

T R A N S C R I P T

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Cultural and Creative Industries in Victoria

Melbourne – Thursday 13 March 2025

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WITNESSES

Debra Allanson, Chief Executive Officer, Arena Theatre Company;

Katrina Cornwell, Co-Artistic Director, Rawcus Theatre Company; and

Caitlin Dullard, Chief Executive Officer and Director (*via videoconference*), La Mama Theatre.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Council Economy and Infrastructure Committee's public hearing for the Inquiry into the Cultural and Creative Industries in Victoria. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised.

I would like to begin this hearing by respectfully acknowledging the Aboriginal peoples, the traditional custodians of the land we are gathered on today, and pay my respects to their ancestors, elders and families. I particularly welcome any elders or community members who are here today to impart their knowledge of this issue to the committee or who are watching the broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast.

To kick off, I will get committee members to introduce themselves to you, starting with Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Evan Mulholland, Northern Metro Region.

David DAVIS: David Davis.

Richard WELCH: Richard Welch, North-East Metro.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Gaelle BROAD: Hi. I am Gaelle Broad, Member for Northern Victoria as well.

The CHAIR: Thanks so much for appearing today. All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act* and further subject to the provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during this hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you all please state your full names and the organisations you are appearing on behalf of.

Caitlin DULLARD: Caitlin Dullard, La Mama Theatre.

Katrina CORNWELL: Katrina Cornwell, Rawcus Theatre Company.

Debra ALLANSON: Debra Allanson, Arena Theatre Company.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. We now welcome your opening comments but ask they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Caitlin DULLARD: Sure. I will start us off. Hello. Thank you for this opportunity. I am the CEO of La Mama Theatre company, which is a company that has been around since 1967 and is well known as one of the critical incubators of theatre in this country. The three of us, with our colleagues, put in a joint submission, as well as some of us independent submissions, as we identify as a collective who really are at the grassroots and independent incubator of culture. We represent a part of the ecology that really is the backbone: the people making the work, the people on the ground who are feeding the larger organisations and really responsible for much of culture in this state. We are concerned about the future of culture in this state. I am primarily concerned about the number of independent artists who are not able to sustain a career in theatre. There is not

enough support, not enough infrastructure and not enough finance, and we are seeing people leave the sector at a concerning rate and also not entering the sector. So my main concern is that by not supporting the grassroots where it all happens, we are setting ourselves up for a homogenised, very depressing cultural scene in a state that prides itself on being so vital in its cultural output. I deal with thousands of independent artists every year and have for a long time, and with the direction I think we are heading in, the cultural scene in this city and state in 40 years will not exist. I think it is really important to communicate that what we provide – the fertile grounds that we are daily bringing – is really what feeds the more well known, the more mainstream. The big musicals, the big state theatres et cetera, most of those creatives, most of those artists, most of the arts workers even have started at the baseline of the ecology. We are a really dynamic ecology. We all have specific roles to play, but they are interconnected and together we create the culture here.

I will now talk about La Mama specifically, and then I will hand over to my colleagues to talk about the roles their organisations play. And the colleagues you met with just before – they each play their individual roles but work together to make culture happen.

La Mama Theatre was founded in 1967 and is well known as the place that was one of the starting places for the Australian voice to really be found in the theatre scene. Before then, really, what we were listening to in our theatres was English work and international work, so we really have been credited, with some peers, with pioneering the voice of Australia at the time. We have continued to do that through the generations. We are nearly 58 years old, and we have been in step with how society has changed, how culture is changing and how our demographics have changed and have really responded to the needs of our current and future Australian voice to play our part.

We present hundreds of works every year and work with thousands of artists, and we are currently meeting 15 per cent of the demand. The demand is growing, and the capacity to fill it is not. The expectations are growing, but the resources to meet them are not, and that has been a growing trend really for decades. I would say for a generation. I am just going to give an example. Opening this week is *The Removalists* at Melbourne Theatre Company, which will bring in tens of thousands of audience members and pay hundreds of people. That was a play that started at La Mama in 1971, and we are proudly partnering with Melbourne Theatre Company because they are really acknowledging that without organisations like ours –

David DAVIS: Theatres that have built over time – built through.

