

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into the Cultural and Creative Industries in Victoria**

Melbourne – Thursday 13 March 2025

#### **MEMBERS**

Georgie Purcell – Chair

Richard Welch – Deputy Chair

John Berger

Katherine Copsey

Moira Deeming

Bev McArthur

Tom McIntosh

Evan Mulholland

Sonja Terpstra

#### **PARTICIPATING MEMBERS**

Gaelle Broad

Georgie Crozier

David Davis

David Ettershank

Michael Galea

Renee Heath

Sarah Mansfield

Rachel Payne

**WITNESSES**

Conor Cunningham, President, and

Vern Wall, General Committee Member, Bendigo Theatre Company; and

Leah Sertori, Founder, Facilitator and Coach (*via videoconference*), and

Megan Champion, Business Development and Facilitator (*via videoconference*), Sertori Consulting.

**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 various lands we are gathered on today, and paying 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, starting with Ms Broad.

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

**Richard WELCH:** I am Richard Welch, Member for North-East Metro Region.

**The CHAIR:** I am Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Katherine Copsey, Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you so much for appearing before us 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, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could I get you all to state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of. For the sake of ease, we might start with Leah and Megan on the screen and then go to the room.

**Leah SERTORI:** Thanks, Georgie. Leah Sertori, Sertori Consulting.

**Megan CHAMPION:** Megan Champion, Sertori Consulting.

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** Conor Cunningham, Bendigo Theatre Company.

**Vern WALL:** Vern Wall, Bendigo Theatre Company.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you. It is lovely to have some constituents of mine and Gaelle's here. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they are kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for discussion and questions.

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** Good afternoon, and thank you. My name is Conor Cunningham. I am the Bendigo Theatre Company President, and this is my colleague Vern Wall. He is a life member, general

committee member and a past president of Bendigo Theatre Company. I would like to thank you for the invitation to attend this hearing and for the opportunity to tell our story.

Bendigo Theatre Company was founded over 70 years ago, in 1952, and in that time we have produced hundreds of productions, involving thousands of volunteer performers and crew, to the delight of tens of thousands of audience members in Bendigo. We are and always have been a not-for-profit community theatre group run entirely by and for passionate volunteers. From our humble beginnings, when we hired numerous locations for rehearsals, costumes, storage and construction of sets, we centralised our operations in 1999 by acquiring a disused army drill hole from the Commonwealth through an arrangement with our local council. Over the following 25-plus years of countless volunteer hours we have lovingly converted this facility into what we now call our home, the BTC Arts Shed on Allingham Street in Golden Square. This facility comprises rehearsal spaces; a large workshop for material storage, set construction and painting; stores for tools, props and costumes; and the centrepiece, being a 61-seater auditorium recently named the Patricia Lyon Black Box Theatre in honour of one of our founding members. BTC also comprises of a youth theatre group called Tribe, which is a dedicated group for all high-school aged youth, enabling them to participate in all aspects of the performing arts, thus developing their skills and building friendships.

A typical annual season at Bendigo Theatre Company includes a pantomime and the TenX10, which comprises 10 original 10-minute plays – these plays are written locally, and it is a chance for budding new playwrights, directors and actors to try out their desire for theatre work and have it performed in front of a live audience. We also do a full-length play every year. This could be anything from a murder mystery to a comedy or a courtroom drama et cetera. We put on a Tribe production, which is either a play or a musical produced and performed by our youth theatre group. We have what is called the B Sharp Chorus, a weekly choral group for singers of all abilities, and regular showcase events where local talent is invited to perform anything that they like, providing an evening of enjoyable variety entertainment. Each of the above items is performed and produced in our BTC Arts Shed, but the highlight of the year usually is our major musical. This is also produced in our Arts Shed but performed at the Ulumbarra Theatre in Bendigo, a near 1000-seat professional theatre, allowing us to create professional-quality productions, a wholesome experience for everyone involved. Our recent production of *Wicked* was nominated for 14 Music Theatre Guild of Victoria categories, taking out 13 of those awards. This is the highest awards haul by any one theatre company in the history of the guild, an achievement we are very proud of.

