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AUSTRALIAN WRITERS' GUILD

Submission

to the

**Senate inquiry into the impact of the 2014 and 2015
Commonwealth Budget decisions on the Arts**

17 July 2015

Australian Writers' Guild

The Australian Writers' Guild (AWG) is the peak industry body representing writers and creators of film, theatre, television, radio and new media. On behalf its members, the AWG works to improve professional standards, conditions and remuneration; to protect and advance creative rights and to promote the Australian cultural voice in all its diversity.

1. ABOUT THE AWG

The Australian Writers' Guild (AWG) is the peak industry body representing performance writers – playwrights, screenwriters, radio dramatists and writers of digital content.

The AWG represents approximately 2,500 members across every state and territory in Australia. The AWG is the only national membership organisation representing Australian playwrights and has done so for more than 40 years.

The AWG works to protect and advance creative rights and to promote the Australian cultural voice in all its diversity. The work of the AWG in improving professional standards and industry conditions delivers impressive, practical outcomes and provides a platform that generates substantial public, corporate and philanthropic support. The AWG and its members expend great time, effort and funds helping talented writers develop both their craft and their professional pathways to ensure quality stories are available for Australian audiences.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The AWG fears that the impact of the diminution of funding for the arts in Australia has been underestimated and cautions against major change in the absence of clear objectives and considered policy supported by sound research. While we appreciate the competing demands on public revenue, the impact of changes to arts policy far beyond the arts themselves is often underestimated. The arts lie at the heart of national identity and culture and without due consultation and planning, the broader social and economic implications will prove far more costly and complex than is commonly understood. Considered policy and transparent, equitable funding that is well targeted and efficiently delivered is essential not only for public access to and enjoyment of the arts, but also for the health, education and social cohesion of a nation.

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 international trade of intellectual property. Insofar as the Commonwealth Budget measures affect playwrights and Australians writing for multimedia, the AWG wishes to make the following points for the Senate Inquiry's consideration:

- In the stage and screen sectors, if excellence and audiences are the goal of the Government's decisions, then its driving force should be investment in the individuals and theatre companies that represent, seek and develop a diversity of voices, reflect the kaleidoscope of Australian stories and appeal to a diversity of Australian audiences.
- The funding priority in the Australian 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.

- Mid-tier and regional theatres are the proving ground of excellence for Australian plays and playwrights. They struggle economically and are often on the brink of viability, relying almost entirely on the voluntary work of even the most revered playwrights, cast and crew. If they continue to be starved of funds they will no longer be able to stage new Australian work and more theatres will go dark. This is a legacy no Australian would wish to leave our children and grandchildren.

3. IN THIS SUBMISSION THE AWG WISHES TO EMPHASISE THE FOLLOWING:

- We believe it is possible to ensure that government support reflects Australian diversity and culture. This can be achieved through a reallocation of existing government investment in our sector and with insistence on linking investment to policy outcomes and an increase in artist-driven determination of excellence. Appropriate investment can produce outstanding Australian stories and storytellers with a unique Australian vision and interpretation of the world as it reflects and shapes our culture.
- Over the past several years the industry has witnessed a drastic reduction of funding for mid-tier and regional theatre companies. As the industry sector that has consistently nurtured and showcased the majority of writers who later produce work that is performed by the major performing arts companies, any further retrenchment of funding for mid-tier and regional theatres will have dangerous consequences for new writing. It will force the closure of some companies, bring about a further decline in the number of programs available through others, but most alarmingly - it will leave new playwrights bereft of the skills and experience that writing for larger stages mandates and it will prompt the loss of key talent overseas, to other forms of writing, or to other industries all together.
- There needs to be a mechanism to fund grassroots, artist-driven independent organisations and collectives. The AWG recognises that working with these types of organisations is complex and requires ceding considerably more control over the determination of artistic and cultural priorities than dealing with individuals and national structures dependent on government funding. Nonetheless, these types of organisations are the bedrock of diversity and the identification, nurturing and showcasing of new Australian stories and storytellers.
- Funding should be directed to organisations that have grown out of the artistic community, are representative of Australia's artistic life and have the autonomy, diversity and scope to represent a healthy variety of taste, talent and opinion.
- The AWG believes that new technologies create an opportunity for a diversion of funds to the much-needed investment and reinvigoration of quality new Australian work by experienced practitioners of excellence and outstanding ability. Many of the most talented and successful storytellers in the country are leaving the industry as the funding and the focus of our age have shifted so dramatically to the young and

emerging at the expense of other talented writers. Funding decisions should be much more sophisticated than an either/or issue. The AWG by no means ignores the importance of supporting and celebrating new talent, it simply recognises that the market and technology have shifted significantly to create a far better balance between discovering new talent and investing in quality and proven excellence.

4. TRANSPARENCY, REVIEW AND TIED POLICY OUTCOMES

The AWG recommends that the NPEA includes strict guidelines to assure transparency in the granting of taxpayer funds. We believe increased transparency as well as a mechanism for a review after the first year of operation will assist policy makers and industry in measuring success based on clear outcomes.

We strongly advocate for public subsidy to be tied to specific policy outcomes, and in particular to the investment in and staging of new Australian works. Where box office figures are available, it is clear that the Australian public want to see Australian work. And while we acknowledge that it is more expensive and a greater financial risk to commission, develop and invest in new Australian work than to import offshore productions with a proven track record or stage reinterpretations of classics, it is this very market failure that warrants government subsidy designed to develop excellence and diversity in Australian culture and storytelling.

Investing in Australian organisations is not the same as investing in Australian culture. This is true across the range of performance industries from stage to screen and we cannot emphasise strongly enough the need for the government's cultural policy to insist that investment be linked to the outcomes and not the institutions.

The AWG and its members demonstrate this principle of outcomes assessment in that our market place is our peer review mechanism – playwrights need to get everyone in the production process to engage with their story, from directors, a production company and actors all the way to audiences who will ultimately determine the success and quality of their works. It is therefore of crucial importance that playwrights and other writers have sufficient financial incentives to create new work and develop excellence. Key to that is a healthy small-to-mid-tier theatre sector in Australia.

5. THE CULTURE OF THE AUTEUR

As a footnote, the AWG has welcomed with considerable appreciation a notable shift in the philosophy of Screen Australia in recognising the importance of the script and the screenwriter in developing screen content of artistic and cultural merit and commercial appeal. This philosophy needs to be replicated in the arts in general and theatre in particular. Australia has for decades concentrated its development and production funding on auteurs and the discovery of new talent. While the discovery of a brilliant

writer, director or that most rare gift of the true auteur, is exciting for all those involved, including audiences, it is not the basis on which to build a thriving and successful industry.

6. CONCLUSION

“What writers do in crafting, in writing, in enabling to be presented, the great stories of our nation - is one of the most important things our nation can do.” Senator George Brandis, Minister for the Arts, 2013 Annual AWGIE Awards, 4 October 2013.

Australia's stage, screen and new media industries are not only at the heart of Australia's cultural identity, they are also a vital and dynamic growth sector in the international trade of intellectual property.

If those industries are to continue to enhance Australia's reputation internationally and to contribute to our national cultural and economic wellbeing, they deserve a comprehensive, considered, well-informed and clearly articulated arts policy that is transparent and well targeted to address cultural policy objectives and industry market gaps.

We welcome the opportunity to work with all agencies to represent the rich knowledge and experience of Australian playwrights essential to the development of effective policy.



Jacqueline Elaine
Executive Director