

JUTE Theatre Company

Impact of the 2014 and 2015 Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts Submission

JUTE is a theatre company based in Far North Queensland that creates new, Australian writer-driven work. The stories it tells on stage, capture the diversity of life in regional Australia. JUTE is passionate and ambitious about what it does. JUTE is a company respected for the investment it has made in supporting, developing and employing regional artists, particularly in regional Queensland. JUTE has also played a leadership role in bringing isolated artists together from centres in the Northern Territory and Tasmania as well as regional Queensland. JUTE has worked hard to develop the artform in the regions, creating a strong community of artists and audiences.

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

The decision to cut \$104.8 million from the Australia Council budget seems to have been taken without consultation with the arts sector, audiences, state governments or the Australia Council. It came immediately following a reframing of the Australia Council strategic plan developed through significant consultation with all these sectors, which gave hope for a more moderated funding distribution. The Minister was part of the launch of this new strategy.

The funding cuts have meant that the entire small to medium sector across Australia is now in limbo. While some are lucky enough to be funded until the end of 2016, there is no clarity around how companies will survive past this date. If this sector is destroyed it will take the Australian arts scene back to the dark ages where access to the arts outside of major centres and outside a certain economic class was tokenistic to say the least. We will be derided as a middle class monoculture lacking vibrancy and cultural authenticity.

If the Minister can quarantine funding for the major companies and believes and understands in the value and audience reach of the small to medium sector, then surely it is time to quarantine the funding for the small to medium sector as well?

The Minister believes that the major companies must tour to regional centres across Australia so that they are truly accessible to the Australian taxpayer in order for the Australian public is exposed to 'excellence'. Perhaps we should stretch this idea out to Sydney and Melbourne? Rather than have Australian major companies, why not just tour in the Paris National Opera – where does this particular idea of 'excellence' stop?

It is not unusual to sit in an audience of a major company touring production in a regional centre knowing that half the house has been papered. The cost of touring these very expensive companies is exhaustive and I would suggest is has a little value as a one night stand for a few white middle class audience members.

Contrast this to the diversity and bang for taxpayer and audience buck of the small to medium companies, the diversity in artists, stories, audience and engagement. A rich ongoing engagement of arts companies embedded in their communities running on the smell of an oily rag, stretching the tax dollar, with lots of local in kind support, community

ownership and pride and year round engagement. These small to medium companies not only produce great art but are responsible for developing the next generation of artists, creating employment and pathways and for engaging communities in asking the big questions of our day, for ensuring that the diversity of our society is represented on our stages and in all our artforms. I'm a taxpayer and an audience member and this is a much more exciting prospect for me than a one night stand.

- Bang for Buck
- Culturally vibrant communities
- Accessibility and diversity for audiences
- Developing the next generation

What's not to love!

I am not against the major organizations, there is room for us all, but I think they could learn a thing or two from the small to medium sector and vice versa. Surely we would rather work together than against, but this quarantining of one sector and not the other smacks of elitism and creating class structures. I know this is not what the artists within the major organizations want, but is this being forced on the sector by the very different treatment – quarantining one while discriminating against the other.

It seems that the small to medium sector is the meat in the sandwich between the Minister and the Australia Council, but in the end it is the current and next generation of audiences who will lose out.

There are many concerns around the NPEA:

- The current capacity of the Department to process the massive amount of applications that will be received – over 400 from the small to medium sector in the first instance if the 6 year funding process is not reinstated by the Australia Council. Although the Department currently administers some grants, the increase in capacity required to deal with the influx will no doubt require an increase in the bureaucracy – this has to be a double up of the resources already in place at the Australia Council. Is this a wise use of the limited arts funding bucket and my taxpayer dollar?
- The first come first served application process of the NPEA does not have the potential to moderate the funding as is suggested. The first to come will no doubt be the major companies that have the resources to submit large scale, expensive projects immediately – gutting the fund. This will lead to an outcry from the sector, potentially with the same complaints that the Australia Council now receives but now directed at the Minister.
- With the major companies already taking 66% of the arts dollars, why do they need access to yet more government funding? Surely they, amongst the entire sector, have the capacity and connection to high net worth individuals and city audiences and high ticket prices to subsidise their own work?
- With the potential for only one or two industry peers to be assessing the applications along with Department employees, how will regional companies get any more of a look-in than they currently do, given that those assessors will not have any knowledge of the veracity of the application and the work.

- Are the tastes of one individual, to be the arbiter of what Australian audiences want? The Australian public do not elect a Minister for the Arts, that decision is made by an elected party. How can Australian audiences be protected against the potentially narrow view of current and subsequent Ministers appointed by the next government and the next? Surely this is why we have a statutory body to ensure our diverse tastes are met.
- There is an argument that the major companies need certainty of long term funding in order to attract investment and to develop long term programs....this is absolutely the case for the small to medium sector who are expected to run at extremely low costs but still attract private investment and high box office income – an impossible task in a regional centre where audiences are not prepared to pay \$150 for a ticket and there are few large corporations and high net worth individuals. How will the small to medium sector, particularly in the regions, access private funding to make it eligible for some of the NPEA funding where there is no critical mass in the regions.
- How can the NPEA ensure the small to medium infrastructure across the country will be supported? What are the structures in place to understand the matrix of activity required across the country to ensure access for great art to our communities outside of the major centres? Has the cost of the loss of the small to medium sector been evaluated? Does every member of parliament understand how this will impact on the employment and artistic endeavour and accessibility for audiences in their region? Are they ready for the outcry when the loss is understood?
- It is clear that the arts funding budget does not currently meet the needs of the vibrant Australian arts sector. How will the NPEA meet this challenge where the Australia Council has not succeeded?
- When the complaints start coming to the Minister about not being funded through the NPEA will we then need another fund to meet the needs of those complaints? How many funding processes will need to be invented and reinvented to silence all the complaints?
- Why is there a need for secrecy about any of the funding decisions of the NPEA when its tax payers money? Surely in our democratic society we require transparency around the funding of arts activity? In what instance would secrecy be required?

I urge the Minister and the Australia Council to work together to ensure the viability of the small to medium sector in the long term.

Suellen Maunder

Artistic Director/CEO

JUTE Theatre Company