In support of our operations we have groups that meet on Wednesday and Saturday mornings with a focus on set construction and groups that meet as and when required to create our wonderful costumes – all volunteers, all developing strong friendships and practical skills in a model akin to the men's shed. Of course, nothing is possible without our passionate volunteers, who give up countless hours in all aspects of creating theatre, from admin and governance through to design and creation, production and of course performance.

A life members board honours those that have given so much of their time and talents to BTC over the years and have been awarded with life membership of Bendigo Theatre Company. An alumni board recognises those that have passed through BTC as performers or backstage crew and have gone on to make a career out of the performing arts not only in Melbourne and throughout Australia but also internationally in theatres on the West End and Broadway. When it comes to funding, our income stream comes mainly from a combination of annual membership fees; players fees for those involved in our larger productions; hiring out of our sets, furniture and costumes; plus any moneys we may make from income from ticket sales over and above the cost of producing a show. However, similar to other theatre companies, we too are taking a hit to our bottom line, as continually increasing costs are being met with declining audience numbers, unable or unwilling to patronise shows as they once did pre COVID due to a number of factors, including the current cost-of-living situation, for example. This clearly is not sustainable for us moving forward.

Grants funding opportunities for BTC have in the past been small and sporadic. However, we are very grateful for the assistance we have received to date that has enabled us to purchase assets and equipment for our arts shed. We also are very grateful to the local council for their assistance with ongoing maintenance works at our shed, including a recent electrical upgrade. However, if we are to survive as an organisation into the future, we will become more and more reliant on outside funding to enable the Bendigo Theatre Company to continue to provide brilliant theatre experiences for Bendigo for another 70 years. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Was there any other contribution for opening remarks?

**Megan CHAMPION:** Yes – if you would like to start.

**Leah SERTORI:** Thanks, Megan. I will just start by congratulating Bendigo Theatre Company. It is a remarkable story and achievements, and it is lovely to join you at this hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to speak today, and I am joining you from beautiful Djaara country in Bendigo. I am delighted to share a perspective on the importance of sustained investment in Victoria's cultural and creative industries. My name is Leah. I am representing Sertori Consulting, and I have seen firsthand how strategic funding empowers creative professionals to build sustainable careers.

Back in 2020 the business was engaged to design and deliver a professional development program for creative industry workers and those who aspired to move into the creative industries in a paid capacity at Emporium Creative Hub in Bendigo. Emporium Creative Hub is an initiative of Creative Victoria. It has recently transitioned to be annexed by La Trobe University, after the funding ceased. The hub opened in March 2020 just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit, providing vital support for creative entrepreneurs through co-working spaces and structured programming. One of its flagship initiatives was the Emporium incubator program, which ran for four years, and it equipped 58 emerging creatives with the tools, knowledge and networks to establish viable enterprises. Many of those enterprises have grown to employ others, and many of those enterprises are now collaborating with each other to win larger contracts of work. The great majority of participants in this program either made the transition from having a creative side hustle to being fully self-employed in the creative industries or from having a startup creating industry business to a sustainable and mature small business in the creative industries. However, this great work is no longer funded by the Victorian government.

The Emporium incubator program achieved great social and economic impact. For example, take Lauren Starr, a former primary school teacher who hesitated to call herself an artist when she joined us in the program in 2020. Through the Emporium incubator program Lauren transitioned to a full-time creative career, opening a studio in Bendigo's arts precinct and winning Australia's largest art prize, the \$150,000 Bluethumb Art Prize. Lauren's work has since been acquired by Parliament House and by the Bendigo Art Gallery. Lauren's journey is just one of many, one of those 58, and I am really aware, one of many other creatives around rural and regional Victoria who do not have access to the sort of creative industry support that is available in Melbourne. If we want Victoria's creative sector to thrive, and very specifically we want it to thrive in regional and rural Victoria, we must ensure that vital programs like the Emporium incubator continue to receive funding. Sustained investment could not only support artists and entrepreneurs but strengthen Victoria's economy and cultural landscape. Another success story of the program is Meg Champion, and I will hand over to Meg now.