Caitlin DULLARD: That is right. David Williamson, that author, that writer who is a household name for many Australians, started his career at La Mama and is just one of thousands of examples of what can happen if you are given the chances that theatres like La Mama give. I suppose what drives me and what keeps me working so hard is that I see the David Williamsons of today not getting the same chances that he had. The world that we are living in is very different. It is much harder to be an artist now, and I really feel like we need an urgent injection of support for the humans, for the artists, for the arts workers. There is quite a lot of money, by comparison, that goes into infrastructure, which we appreciate is necessary, but the reality I see is that we are going to have empty theatres in 40 years time if we do not urgently and generously inject finances into the independent humans doing the work now. I will pass over. I will have much more to say.

Katrina CORNWELL: Thanks, Caitlin. I am from Rawcus Theatre Company, and for 25 years Rawcus has nurtured an ensemble of performers with and without disability. Together we make award-winning performances that come from the diverse minds, bodies and imagination of the ensemble. Alongside that, we strive to continually innovate in the areas of access and inclusion, both for the artists that we work with and for our audiences, meaning that we are encouraging more and more people to come and see theatre and performance.

Theatre combats social isolation by bringing people together and by telling our stories, and that is something that our state still needs after the severity of our lockdowns. Art gives us a sense of who we are and who we want to be, and it builds community at its foundational level. Rawcus creates art that represents the diversity of the Victorian population. Without proper investment, it is only people that can afford it that get to tell their stories, that can attend our drama schools and that have the financial means to take the risks that are involved in theatre. Arts funding not only allows art to be made, it also keeps tickets affordable so that anyone can attend.

Rawcus's staff totals 1.4 full-time employees, and we are really stretched with fundraising and administration and the reporting that comes from the small grants of \$5000, \$10,000, \$20,000. The other thing with those small grants is that what we can do with them at the moment is limited because we are existing in the same world that everybody else is with cost of living and CPI increases. What we can actually do with those small amounts is less now. Creative Australia is the company's only avenue to apply for big grants of \$100,000, which is what our company needs to put on our full ensemble shows with the required access, inclusion and support built into the process. In the latest round of Creative Australia project funding, only 17 per cent of the projects that applied for grants were funded.

In alignment with the other companies that are here, we call for significant investment at both a state and federal level for the small to medium arts sector, for those that are creating the art, those that are providing training, those that are the incubators that nourish up and those that are working with diverse voices, because art should be for everyone.

Debra ALLANSON: Thank you to my colleagues. Arena Theatre Company has been around since 1966. In 2018 it made the strategic move to Bendigo, establishing itself as the first professional company in that city, which already has quite remarkable infrastructure for performances, for the art gallery and for the cultural life of the city. It was an exciting opportunity for Arena but, more importantly, I think for the community of Bendigo to have in their midst a company that was focused on creating work, often award-winning work, whose focus was on children and young people, broadly speaking, up to the age of 25.

Arena started its trajectory to where it is now as theatre in education, where it took works into schools and had an important role to play not just in the creative life of children but also in developing them as whole, well-rounded human beings. We are extremely concerned that the opportunities for continuing that at the scale that it needs to be available to children in schools, particularly schools outside of the metropolitan area and more specifically in our area of Bendigo and central Victoria, are becoming harder and harder to find. Like my colleagues, we have sources of funding available to us that we spend an enormous amount of our time seeking to access, more time than is probably justified for the amount of money that comes back into the organisation. We understand the value of developing young people as future citizens and have a dual role to play in the sense that those people are our future audiences. We are developing people who are well-rounded citizens, but we are also developing people who may also seek a career in the creative industries or to become creative thinkers in whatever industry they choose to enter. We know the value of children accessing theatre and performance at the earliest stage. I had the good fortune last night, as did Mr Davis over here, to hear Geoffrey Rush speaking of his experience.

David DAVIS: Fantastic, wasn't it? Talking about somebody who from that period, 1971 –

Debra ALLANSON: Toowoomba – a tent with 800 other children in it was the wellspring of that man's career. It was so thrilling to hear that knowing that I was going to be talking to you today. It was from the heart, and I think that was just a proof point there that these things can lead on to remarkable opportunities. That is the story that we really want to share with this committee and the broader community – that our organisation is about creating those opportunities and is about those pathways. It is about the community we work with, creating those connections and exciting, inspiring moments that really flick the switch on some kid's future life.

David DAVIS: I could not agree with you more. He is a remarkable example of a remarkable Australian who has come through from university – I mean, I think he described how he was a graduate on the Friday from Queensland University and on Monday he was in a theatre, and the rest is history, in a way. He learned a craft and had that support.

