Australian Major Performing Arts Group

SUBMISSION TO
House Standing Committee on Communications and the Arts

INQUIRY INTO
Factors contributing to the growth and sustainability of the Australian film and television industry

31 March 2017

TO:
Committee Secretariat:
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA
Canberra ACT 2600
communications.reps@aph.gov.au

AMPAG
PO Box 1965
Sydney NSW 1225
www.ampag.com.au
Tel +61 2 9253 5350

Contents

Introduction

Internationally, Australian creatives and performers are held in high esteem – we have a reputation for talent, technical know how, innovation and a 'can do' work ethic. Australia has also produced more than its fair share of productions acclaimed on the world stage. Of the five films nominated for 'Best Picture' at last year's Academy Awards for example, two were Australian.

But the primary cultural purpose of government investment in screen production is to enable Australian stories or Australian interpretations of universal stories to be told well, with significant Australian creative input and control. This in turn ensures Australian stories and perspectives are seen by Australian audiences and to varying degrees audiences overseas. To this end, government support allows the development of creative talent and addresses market failure, helping to mitigate the high risks that limit the availability of private capital investment.

Many of these characteristics apply to theatre just as much as screen production. However, the two sectors are often siloed in terms of government investment and policy approaches. The financial and distribution structures may be very different, but there are important synergies that need to be taken into account to maximise the effectiveness of support for both sectors. These synergies can help build our creative assets and storytelling capacity.

The Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG) has prepared this submission to support development of stronger cross-sector insights and discussion. We recognise that this can help strengthen the development of creative talent and their career trajectory as well as enhance our capacity to tell Australian stories across multiple formats.

The long-term sustainability and creativity of the screen sector is affected by the extent to which the theatre sector is also vibrant, providing new opportunities to nurture creative talent and the development of new Australian works.

- The Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG) is the umbrella group for Australia's major performing arts (MPA) companies, across theatre, circus, opera, orchestral music and dance. See Appendix 1 for more information and a list of AMPAG members.
- AMPAG recognises the value and importance of effective support structures for the Australian screen industry, including direct government investment, production incentives and content regulations**.**
- However, AMPAG believes that the sustainability of film and television drama production in Australia is also inextricably linked to the health and vibrancy of the performing arts, particularly theatre**.**
- AMPAG's submission aims to highlight the benefits that flow from the interconnectedness of stage and screen. This relationship strengthens creative inputs – the acting, storytelling and behind-the-scenes talent that underpin both sectors. It can also enhance the reach and impact of each sector's outputs – the plays, films and television productions themselves – affecting audience engagement, box office and future success.

Stage and screen – parallels, connections, synergies

Snapshot of the 'major performing arts' sector

Audience: The major performing arts (MPA) companies attracted national audiences of 3.3 million in 2015 (including in regional and remote areas). They also presented to 566,000 students through school programs and reached 99,000 participants through workshops, classes and seminars. In total, 4.1 million people attended a performance, school activity or workshop by the MPA companies in 2015 – an increase of 270,000 on 2014 – with an estimated further online and broadcast reach of 13 million.

Employment: The MPAs employed more than 10,900 people in 2015, offering jobs and artistic opportunities to 6,000 artists, 2,300 creatives, 1,700 technical personnel, and almost 900 administrative and management staff.

Income: In 2015 the MPAs achieved a turnover of $504 million, 66% of which came from non-government sources. Performance income has increased by 11% in real terms since 2011. Overall, the MPAs leveraged a further $1.98 for each $1 of government funding in 2015.

Eight theatre companies are AMPAG members: Belvoir, Bell Shakespeare, Sydney Theatre Company, Black Swan State Theatre Company, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne Theatre Company, Queensland Theatre Company, and the State Theatre Company South Australia.

Australian stories on stage and screen

According to Screen Australia data, Australian screen production companies made an average of 32 new feature films each year 2010/11-2014/15, with around 66 per cent (21 films) achieving a cinema release.[1] The box office for Australian films has averaged $45.5 million per year over the six years 2010-2016.[2]

In the theatre sector, the eight major companies are responsible for the development of significant numbers of new Australian stories, producing an average of 40 new works per year between 2010 and 2015.