**Megan CHAMPION:** Thanks, Leah. Thank you to the committee for this opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry today. I come before you today as both a creative professional and a regional Victorian who has firsthand experience of the challenges and opportunities within our cultural and creative industries. I grew up in Bendigo with a deep passion for classical music and dramatic arts. However, like many regional creatives I found that if I wanted to pursue formal training I had no choice but to leave my home and move to Melbourne. At 17 I was accepted into both the Victorian College of the Arts and Melbourne conservatorium. I chose Melba, completing four years of study, before undertaking a foundation year at VCA in dramatic arts. Whilst working as a singer, actor and children's entertainer I trained in make-up artistry and hairdressing to sustain myself, eventually building a career backstage in theatre, film, TV and fashion. But this journey was not an easy one. Moving to the city at a young age placed me at significant disadvantage compared to my city-based peers. I had to juggle multiple jobs to afford rent, food and study expenses without local support networks or mentors. The industry itself was unforgiving, unstable, underpaid and at times unsafe. It was unsustainable for me. Eventually I transitioned into training, curriculum design and copywriting before starting a family.

After 20 years in Melbourne I returned to Bendigo intending to re-enter the workforce after parental leave. Then the pandemic hit. Like so many in our industry I was faced with an uncertain future. The creative sector had shut down, and as a mother I had no viable career prospects. The reality is that creative industries often pay less, and women in the sector are paid even less than men, which made the decision for me to stay home while my husband worked an economic necessity rather than a choice. It was during this time that I joined the incubator program at Emporium Creative Hub. Initially my project aimed to highlight the importance of the creative arts industry. However, I quickly realised that nearly all my fellow participants were women facing similar struggles: mothers and creatives with no career prospects in a post-pandemic world. This shifted my focus to advocating for women's voices and storytelling within the creative sector.

The impact of the incubator was profound. Within two years I secured funding from Creative Victoria and the City of Greater Bendigo alongside \$200,000 of in-kind support to produce the *Women of Gold* project, an exhibition of artworks and a short film that was also showcased on the iconic Bendigo sign for International Women's Day. For the project I conducted interviews with over 50 diverse women across various sectors including STEM, business, law, community and government. Their stories influenced the artwork created by six local artists and were represented in the film. This cross-industry collaboration had expansive reach and impact. The project resonated deeply within our community, and its ripple effects still continue. Six female creatives, three who were artists in the *Women of Gold* project and three others who came to the launch event that were inspired by my journey, went on to complete the incubator program and launch their own successful community projects. This highlights the immense value of the incubator program and the collaboration which I believe is crucial to the sustainability of the creative sector.

Addressing the terms of reference (1), (2) and (4), the loss of funding for the incubator program is devastating. If federal funding is inadequate, state resources must compensate, often leaving regional and rural areas underfunded. Bendigo is a major tourist destination, attracting visitors who come for our cultural institutions like the Bendigo Art Gallery. It is vital that our creative community remains sustainable, not only to retain this economic benefit but also for the social and health benefits that the arts provide to our wider region.

Addressing term of reference (5), we must rethink how the creative sector is engaged and utilised. Creativity is not just an activity or a personality trait; it is a skill, a way of thinking that allows us to problem-solve, innovate and tell stories. Artistry is how those solutions are communicated, whether through film, music, dance or visual art. Creativity is not exclusive to the arts; it is essential to all industries. If we recognise this, we can integrate creative workers into policymaking, education and business innovation. However, I question whether policies like *Revive* adequately value the creative process, the ideation that precedes the finished product. Too often funding models prioritise tangible outcomes over the development of ideas. If we truly want a sustainable creative industry, we must invest in the three Ps: the person, the process and the product. This means supporting creatives not just in production but in education, incubation and cross-industry collaboration. Pillar 3 of the *Revive* policy, 'Centrality of the artist', addresses this, but still within the context of the creative industry. The creative sector has the power to influence industries beyond our own. We can shift societal norms, drive policy change and shape education and technology, but to do this we need creative minds in decision-making spaces on boards, committees and within government. AI can generate content, but it cannot create ideas. Only humans can. The more innovative and creative our thinking, the more valuable our contributions to every sector will be. The creative industry connects and influences all other industries. Without it there is no storytelling of our past, no reflection of our present and no vision of our future. The contribution of creative workers must be recognised not only in terms of economic output but in the broader influence we have on society.