Debra ALLANSON: And the fear of course is that those opportunities are shrinking. Those same opportunities that provided that opportunity are just simply not as evident as they used to be. From our perspective, you know, we hugely value the role of government in supporting us, and we urge this government, the state government, to back this future potential that we have and to keep Victoria where it should be, right at the forefront of creativity and cultural development and enriching the life of every single person in this state.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you so much. I will start with Mr Mulholland for questions.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Thank you. Just to Caitlin: your submission states that you did not receive funding, as you mentioned, from Creative Victoria –

Caitlin DULLARD: Creative Australia.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes, Creative Australia; sorry. How much previously did you receive from the Commonwealth?

Caitlin DULLARD: I should just say that we have since received \$175,000 for the next two years for a pilot program from Creative Australia. So at the end of 2026 we have no commitment from them. Previously we received \$300,000 a year from Creative Australia, and we have been receiving \$225,000 from Creative Victoria and are currently receiving \$72,000 from the City of Melbourne. I suppose with that money we present hundreds of works, so the main thing I would want to communicate is that we are such good value to the state's budget. What we provide for such a small amount – I mean, it needs to be said that \$225,000 from Creative Victoria has not been increased in 12 years and we need an increase, but for that amount of money how much we bring Victorians is significant.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes, absolutely. How did the lockdowns impact?

Caitlin DULLARD: Lockdowns actually brought us money, I have to say. We gratefully received JobKeeper and the strategic initiatives, and also we did get a significant increase from Creative Victoria for that time only. That is finished. In a way, our budgets over COVID were bigger than they are now. We were able to keep staff on and were able to pay artists, and now we are really living the reality of the post-COVID world, which is that none of those opportunities exist anymore. All of that money has been spent and there is not much left in the coffers.

Evan MULHOLLAND: This is a question for all of you: what issues does the *Revive* policy not address?

Caitlin DULLARD: Theatre is not strong in the *Revive* policy. We are really grateful for the cultural policy. It is a step in the right direction, and from La Mama's perspective, we believe in much of it. For me it is disappointing to see that theatre is not celebrated as much as other art forms.

Debra ALLANSON: I can add that there was no specific focus on children and young people, despite the self-evident nature of them being the future audience. Involving young people at the earliest time is futureproofing an industry.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Absolutely.

Katrina CORNWELL: I would just agree that there was a lack of emphasis on theatre. It acknowledged some other art forms that also needed bolstering, but we were kind of a bit left out of the conversation.

Caitlin DULLARD: To add that, two of the products of *Revive*, literature and music, have their own bodies. A body like that from a theatre perspective would revolutionise – they are absolute gifts to those art forms – Music Australia is a godsend.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes, as someone who is very involved in the theatre scene, I very much agree. At a Victorian level, according to all of you, what is the best thing you think we can be doing as a government, as opposition, as Parliament –

David DAVIS: As an all-party committee.

Evan MULHOLLAND: yes – to better advocate both on a structural level and also at a Victorian level to address some of the issues?

Caitlin DULLARD: Certainly advocating to your federal counterparts. Really, an aligned emphasis from state and federal would be wonderful. I think it would be fair to say that an acknowledgement of the work that we do through resources, in kind and finances, is really needed.

Katrina CORNWELL: I would say – certainly from our organisation's perspective and I think from those of other small to mediums – as far as Creative Victoria goes in their support of the industry, what is really needed is an increase of our core funding that accounts for CPI increases and indexing, because for us it feels like our funding is doing this, even though it is staying the same. That is probably across the board for all –

David DAVIS: The costs have gone up. I mean static funding over, how long –

Katrina CORNWELL: The costs have gone up significantly, and we feel that –

David DAVIS: Twelve years, is that what you are saying, roughly?

Katrina CORNWELL: Yes, 12 years.

Richard WELCH: That is a 20 per cent cut.

David DAVIS: More. The inflation is roaring.

Katrina CORNWELL: We feel that internally.

Debra ALLANSON: That is right. I can only reinforce that I feel the organisation that understands the sector the best, Creative Victoria, is in dire need of greater degrees of support. The work of this committee in finding out these things is I think invaluable to make that possible.