These eight companies alone generated $59.1 million in box office in 2015. This is across all productions – new Australian works, new Australian interpretations of existing works, and revivals. It excludes philanthropic support for the MPAs (which often supplements ticket sales to enable access), as well as commercial and smaller professional theatre companies' activity. In 2015 audience reach for MPA mainstage theatre was 1.1 million people.

Ticket revenue across the whole theatre sector (commercial and not-for-profit) averages approximately $92.25 million[3] per year (2012-2015), but can be quite volatile. In the case of the MPA theatre companies on the other hand, revenue has been relatively stable, averaging $57.4 million annually(2012–2015). This stability helps to underpin ongoing creative development and employment opportunities for many actors, directors, writers and designers.

The extent of overlap between Australian audiences for theatre and feature film is unknown. However, the performance of feature films adapted from other works including plays,

[1] As of January 2017. Screen Australia http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/cinema/australian-films/feature-film-releases/proportion-of-films

[2] http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/cinema/australian-films/feature-film-releases/box-office-share

[3] Live Performance Australia, *Ticket Attendance and Revenue Survey 2015* http://reports.liveperformance.com.au/ticket-survey-2015/

suggests crossovers exist. The vibrancy and immediacy of theatrical storytelling can create strong direct connections with audiences, with the additional potential for secondary impacts or spill-over value for the screen sector.

Similarly, casting a theatre production with actors who have become 'household names' through film or television can generate broader media awareness and coverage, which in turn can generate greater ticket sales.

Audience engagement in theatre is active and deep: theatre requires commitment – the audience must purchase a ticket for a set time and date. Many theatre-goers are subscribers, committing up front to multiple shows in the year ahead; they are not simply invested in an individual play but in the unique storytelling experience that live theatre offers.

While government policy for the theatre sector has tended to be addressed separately from the screen sector, strategies for building creative capacity in both sectors overlap, and consideration of the interconnections between the two is essential.

Regardless of the level of investment leveraged into productions, work that resonates with audiences, specialised or mainstream, relies on vibrant creative 'inputs' – the talent base.

It is the intersections, the overall health and sustainability of the creative inputs, and the possibility of seeking new, less 'siloed' approaches to the development of audience-engaging storytelling, that this submission seeks to highlight to the committee.

The talent ecosystem

A diverse pool of creative talent – across actors, writers, directors and other key creatives – is a key input to the screen industry, and theatre is a key part of the ecosystem in which this talent can thrive.

The employment opportunities, career structures and development paths that characterise each sector affect the creative vibrancy and sustainability of both.

> "*Any shift that reduces employment opportunities for artists is a problem for us all. Actors rely on being able to move between film and television, small and large theatre companies, and sometimes their own independent work, to maintain a living wage and also to continue to practise and deepen their craft.*
>
> "*If we lose theatre companies, or if companies have to reduce their output, we run the real risk of losing talent from the sector altogether.*"
>
> Patrick McIntyre, Executive Director Sydney Theatre Company[4]

Employment and creative careers

Creative artists generally have 'portfolio' careers – characterised by income drawn from multiple sources and sequences of relatively project-based employment.

Most actors work across both stage and screen. Some – like Cate Blanchett, Geoffrey Rush, Hugh Jackman, Hugo Weaving, Richard Roxburgh, Toni Collette and Judy Davis – have high-profile careers on both platforms. Other examples include Barry Otto, Deborah Mailman, Miranda Tapsell, Hunter Page-Lochard, Jack Charles, David Wenham, Colin Friels, Sigrid Thornton, John Howard, Angus Sampson, Denise Scott and Robyn Nevin.