In closing, I urge the committee to consider how cultural, policy and funding structures can better support creative workers, including regional, like all of us here today, not just through finished products but by investing in people, ideas and cross-industry collaboration. I hope to see more opportunities for the creative sector to contribute to inquiries beyond this one, including those focused on mental health, women's health, education and technology. The creative industries have a profound role to play in shaping a more equitable and innovative society. Thank you for your time and for recognising the importance of our voices in this conversation.

**The CHAIR:** Wonderful. Thank you so much, Megan. We will go to members for questions now, and I will kick off. Something that has come through really clearly in these hearings is this feeling that the state government has not delivered the funding required to support the arts and creative industries, and particularly for smaller organisations like your own in regional areas, that is felt even more, being out in the regions. In your view, what would an ideal grant system look like for the Bendigo Theatre Company? Obviously we hear about the sporadic and unreliable nature, and not knowing when grants are going to open and if you are even going to get them at all. What would be a system for you that would work?

**Vern WALL:** Look, I think the thing that we find with the performing arts – and of course we are mainly focusing on the performing arts, but we believe that all the arts industry is equally important. But with the performing arts area, a lot of it focuses on specific grants that might deliver certain equipment or opportunities for training and so forth. But one area where we are really struggling, and it has come through from what Conor said, is we are noticing that it is becoming more difficult to put on the larger productions where we can engage our whole Bendigo community, where we can have our creative young people and older ones engaged in a

musical production, for example. In the last eight to 10 years the costs roughly have increased by 80 to 100 per cent, and the only way it appears now that we can actually balance our books is as well as having our volunteers provide all their time to create the production, we then have to create fundraising opportunities to get additional funds. So if there was a funding arrangement where perhaps a regional theatre company could say, 'We're putting on this particular production. It's going to cost us' – and I will tell you that for us to put on a production in Ulumbarra is in excess of \$100,000 – 'to put on a production like that.' We will give you some funding that could either be for you to provide families that are not able to go to the theatre with tickets, or you could provide us with funds to say, 'We will provide some of the theatre costs,' for example. They would be really tangible, really beneficial projects for us so that when we then come to make our decision about what show we are going to put on and the budget that we set for it, we then can feel confident that we are going to be able to achieve the actual balanced figure. For a long while – and I have been involved with the performing industry for a long time, particularly performing arts – there has been a perception, and I may be wrong, but it is that the arts industry must be self-sufficient. And that is not really fair. I do not believe that we have a level playing field across all the areas. We understand where that pressure is coming from, because we are an economy and a system where we have to make all of our funding relatable, but it has been noticeable over the last 10, 15 years that there is more and more pressure on us and on theatres and everything that they must balance their funding. We do not deny the fact that when we, say, hire the theatre we are going to have quite large costs; they have to meet their bottom line too. It is just if there was something whereby we could look at ticketing or production costs or theatre costs or something like that as a grant procedure, that would enable us to continue doing what I think is really valuable work.

As far as companies like us go, community theatre, we are the grassroots of the performing arts. We create everything in a lot of senses. There are some that come through us and go on to professional ones, and with pride we look at people that have gone on to NIDA, WAAPA and the VCA, have gone overseas, have become creative choreographers. There are a large group of people who we can proudly say we have, through the performing arts in Bendigo, enabled to have strong, viable community careers, and some of them have become recognised internationally. It is a very proud thing for us to be able to do. I am hoping I have covered what you are talking about with regard to funding.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, that is very helpful.

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** And without that funding, the impact on us is that the only way we can meet these increasing costs is obviously by increasing our ticket prices. That then, conversely, reduces our audience numbers due to the lack of affordability for them to attend our shows, and we found that with our most recent major musical production – people just cannot afford the increasing ticket prices anymore.

**Megan CHAMPION:** Can I just add something to that as well. The problem with the additional fundraising, which is in most creative projects – it was definitely in mine; I had \$200,000 of in-kind support compared to the \$35,000 in actual funding that I had – is that if we do not get those additional funds, then we cannot produce events or works that are of such great quality and impact. And if we cannot do that, if we cannot give those quality and impactful performances, then that brings down the value of what we are giving to the community. Then the community thinks, 'What's the point of us spending our money or our time on the arts, because it is not very impressive'. It creates this cycle of bringing down the value of the arts industry. We feel forced to come up with those additional funds to create great pieces of art. There is the other option where people say, 'Why don't you make a smaller production?' Well, smaller productions do not get people to come along to see them. Smaller artworks or projects do not have the reach and the impact that ones that cost \$300,000 do. That is just the reality. It really does force us into a position where we feel like we have to come up with that additional funding ourselves.