Katrina CORNWELL: I do not think any of our organisations are applying for project grants to Creative Victoria, but we are all probably in conversation with independent artists who are not attached to a company who are applying for project funding, and over the last, I think since 2020, there have only been three rounds available, which is really just halting –

David DAVIS: It is constricted.

Katrina CORNWELL: Yes, it is very constricted. And then the maximum amount that anyone can apply for is \$20,000, so that is quite a small amount of money to put a project on.

David Davis: Well, that does not really go anywhere.

Debra ALLANSON: I think the roll-on effect is it makes it difficult for partnerships to be formed, because that is the opportunity for organisations like ours to work more collaboratively with even smaller organisations and artists to create new opportunities, but if they cannot bring anything to the table apart from their talent and themselves, it makes it very difficult.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Yes, for sure. Do you want to go to someone else?

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Mulholland. We will go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you. Thank you, all. Your evidence here today is building an accumulating story, so some of my questions are actually in the context of what we have already heard. What seems to be the narrative that is building up is that the arts in Victoria and your particular area is reaching a crisis point, a point of unsustainability. We also then reflect back on 1971 and the late 60s, when we seemed to have this flourishing of the Australian voice in arts. I will ask you a very big picture question, and I will qualify it: what has changed? It is unsustainable now. You will be able to explain whether it is just the increases in cost – is it that you have always been reliant on government funding and you are not getting it now? I think the other devil's advocate question is: has your scope changed? Are you doing peripheral things now that in 1971 you were not doing, so the model was better? I will push that in your direction.

Caitlin DULLARD: For me I think it is worth noting that the population has grown astonishingly since 1967, and the demand on us has grown. Every week the demand grows because there are more and more people living here, there are more and more people trying to have creative careers. Really La Mama served the needs of the community in 1967 and now really cannot because the demand is so high and the complexity of navigating society through the arts gets more and more nuanced every year. The requirements from government and the expectations from society grow. I think our model is still an appropriate model, although we are looking at downsizing because of this reality. I think we have been dependent on government funding, and that has not grown. But also we have not grown the way some of our international counterparts have in terms of philanthropic, business, corporate. I think that needs to be said.

Debra ALLANSON: Interesting point about scope, because I do feel, apart from the obvious one of the huge difference in population, it is the expectation on the small organisations to meet outcomes that are measurable – not that that is a bad thing in itself, but it has increased. I will give you an example from our perspective as a company focused on young people and working in both the creative arts context and the education context, which is the rise of the digital native. We are all migrants or tourists, by the way, but our young audience are born into digital. Our work seeks to reflect that need, that we value and celebrate live experiences, but we also need to meet the children where they are, which means finding really engaging ways to both tell stories and create exciting experiences that use the creative technologies while imparting some digital literacy. That it is not just about digital and does not just mean social media and so on, it actually means creating stories, creating experiences and sharing those stories and experiences. That is the scope that has changed immeasurably for a little organisation like ours. We absolutely embrace it, but it comes with a cost.

The other that I would mention in our particular situation is that we are regionally based, and the regions have their own dynamic. The work that we do for children and young people is invaluable, but I also see the need for more support for artists in the region and can see the scope to expand what we do to meet that need in the community. I do not know if that answers your question well, but I can see that scope is an issue for us.

Richard WELCH: Yes, I can see what you mean. I think in 1971 you would put on a play, you would go and do the play and you were done. Now it seems like, from all the witnesses here, the scope of what you do and the remit of what you do is vastly wider and more nuanced and complex. That obviously makes the cost base go up, and what you expect to be cross-subsidising within your operation would be more difficult.

Katrina CORNWELL: I will just speak from Rawcus's perspective. Rawcus was not around in the 70s – and neither was I – but the idea of access, inclusion and equity is I think more of a contemporary proposition in society. Certainly that is something that Rawcus fulfils, and we try to do best practice as well. That takes expertise, which takes resourcing, which takes funding to hold our ensemble and to support everyone's needs. And certainly with our work – we are known for making quite ambitious work that defies what you think a diverse ensemble would put on, so certainly our ambition is high. But that is part of the proposition of the company.

Richard WELCH: And I guess that comes back to the original point of the question. The fundamentals have changed, and therefore the role of funding and the role of other support must change with it.

Caitlin DULLARD: Absolutely.

Richard WELCH: What I am hoping, and trying to get help here with, is to say it is not just you asking for more money, at the end of the day.