[4] http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/cate-blanchett-helps-sydney-theatre-company-post-profit-but-funding-cuts-cast-shadow-20160510-goqnft.html

The synergies apply to key creatives like writers and directors as well. Experienced theatre director Simon Stone reimagined his award-winning theatrical production of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* for the screen as writer and director of feature film *The Daughter*, while Neil Armfield, Artistic Director of Belvoir for many years, has directed several feature films as well as opera and theatre. Baz Lurhmann began his career in theatre, directing the original stage version of *Strictly Ballroom* before creating *Strictly Ballroom* the film. Baz has also directed several successful opera productions, as has film director Bruce Beresford. And Nadia Tass has directed numerous feature films as well as many stage plays and musicals.

Writers with multiple credits in both stage and screen include Andrew Bovell (films such as *Lantana*, based on his own play *Speaking in Tongues*, *Blessed*, and *Edge of Darkness*; plays such as *When the Rain Stops Falling*, the original stage play for *Strictly Ballroom* and the stage adaptation of Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*), Louis Nowra (features *Radiance* and *Cosi* based on his own plays, as well as TV series *The Straits* and feature film *Black and White*), Reg Cribb (stage and film versions of both *Bran Nue Dae*, and *Last Cab to Darwin*), Others have adapted their own plays for the screen: for example, Jim Sharman (*Rocky Horror Picture Show*), Richard Barrett (*Heartbreak Kid*), Tommy Murphy (*Holding the Man*) and Tony Briggs (*The Sapphires*).

Practitioners like Judy Davis, Brendan Cowell, Wayne Blair, Rachel Ward and Leah Purcell have built multifaceted careers in acting, writing and directing across both stage and screen.

The capacity of creatives to work across the two disciplines of screen and theatre enables them to develop complementary but particular skills sets and, importantly, financial sustainability, which in turn enables them to stay in their profession. However, theatre cannot compete with screen wages, and talent picked up by the screen sector may be subsequently unavailable for theatre bookings.

This can create casting dilemmas. It also means theatre marketing promotes the brand and artistic leadership of the theatre company alongside the individual works and creatives involved. Further, theatre is compelled to continually uncover new talented performers and writers to ensure its own creative sustainability. This in turn grows the Australian talent pool.

Renewing, broadening and deepening the talent pool

In developing and renewing the pool of talent available to both the theatre and screen sectors, theatre is often the foundation of a creative career, particularly for actors, allowing them to showcase their talent as well as build their skills. In this context, it is also important to acknowledge the critical contribution of the elite performing arts training institutions, particular National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA), West Australian Academy of performing Arts(WAAPA)and Victorian College of the Arts (VCA).

All the MPA companies offer a range of creative development opportunities, through fellowships, director attachments, co-productions with smaller arts organisations and writing development workshops and readings. The imperative to be constantly on the lookout for new talent also means the theatre can act as a kind of hothouse for emerging actors and creatives, with the rehearsal phase offering space to nurture their craft in conjunction with experienced professionals, and associations formed during a production often lasting well beyond the season run.

The companies are specifically required, in return for government investment, to develop the art form and artists. This can include:

- commissioning new plays
- presenting a high number of productions annually (diversity of content drives annual programming; forgoing economies of scale of less productions and longer runs results in a broader range of creative opportunities and audience choice)
- balancing artistic purpose with commercial responsibility in programming and commissioning new works
- casting yet-to-be known actors alongside established theatre performers
- offering fellowships, awards and attachments in directing and dramaturgy
- partnering with aligned theatre companies or individuals to develop workshops or other interventions to address shared needs or skills gaps, or improve access to the sector for diverse talent.

As an example, Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) created a Women Directors Program in 2013, providing workshops, mentoring and networking opportunities. This evolved into MTC's Women in Theatre initiative, which this year will be providing meaningful support and guidance to 13 women working in the industry. There are obvious synergies here with the screen sector's work to address lack of female participation and creative leadership in the industry.

In the case of Belvoir, more than 20 years of creating space for Indigenous theatre work to be developed and promoted has supported a progressive deepening of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theatrical experience and talent. Many of these artists are now also gaining opportunities to work in screen. Again, initiatives like this sit effectively alongside the screen sector's long-term investment in developing Indigenous talent.