**The CHAIR:** Okay. Thank you. That is very useful. Just another really quick one: we have been hearing a lot as well from other people that have appeared about this really vital social connection that the arts bring, and that is probably particularly important in regional areas. We had another member before talking about how quickly that will be recognised in sporting clubs and, you know, money being thrown at sporting clubs but how arts and creative industries do not receive the same love. Could you just tell us a little bit more about what you feel you bring to a regional community and the connections that you are able to foster through your work?

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** Yes, certainly.

**Vern WALL:** Can I cover it first?

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** Of course you can.

**Vern WALL:** In a small regional area, like Bendigo itself, we see ourselves as being forefront in being able to assist schools, other theatre groups, community groups, councils and other community organisations with expertise and advice. They often come to us and say ‘We’re putting on such and such’ or ‘We’re doing such and such’. We are able to be seen as that group that you go to talk to, to hire stuff from, to have us come and construct something or do some help with it and so on. So we have that sort of role, I suppose, as the premier theatre company in Bendigo, of training other people and so on. But at the same time we also are able to assist them in other ways, and oftentimes it is through this engagement with a whole diverse range of performers. We welcome anyone that wants to come and perform with us, and if you look at previous shows, you will see we have a really diverse range of people that come and want to perform and want to have some aspect of theatre. I just see that as being important, but you can add to that if you want.

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** We get many young performers through our doors, and not just for a one-off experience. They return time and time again because of the enjoyment they had the first time round et cetera, and of course they bring their families along as well. We are there as a support to them in every way, shape and form we can do that, but obviously at the end of the day we are just a bunch of volunteers ourselves. We do not have any expertise. As Vern mentioned, we get a lot of diverse groups through our doors, and we are just working on our own experiences and welcoming them as much as we can without any training that we have got ourselves, but any funding that may be out there to help us to engage more with our young performers would absolutely be outstanding.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will go to Ms Broad next.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Thank you very much, all of you, for your contribution to this inquiry, because it is very important – and part of the terms of reference is looking at regional Victoria’s share of national arts and cultural spending. Maybe, Leah, what are your thoughts on that from a very high level perspective? Do you think regional Victoria does receive a fair share of funding?

**Leah SERTORI:** Certainly not, Gaelle, and thank you very much for the question. I think it is very timely and relevant to think about the value of investing in the creative industries and arts for rural and regional Victoria in the context of the rapid iteration of artificial intelligence. When we think about our industry mix in regional and rural Australia, there are so many jobs that will become extinct that our young people would be moving into, so the work of organisations like Bendigo Theatre Company in developing people’s creative thinking, their critical thinking, their confidence and their ability to generate new ideas is hugely relevant for the survival of rural and regional communities and innovation in some of our more traditional industry segments.

I think it is far more likely for the Victorian or Australian government to support initiatives in our part of the world that are focused on mining, manufacturing, professional services or health care and overlook the relative return on investment in the creative industries. It is seen as a nice to have rather than a must-have, and that is something that we need to change, because investing in the creative industries is not icing on the cake. It is baking in the capacity for rural and regional Victorian communities to meet the challenges that we are facing in this new world and really employ a very unique set of critical thinking skills and an ability to work with people from very diverse backgrounds and be inclusive. They are not hallmarks of all community groups. The creative industries are by nature incredibly diverse, welcoming, inclusive spaces, and I think that they bring something unique to the mix there. When I take a look at the incubator programs or startup support for the creative industries in Melbourne, Gaelle, compared to what people can access here, it is markedly different. And I just note that Regional Arts Victoria is headquartered in St Kilda Road. It is really interesting that those sorts of peak organisations are not based in Bendigo, Ballarat, Geelong or Donald. It would be interesting to have a look at what are the opportunities there to move some of those core organisations out into the regions.

**Gaelle BROAD:** Can you just take us back – you mentioned the Emporium Creative Hub in Bendigo. How was it funded? How long for? You said funding ceased. Can you give us a bit more detail behind that?

