a script based on the material from these workshops, her research and discussions and the transcripts of the interviews with the participating women.

The next phase of development took place between February and May 2012. The troupe and an expanded creative team undertook weekly workshops to develop material for the work. The workshops consisted of research and development tasks; skills development work and improvisation. Themes, images and ideas that arose out of the women's stories and responses to tasks were explored, generating draft script, music and visual material for the piece. There was a great focus on exploring aspects of the women's different cultures and a real focus on long-term effects of trauma on the women, where and how they found their strength and resilience -and exploring their lives now.

Through this period Ros worked weekly to select and shape the material generated by the troupe into scenes for a script. At each workshop the troupe would read the new script. The women would give their responses to the script, and there would be discussions about 'what things meant', how the women felt about the material and any new ideas. Ros would then work again to reshape and refine the script material further.

A unique and challenging aspect of this project has been working with trauma. Not just real people, but real survivors of trauma. Therefore the focus of these first stages of development was about building trust and cohesion within the group, supporting the women with the presence of professional counsellor, where necessary-as the team dealt with the potent sensitivities and emotions around their trauma. By its very nature it was a slow and delicate process and will continue to be all the way through to production.

Throughout the making process the women have been in total control of their material, and at the centre of all decision making about the production. As a group they developed a very refined process of discussion and decision making in regards to the dramaturgical, social, cultural and individual meaning of material and the piece as a whole.

By the end of April 2012 the team, which included Lucia Mastrantone as movement director, had created about an hours worth of material that they were prepared to semi-stage and showcase to an audience-as a work-in progress. They worked for a week to bring together aspects of the work and then in May presented the material to an invited audience of some 50 people at Riverside in Parramatta. The audience were staff from STARTTS, UNHCR, the NSW Attorney Generals Department, other women from African

communities, friends and family of the women, industry producers and presenters.

The response to the showing was very strong and positive. Most people were very moved and keen to see the work developed into a full production. This was of course extremely affirming and encouraging to the women involved.

At this time Riverside and Belvoir invited the work to be part of their 2013 seasons and became investors in the work along with STARTTS and Racing Pulse Productions. Numerous individuals, the Australia Council, Arts NSW, Amnesty International Australia and the Sky Foundation have all contributed financially to enable this ambitious project to come to life.

The original working title for the show *“Batagine”* came from Aminata Conteh’s sharing of her story.

*‘Most powerful woman’. My grandfather used to call me that. ‘Batagine’.
From when I was a small child. I don’t know why. He must have seen
something in me. Because he only used that word for me, out of our whole
family.’*

The women and the creative team have been on an extraordinary journey in the process of co-creating this production. The decision to have the four women perform on stage along with other professional African Australian performers is about creating, in an authentic yet subtle way, the experience of a warm and joyous functioning community of African women in Australia now-as a counterpoint to the dysfunction they describe.

The four women have a power and a presence that is uniquely their own. And to hear them speak in their own words is both profoundly moving and inspiring.

Mixing non-professionals (ordinary people) with professional performers is an investigative practice that is at the forefront of contemporary theatre.

'How to theatricalise the real, and blur the boundaries between life and art?'

Exploring the notion of playing/performing "Self" with integrity, authenticity and theatricality is a creative challenge in this work.

Ros and the creative team have been continually forging a process, a form and modes of performance that successfully integrate non-professional performers with professional artists, and explore the relationships between the two groups. This ensures the women are not required to be anyone or anything they are not; that they are able to "perform" in a way that is authentic and within their own comfort zone and skills. The modes for approaching each woman and their particular story require individual solutions. And this of course adds to the theatrical interest of the work. In broad terms, the real women are able to mediate the way in which their stories are portrayed and the actors are involved in 'representation' in a Brechtian sense. The women are firmly in control of the narratives they are sharing and creating.

The professional African Australian actors and performers bring their individual cultural heritages, knowledge, dexterities to the piece, as well as their theatrical and musical skill, talent and training. Effie Nkrumah, Aminata Doumbia and Tariro Mavondo are, at the very least bi-cultural women, who have worked with the creative team and the women to navigate and broker the cultural and dramaturgical territory we are exploring.

Whilst the work uses some verbatim text, the form and aesthetic is much more richly layered in its theatricality, yet stripped back to its essentials in both stagecraft and performative elements. The work is lyrical and transformative, and the experience of it is intimate. The key expressive elements are drawn from the women's different African cultures. Dance, song, humour and gestural language inhabit and animate the work. The team

has discovered ways of transforming the women's words and stories from everyday reality, into metaphor -through poetry, dance or song. Exploring the issues that exist around abuse, through the prism of the specific community-making practices and cultures of the women -enables the work to resonate as more than just the sum total of the four individual stories, lyrically transforming and transcending the particulars to generate an experience everyone can feel, can understand.

It takes a village to make and deliver a production such as this one. Every member of the professional team- from the Designers to the Stage Manager was carefully selected for both their exceptional talents, skills as well as their personal qualities, sensitivities and sensibilities. Each team member and key staff from Riverside and Belvoir have undertaken specific training on working with torture and trauma survivors. The cultural, political, social terrain of a work and a process such as this demand and are enriched by close relationships with a range of individuals and partners outside of the rarefied world of theatre. The guiding and advocating support of women such as Associate Professor Andrea Durbach, Director of the Australian Human Rights Centre, Dativah Murungi and Juliana Nkrumah from African Women Australia, Adol Takpiny from the NSW Department of Attorney General and Justice, numerous local politicians across Sydney, and very specifically Jasmina Bajraktarevic and Jiva Parthipan from STARTTS, works to connect many different worlds. These relationships ensure the project's process and final product have an impact beyond the ephemeral public seasons. They have also helped our team, as theatre makers; make room for new narratives in Australian theatre culture- narratives of just some of the many "batigine" living amongst us.

The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe is presented by Racing Pulse Productions, Riverside and Belvoir in association with the NSW Service for

the rehabilitation and treatment of torture and trauma survivors (STARTTS). It will be showing May 9–18 2013 Riverside Theatre, Parramatta and August 15–8 September 2013, Belvoir St Theatre, Surry Hills.

Michelle Kotevski is from Sydney and currently producing *The Baulkham Hills African Ladies Troupe*. Michelle was Executive Producer at Urban Theatre Projects where she produced *Buried City*, *Ama and Chan*, and *The Fence*, and was commissioning producer for *Michael Essien I Want to Play As You*. Michelle also spent four years as a Creative Producer with Big hART Inc, where she produced the award-winning *Junk Theory*.