Another example is the important work of Contemporary Asian Australian Performance (CAAP), which focuses on telling Asian-Australian stories as well as enabling Australian Asian creatives to develop their craft and progress opportunities to build professional creative futures. The organisation is currently running a range of industry craft workshops within the major theatre companies, drawing in artists from diverse backgrounds to develop their skills and build their network and creative momentum. This initiative is collaborative, carries low financial risk in the initial stages and helps to advance new creative storytellers and performers.

Although focused on theatre, this emphasis on enhancing diversity in the talent pool is likely to have a flow on benefit for the screen sector, which is also grappling with the issue.

The story ecosystem

Building craft

Both screen content and live theatre are founded in the craft of storytelling. However, there are differences in the way a production is realised in each case, and working with these differences can help creatives expand and extend skills and sensibilities that can be applied in both mediums. It is a virtuous circle.

In theatre, for example, longer rehearsal periods and a season run can build opportunities for creative collaboration and time for exploration of character and craft in the context of audience reaction, night after night – something generally not possible in film.

"*A film is not easy either, but in theatre you get to do it every night, eight times a week. There are different people there. When performing, I think you improve and you discover more about your character than you did in the rehearsal period*." Barry Otto[5]

"*When you are on the stage, you can really gauge it. Making a film is very piecemeal, so you don't know*." Cate Blanchett[6]

The development of a play often begins as a concept in the studio rather than on the page and theatre companies regularly provide structured support and access to a range of complementary creative 'inputs' to nurture the process. There may be two or more development phases before a script is even commissioned, as well as further opportunities for the writer to bring a draft back into the theatre to work with actors, dramaturgs and designers before the play is greenlit for production.

The major theatre companies are both 'producers' and in some ways 'distributors' in the film sense. They produce and present new work, and rely on market returns to enable their ongoing creative output.

Given the very close relationship theatre has with its audience these companies are also well placed to facilitate audience testing, through play readings for example. The development process is collaborative, and relies on the soft infrastructure of theatre companies as well as some financial investment that often includes philanthropic support to produce strong contemporary theatre works in as little as a year.

For a playwright, staging a new play often means attending rehearsals, working with the director and the actors and retaining a high level of control over their work. The writer will gain a close insight into application of their script and the skill set and working methods of both the actors and director. In a TV series, the writers often work together in a 'writers' room'; they contribute to a collaborative writing process, address technical and creative changes within a rigorous output schedule that affords little time to ponder and rarely access to the set. Experiencing both forms of creative process can help expand the writers' craft and build their long-term professional capacity.

"*Seeing the stage production particularly, enabled me to kind of emotionally access the story in a way that I hadn't previously*."[7]

"*For me it was an opportunity to tell this story in a different way and to introduce it to a new audience. … I came to understand and appreciate the beauty in the different methods of telling a story and had a great sense of excitement and challenge to bring this story to screen.*"[8]

Jasper Jones author Craig Silvey on writing the feature film screenplay for his novel, which had previously been adapted for the stage by Kate Mulvany

Depth of experience in theatre can contribute to success in the high-risk world of feature film production. Jeremy Sims, for example, was able to draw on his extensive acting and theatre directing experience in helming the award-winning feature *Last Cab to Darwin*, a film based on a 2003 play by Reg Cribb, who also contributed to the screenplay.[9] And Screen Australia now accepts significant theatre credits as satisfying the rigorous eligibility criteria for its 'Story Development' funding.

---

5 http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/celebrity/barry-otto-talks-career-family-and-not-slowing-down-in-a-date-with-kate-waterhouse-20150824-gj6m4q.html

6 http://www.scmp.com/magazines/style/article/1627580/roles-honour

7 https://www.killyourdarlings.com.au/2017/03/jasper-jones-and-the-art-of-adept-adaptation/

8 http://www.screen.nsw.gov.au/news/interview-with-rachel-perkins-jasper-jone

9 Screen Australia, Performance in Australian Cinemas Facts& Figures http://thescreenblog.com/screenintel/performance-in-australian-cinemas/

Theatre to screen adaptations

There are many examples of theatre works being adapted for screen. *Strictly Ballroom, The Sapphires* and *Radiance* are just a few classic examples.