Caitlin DULLARD: Absolutely not. I mean, I will use a very bland example – I have looked at the archives of what the reporting requirements were from 1971 and even the insurance document and the KPIs, and it is a comedy actually to look at what was expected and add all of the nuances of ensuring we are appropriately working with First Nations communities, appropriately working with young people, appropriately working with all sorts of diverse communities, which is all wonderful and necessary, but quite labour intensive and quite costly. All of those expectations have just grown and continue to grow, and as the demand and expectations are going up, the resources are going like this. So this thing of putting in that real core heart of what we need to be doing is getting weakened by the email really. It is.

Katrina CORNWELL: Yes, so true.

Caitlin DULLARD: It is just getting so hard for organisations, and that is replicated to the individual. So it is getting impossible for the individual, who also needs to meet all of these social and bureaucratic expectations.

Richard WELCH: It is very anti-art at the end of the day.

Caitlin DULLARD: It takes away from all the beautiful art making and society changing we could be doing.

Richard WELCH: Picasso would never be able to open his workshop, his studio, would he?

Katrina CORNWELL: He would be busy in the emails.

Caitlin DULLARD: That is right, and I am sure all of us can on a daily level relate too. I should be spending today programming 2026. I really should be spending today reading a script, but I could not afford to do that because I need to be advocating, I need to be writing grant submissions, I need to be managing staff, all of the things. And the less support we get, the more we are heading in that direction, and the power of art is being sidelined in what should be core business.

Richard WELCH: Thank you.

The CHAIR: I will go to you, so go for it.

David DAVIS: Just continuing on that vein, in effect what you three have described is an effective cut in funding over a longer period, more complexity, scope creep, to use the description there – should we be getting back to basics and just saying, ‘Look, we’re theatre and this is what we should do. We may not be able to do everything for every group’? Tagging all these things onto funding actually makes it incredibly complex and difficult. Am I being unreasonable there?

Caitlin DULLARD: But I think the power of theatre is responding to the climate of now. So the power is in speaking back to humanity and saying, ‘This is what’s happening.’ So I think you would run the risk of creating out-of-date theatre if you were not fully engaged in what is happening.

David DAVIS: But you might choose to narrow it to X and not do X, Y, Z and other things. It just might not be possible to do every add-on, every linkage that is rolled into some of these agreements.

Katrina CORNWELL: I do not think any of us here would want to see a reduction in the complexity and scope of the industry in general. Certainly Rawcus holds a really special place in the ecology and what we do and the people that we work with, and it would be a shame if we were not able to do that and were not able to support the diverse people that we work with to tell their stories.

Debra ALLANSON: I think there is an element of ‘The genie’s out of the bottle’ in that you could argue that the definition of theatre has changed. So when you say go back into the box, if you like, and do theatre, what do you actually mean by that? Do you mean write a play, invite people to come in and sit in a room and watch a play about –

David DAVIS: That might be part of it. It might be that that would be the creative side of it, and I am not claiming the creative skill, but –

Debra ALLANSON: Because what I am talking about when we talk about scope creep, for example, is that integrating digital is not about not creating theatre, it is about meeting your audience where they are.

David DAVIS: Yes. It is about delivery. It is a delivery mechanism; I get it.

Katrina CORNWELL: It is also about audience expectation as well, and we want to be able to speak to a broad audience so that they are coming and buying tickets.

David DAVIS: But every broad audience is my point. Might it be that a specialisation goes on and a narrow casting in a certain area. You might do this and another group does that, rather than everyone trying to touch every –

Debra ALLANSON: I think we do do that, David.

Katrina CORNWELL: The industry does do that. We are kind of like an interwoven tapestry.

Debra ALLANSON: I think we do that. It is quite interesting, actually. I have had discussions about the matrix, and we probably would benefit from having it there, visible, because the work that Arena does focused on young people, and we are in the regions, is quite different to what a company in Melbourne here, Polyglot –

Richard WELCH: All three of you represent quite different –

Debra ALLANSON: Yes. So we are not eating each other’s lunch. We are actually doing quite different works and, you know, aiming for different experiences.

Richard WELCH: To be fair, I think maybe the point David was making is not that we want you to homogenise or de-homogenise, it is the non-artistic dimensions of what you do, the scope creep in the non-artistic dimensions of what you do.