In 2015 three stories that had begun as plays became Australian films: Brendan Cowell's *Ruben Guthrie* (based on his own play), Jeremy Sims' *Last Cab to Darwin* (previously a play by Reg Cribb) and Simon Stone's *The Daughter* (inspired by his own stage adaptation of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*).

The same year also saw the adaptation of actor, writer and gay activist Tim Conigrave's popular memoir *Holding the Man*, directed by acclaimed theatre, opera and screen director Neil Armfield. The film attracted international recognition and success. The film's screenplay was by Tommy Murphy, who had already created a very successful stage adaptation that premiered in 2006 in a critically acclaimed, sold-out season at Sydney's Griffin Theatre Company before continuing on to a further six, highly successful seasons in various theatres around Australia, as well as a season in London. The play had won the 2007 NSW Premier's Literary Award and 2007 AWGIE and Helpmann Award nominations for Best Play; the screenplay won the 2015 AWGIE for best Feature Film Adaptation (shared with Brendan Cowell for *Reuben Guthrie*) and the 2015 Film Critics Circle of Australia Award for Best Script/Screenplay in 2015.

While the mediums demand different approaches for audience success, they also demonstrate the opportunities for creative crossover, capacity to develop deeper or different connection with stories and capacity to extent creatives' potential through working across platforms.

Screen Australia has noted that eight of the top 10 films it had invested in (to February 2017) were adaptations or sequels, with two of these being adaptations from stage, *Last Cab to Darwin* (2015) and *The Sapphires* (2012).

> "*That there were original versions of these films means that story and character were already well developed, increasing the chance of making a well-honed film.*"
> Screen Australia[10]

Monitoring the level of professional theatre activity

Given the interconnections between stage and screen, trends in the theatre sector are highly likely to impact the creative resources available for screen production. It is therefore important, in considering sustainability of the screen sector, to understand the level of professional theatre activity and its associated employment and commissioning of new works.

However, while annual data on screen drama production has been collected systematically for many years, there is limited comparable data available for theatre.

In the screen sector, production budgets and 'spend in Australia' are often used as an indicator of sector and employment 'health'. The 'value of production' figure provides an indication of levels of opportunities for creatives to be gainfully employed, and the annual drama report generated by Screen Australian provides useful trends analysis.

Unfortunately, the theatre sector does not have an equivalent set of annual data. While the relative stable box office earnings in theatre are a positive sign, total revenue including

[10] *Performance in Australian cinemas, Part 1: Six ingredients that can deliver big audiences*; http://thescreenblog.com/screenintel/performance-in-australian-cinemas/

government subsidy has not kept up with rising production costs, which can place significant downward pressure on cast size, rehearsal time and design budgets for mainstage productions.

In this context, cast size can be a useful measure for creative employment opportunity/ health in the theatre sector: average cast sizes per production of mainstage theatre works and total number of opportunities for performers. Some MPA companies report that cast sizes have been in decline; others report that they have maintained cast sizes but trimmed rehearsal periods or reduced other development activities.

Sydney Theatre Company (STC), for example, reports that its average cast size per production has shrunk from 17 in 1980 to 8.5 in 2016.

However, as figure 1 shows, over the last 10 years STC cast sizes have varied in a more complex way, with smaller casts offset by an increase in total number of shows so that the overall number of mainstage opportunities for performers has remained relatively steady. What has been reduced is dedicated school productions and additional development work in Wharf 2. Melbourne Theatre Company data reveals a more consistent downward trend in both cast sizes and employment opportunities.

Malthouse Theatre's financial structures enabled average cast sizes of around 8 performers during Michael Kantor's years as artistic director (2006-2011), whereas the average cast size from 2012 to now is around 5 performers per show. Bell Shakespeare, which employs actors for longer periods than its AMPAG theatre colleagues, has also noted a significant downward trend in cast sizes. Bell's recent average cast size has ranged from a high of 13 in 2011 to 10 in both 2016 and 2017.