Debra ALLANSON: Yes, I think that is true. It is absolutely true. yes. I mean, a case in point is we have been having conversations about – and this is an investigation on our part – the necessity for a full audit versus a review, the cost and resourcing associated with that for an organisation whose turnover is less than \$3 million a year when the Australian charitable, ACNC – remind me what the acronym is – does not require it for organisations of less than \$3 million. We have requested Theatre Network Australia to support the small organisations. That is just one example.

Richard WELCH: That is a good point. That is a practical thing we could pursue in decluttering, which is not devaluing the value of those aspirations; it is not a comment on that. It is just to help you declutter what is –

Debra ALLANSON: Yes. I mean, you will probably find that most of the small organisations are pretty fleet of foot in the way in which we manage our administration. We have outsourced bookkeeping services, for example. We use specialist firms such as Auspicious Arts, who produce contracts and negotiate standard contracts. All of us look for every single opportunity to work with specialists to offload some of that bureaucratic necessity.

David DAVIS: Just sort of pressing forward on this part of it, on the federal money that comes into the system, it seems to me very little comes into your zone, and we have got to remedy that. Victoria cannot go on with not getting a reasonable share. I personally define a reasonable share at something around our population and economic significance, which is about 25 per cent of federal funding. As best I can see, we are well short of that when it comes to theatre of various types. Is that unreasonable?

Debra ALLANSON: I would certainly agree with the principle. I could not cite the numbers as well as you might be able to or Creative Australia –

David DAVIS: Well, we are investigating this.

Debra ALLANSON: If I understand correctly, regrettably Victoria has gone backwards in the per capita spend on the arts, and I think that erodes its leveraging effect at a federal level. There is nothing that says that, but you cannot help but feel that that is an impact, because it then undermines the scale and nature of work that companies like ours and independent artists can undertake.

David DAVIS: The applications that go in.

Debra ALLANSON: Correct. Not just the applications, the produced work. I am not saying ours per se, but I think that over time it is chipping away at the capacity of the sector to produce work at the value it needs to be to be as competitive in that funding environment. I hope I am not suggesting that the work's not good – it is. It is about the quantum of the work. We are slipping because we do not have as much investment in the R and D.

David DAVIS: Is somewhere in Australia doing that well, leveraging the federal money? What should we look at if we are –

Debra ALLANSON: It is a good question.

Caitlin DULLARD: Not that I am aware of.

Debra ALLANSON: No, I am not aware of it. I do not think it is a conscious – well, actually that is not true. I think in the major performing arts organisations there is definitely a commitment by state governments, which has a leveraging effect into the industry. If we can look at that for smaller organisations, then there may be something to examine there.

I think in the youth sector South Australia seems to be streets ahead with what they have done over many, many years with their funding. They have extremely valued and successful companies, such as Windmill Theatre Company, which is part of the major performing arts. They have expanded very successfully. For example, they do the stage production of *Bluey* as service work, licensing it and then producing that work. The scale enables them to do that, and that is many years of investment by the South Australian government in work

for young people. They have a specialist organisation called Carclew, which has a strategic focus on how you develop work for young people – how you develop those audiences, how you look after young people through their creative development. There might be something in investigating those elements and how that has that leveraging effect.

Caitlin DULLARD: For small to medium arts organisations like us, the piece of stability, certainly for La Mama, is the four-year funding from Creative Australia. That is what has been our cornerstone. In the last round, when we were unsuccessful and as a result of that made the decision to pause for a year to find more sustainable ways, at that moment, which obviously came post COVID, and obviously Victoria was the worst hit, for that category – so bear in mind there are different categories, and the majors are removed; they are somewhat quarantined – in that outcome there was one Victorian small to medium arts organisation that was successful against five from New South Wales. That is completely disproportionate. That has somewhat been rectified in that three of us Victorian organisations who were unsuccessful at that point –

Caitlin DULLARD: have this two years. The reality of that is that there are now four small to medium theatre organisations in Victoria that have some stability. Three of them have that stability for two years, and another one for four years. The reality of that means that everyone else is reliant on state and project, which means I literally cannot program something beyond that funding, because there is not just no guarantee that that money will not exist but great fear that it will not. The way that limits our capacity to drive creatively is phenomenal. The reality financially, what we are looking at, is the end of 2026, the start of 2027 –

David DAVIS: The financial year.

Caitlin DULLARD: No, we are all different, but I am calendar. The only funding that we have to secure our survival really is what the outcome of this Creative Victoria upcoming four-year grants is. In the instance that there are significant cuts at that level, many of us will have no security to move forward at all. It is a very strong reality that our budgets will not allow us to continue beyond that year.

David DAVIS: Can I just get to the prickly end of this?

Caitlin DULLARD: Sure.

David DAVIS: At a federal level I think the new funding arrangements were driven by – let me run the arguments that come internally to that organisation – ‘Oh, these long-established organisations, you know, we’ve got to fund others over here. We’re going to move funding. So we’re going to leave these long-established, successful organisations and not fund them or not fund them properly.’ I think that is what actually happened at a national level. If I can be blunt again, I do not think those bureaucrats and, dare I say, ministers actually understand the impact of what they have done. There is a lack of connection with those sorts of decisions. If you are going to kill the funding to a couple of key organisations that have got long-established histories, back to Geoffrey Rush and all of that, if you are going to pull the funding from them, what do you think is going to happen? You are actually going to do destruction here. But something over there, it may be positive, even if the aggregate is not the same. I mean, I think the aggregate in this circumstance was much less.

Caitlin DULLARD: Yes. I suppose if there is any expectation that after a certain amount of years we should be self-sufficient, that defies the belief in art from the government. You know, we are not commercial ventures. We are not-for-profit charity organisations who exist to contribute to society, and so we are not on a mission to become – we need to find other ways to succeed.

David DAVIS: I am not sure they quite phrase it like that, but there seems to me a disjunction between this concept that we are going to shift the funding –

Caitlin DULLARD: But that is implied, isn’t it?

David DAVIS: and, oh, there are not going to be some consequences over there.

Caitlin DULLARD: Because how else would we survive?

David DAVIS: No, no; I am agreeing.

Caitlin DULLARD: Without government granting, we will die.

David DAVIS: I am agreeing, but I think that is what has gone on. They have said, 'Oh, well, some smartypants in Canberra has decided we are going to fund a group of organisations in New South Wales – new things. We're going in this direction, and these old established organisations, with stunning creativity and history – we're going to cut them.' I think that is what they did. 'We're going to cut them.' Now, there seems to be then this disjunction that actually that is going to have a bad effect. Am I unreasonable in surmising that is roughly the history?

Caitlin DULLARD: I mean, sure. I am not in those rooms. I do not know.

David DAVIS: I think it is destructive, and it is distant people way up in Woop Woop, in a different state, in a different time warp, who have no idea what they are doing.

Caitlin DULLARD: I mean, sure. We can prove we know what we are doing because we have existed in climates for a long, long time. I think it is always important to be open to new organisations and for things to evolve –

David DAVIS: With growth funding, thanks.

Caitlin DULLARD: with growth funding, yes.

David DAVIS: Rather than axing –

Caitlin DULLARD: We have come together because we are icons of the theatre scene in this city and in this state. Without blowing trumpets, the idea of La Mama, of these organisations, ceasing to exist is a terrifying thing for the political environment and for a society that needs these opportunities for connection, for understanding, for coming together. It is critical in the current climate and it is very dire.

David DAVIS: I think you have got my view anyway.

The CHAIR: I was going to say we are running pretty short of time and I want to get to Ms Broad.

Gaelle BROAD: Thank you. And I thank each of you for your contribution to the cultural scene, because it is very important, and I am looking forward to the production tomorrow night. I got a message saying it is going to be quite different, by the sound of it.

Debra ALLANSON: It is pretty remarkable.

Gaelle BROAD: Well, I am looking forward to it. Do not let any secrets out. We heard previously from St Martins youth centre, and they were saying about COVID and the lockdowns that they led to a significant increase in anxiety and depression in young people and a number of skills are missing. I am interested particularly in Arena Theatre's view on this, but also just generally, because our terms of reference do look at the impact of COVID and sustaining after that. What are your thoughts? What are you seeing in young people today?

Debra ALLANSON: Thank you for that question. It is so important. You will see versions of that in the show you are going to see tomorrow night, which is a group of young kids on the outside of, you know, the day to day. They are neurodiverse kids, kids who are distracted for whatever reasons, who are putting on a work and who have come through a program Arena developed. We are so proud of what they have done. But what we have seen in pulling together that work and other works is the incredible rise in young people who are suffering various forms of social anxiety. You know, school refusal – I think that is the term where they are just not going or they are not fitting a pattern that was previously seen as a normal way for young people to be responding. And I think there is reasonable evidence that much of that can be seen as a result of the isolation caused through COVID. We do our best with our programs to offer works that can help bring young people together to represent their experiences and find ways for them to cope with those experiences. But it is a real thing; there is no question about that.