Figure 1: Sydney Theatre Company and Melbourne Theatre Company: Average cast sizes for mainstage productions 2007-2016

	SYDNEY THEATRE COMPANY			MELBOURNE THEATRE COMPANY		
Season	No. productions	No. performers	Average performers/ production	No. productions	No. performers	Average performers/ production
2007	11	104	9.5	11	93	8.45
2008	11	86	7.8	11	99	9.00
2009	12	88	7.3	11	81	7.36
2010	12	99	8.3	11	94	8.55
2011	12	95	7.9	12	95	7.92
2012	11	69	6.2	12	78	6.50
2013	13	99	7.6	11	84	7.64
2014	14	92	6.6	11	68	6.18
2015	13	91	7	11	65	5.91
2016	14	125	8.9	11	64	5.82

Anecdotally, MPA theatre companies also report that production activity and cast opportunities outside the MPAs have been negatively impacted by uncertainty and cuts in federal multiyear funding for smaller theatre organisations.

Recommendations

AMPAG recommends that the committee formally recognises:

- the importance of the creative interconnections between stage and screen
- the positive and vital contribution theatre makes to the development of leading creatives and actors and to the creative resources that the screen sector draws on
- that screen adaptations including from stage can positively impact the Australian box office of a film
- that, although the interconnected employment and skills development opportunities across stage and screen are important in enabling creatives to stay working in their craft, this can also lead to attrition of available talent in theatre, given the difficulty of competing with screen industry wages. While positive for the individuals and for the film sector, it can nevertheless place a burden on ‘creative supply’ in theatre.

AMPAG further suggests that the committee:

- investigates ways that greater incentives or support in developing stage adaptations might lead to more vibrant or new film opportunities and or collaboration between theatre organisations or creatives and film producers
- recognises the potential to strengthen outcomes through building cross-sector awareness; AMPAG is not prescriptive about how this might be achieved: it may, for example, be through annual story development forums (a stage equivalent of the Melbourne International Film Festival’s ‘Books at MIFF’ program, for example), new incentives for collaboration or co-development, joint exploration of audiences
- recommends, as a complement to the annual Screen Australia drama report, the monitoring and analysis of Australian theatre’s creative employment and development activity.

Appendix 1: Australia's major performing arts companies

The major performing arts (MPA) companies are Australia's iconic cultural institutions for performance who:

- deliver creative inspiration, nurturing and empowering communities, art forms and artists
- drive R&D with diversity of content and commissioning of major new works
- expand our nation's reputation across the performing arts
- provide substantial and stable employment across artistic and creative disciplines.

The Australian Major Performing Arts Group (AMPAG) is the umbrella organisation for these companies.

www.ampag.org.au

The MPA companies are:

Adelaide Symphony Orchestra	South Australia
Australian Brandenburg Orchestra	New South Wales
Australian Chamber Orchestra	New South Wales
Bangarra Dance Theatre	New South Wales
Bell Shakespeare	New South Wales
Belvoir	New South Wales
Black Swan State Theatre Company	Western Australia
Circus Oz	Victoria
Malthouse Theatre	Victoria
Melbourne Symphony Orchestra	Victoria
Melbourne Theatre Company	Victoria
Musica Viva Australia	New South Wales
Opera Australia	New South Wales
Opera Queensland	Queensland
Orchestra Victoria	Victoria
Queensland Ballet	Queensland
Queensland Symphony Orchestra	Queensland
Queensland Theatre Company	Queensland
State Opera South Australia	South Australia
State Theatre Company of South Australia	South Australia
Sydney Dance Company	New South Wales
Sydney Symphony Orchestra	New South Wales
Sydney Theatre Company	New South Wales
The Australian Ballet	Victoria
Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra	Tasmania
West Australian Ballet	Western Australia
West Australian Opera	Western Australia
West Australian Symphony Orchestra	Western Australia