Katrina CORNWELL: At the time I was actually working at St Martins during COVID. I was the associate director there, so I worked with Nadja during COVID, trying to support the young people that we worked with, and can absolutely back up that story of the growing anxiety. It was just so palpable. I remember one young person that I had worked with since she was 10, and she was like – I do not know if you have ever

met these young people, but she was like a 30-year-old in a 10-year-old's body. She was so confident, and I was like, 'How are you 10?'

Gaelle BROAD: I think I have a daughter like that.

Katrina CORNWELL: That was pre COVID, working with her in the workshop room. Then we shifted our programs online during COVID, and I just saw this slow – she might have been around 12 at that point – decline. Like you could just see it, her engagement, to the point where she started turning her camera off and to the point where she stopped coming – just this absolute disconnection. And then out of COVID I worked with her on a project – like kind of straight out of COVID – and just her whole demeanour had shifted completely as a person. She was very anxious, very socially aware of herself and just had shifted completely. That is what happened. I was in communication with her parent as well during that period, and her mother echoed the same thing. So it was not just my reading of the situation, it was very real.

Caitlin DULLARD: I do not specialise in young people, but I can say, from an independent theatre and individuals that we were working with, we had the same sort of experience – complete isolation and fear – and yes, we are seeing an appetite for people to have more opportunities for connection and community. Now definitely there is hunger.

Katrina CORNWELL: Yes, I feel like the confidence in coming back into groups is returning in the community now. There is an opportunity for us to really pull audiences back into their habits from before COVID, because there was definitely a decline. I do not know if you have seen the audience atlas study that was done. That really points to the numbers and the shifts in audience patterns, but there is now an opportunity to bring people back into connection and community.

Caitlin DULLARD: Just to speak to that too, I feel like all of us are so well placed to do that work as theatre organisations, as people who bring people together. We have got the networks, we have got the audience, we have got the artists and we have got the infrastructure. Really it is the financial piece that is the substantial missing piece in the puzzle.

Gaelle BROAD: It is amazing. I just got a flashback of wearing a mask and being in a theatre – just the vibe in the room with people being excited to be able to come out of their homes. You think of that connection. The loss of it has had a huge impact and I think will have an impact for years to come. Arena, you did the shared submission but also your own submission, but you talked about regional Victoria. What are you seeing? The terms of reference do talk about regional areas and the share of funding, but what has been your experience or your thoughts on funding for regional Victoria?

Debra ALLANSON: Well, we are told by the federal government that they have no obligation to fund based on region or area. I would like that to not be the case because I think there is a very particular set of circumstances in relation to being regionally based, some of which I have mentioned previously. Because of the fewer companies and fewer artists, there is greater need to be able to provide a broader range of opportunities for young people who are geographically dispersed. So there are costs associated with being able to gather those people or to go out and work with young people in regional areas and with artists in regional areas. It has a very real impact.

Regrettably, we missed out on the four-year funding. Arena feels it has a dual role, working with our young audiences but also working as a powerhouse in the region, potentially, to develop artists and artist opportunities in our region. I feel that there has to be some recognising of the unique nature of working outside of the metropolitan area, where you have scale and capacity already there. We are having to pull it together for every single work that we do. That scale and that capacity are just not there in any recognisable way. We are very committed to changing that, but that requires dedicated resources to do so.

Gaelle BROAD: Do you have anything you want to add to that? No. That is fine. I think it is a regional focus. But what is your experience or your view of moving to regional Victoria?

Debra ALLANSON: It predated me, by the way, but I have to say I think it was a remarkable strategic decision. The embedding in the community was affected by COVID. I think the company did beautiful and award-winning work in the lead-up to COVID. I think we are now back on the up, doing the kind of work that is necessary and that we are so proud of. I think it was a really smart decision on the part of whoever said,

‘Let’s do that,’ to locate a professional company in a place like Bendigo with beautiful infrastructure but, as often is the case, no content. We would like to say we are the content. We can make things happen.

The CHAIR: Sorry, we are going to have to leave it there because we have gone slightly over time. I did not get to myself. It was a great discussion. I am the Chair. It is my own fault. Thank you so much for appearing before us today and for your submission and answering our questions. That concludes the public hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.