**Leah SERTORI:** Certainly. The Emporium Creative Hub was an election announcement. It was at the time called ‘the creative heart of Victoria’, and I think it might have been announced around mid-2019. Then the plans became clearer in early 2020 and it opened in March 2020. The creative hub was funded through Creative

Australia and it was administered by ACMI, the centre for the moving image. The Emporium Creative Hub at its peak employed three people, and its remit was to foster a community of practice, to create a physical space that creatives could come to and co-work in together and to run some structured programming to help uplift the commercial viability of some new creative industries in the area. The hub was very successful in doing that. I think a couple of interesting things around this are that we have written very detailed reports about the social and economic impact of the Emporium Creative Hub and delivered them to ACMI and to Creative Victoria, and we have received absolutely no response and no questions. That lack of communication I think speaks for itself around any further curiosity about the return on investment that was made there. It would be really interesting to explore some more creative ways to help organisations like Bendigo Theatre Company and Emporium Creative Hub tell the stories of the social and economic impact of their work through video submissions. Rather than have us write really lengthy reports, have a look at the ways that people are engaging with the service and capturing their stories in a more digital format that is more akin to the way that we communicate now.

**Gaelle BROAD:** I appreciate these insights, and I am conscious of time.

**The CHAIR:** You can do one more.

**Gaelle BROAD:** That is fine. Thank you very much. Bendigo Theatre Company have got such a good track record of artists doing extremely well and, as you have said, going international. But we have also heard about the impact of COVID, and part of this inquiry is looking at the impact of COVID. We heard from previous witnesses that talked about youth, and the huge escalation in depression and anxiety caused by that. What are you seeing on the ground? We have also heard about basically some artists just dropping out altogether, that they will kind of be lost. What has been the impact of COVID in the industry, and what are you seeing in all ages, but young people as well?

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** Well, certainly all ages; we were, like everyone else, hugely impacted by COVID. It completely stopped everything we were doing. I think we had two productions ready to be staged at that point. The youth theatre were doing *Cats*. We ourselves were doing a production of *We Will Rock You*. Both productions came to a complete standstill, unfortunately. I mean, as grown-ups, the adults were able to deal with the impact of that, but unfortunately our younger people felt the impact of that more because of the work they had put in, the investment of time and love that they gave to that production, only for it to be taken away from them in such a sudden moment. Obviously we as adults knew what was going on but unfortunately the younger ones took that quite hard, and we did lose a lot of them. But when the time came round to restaging the production, the joy and the sense of achievement that those young people went through when that production hit the stage for the first time in front of a live audience was just remarkable and heartfelt.

But I guess the younger people were not the only ones. We did have adults who invested a lot of time and effort into the productions we were doing and unfortunately were also impacted by just the sudden withdrawal of everything that they had invested love into, what we were doing. But we are slowly seeing the resurgence of people coming back to the theatre again now and people reconnecting with the community, and I am just so happy that we are there as an outlet for them to express that and leave some of that sadness behind and bring some of the joy to the stage.

**Megan CHAMPION:** Can I just to add to that really quickly. I think it was back in 2021, possibly, but you will remember that obviously football kept going and many sports kept going. The AFL – I mean, we could not go without the AFL, could we? But I think people really understand the need for children especially, for youth, to play sport, and we all know how important that is. But I do not really think we understand the need and the impact for creative children, that it is not a nice-to-have; it is actually a necessity. It is something that they really need to do to be able to express themselves and it is about their mental health, it is about their whole wellbeing, and that is for all creative people. I think it is part of our national identity that we really understand that more from a sport perspective, but not from a creative perspective, and I think that is what needs to come across.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thanks, Ms Broad. We will go to Mr Welch.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you. Thank you for coming down, taking your time out to do it, and thank you for joining online. I know it is either reassuring or worrying that the things that you have mentioned are built on very, very strong, clear themes that we have heard from all witnesses coming through. So you are certainly not



alone in what you experience, and it has been very valuable for us as a committee to have it reinforced again and again and again so we can understand it. For the sake of time, I do not have a big range of questions. Really it is just the most practical one I can ask, which is: what is it structurally that governments could do that will remove the biggest obstacles for you, or what is the best bang for buck for you, in what we do next?

**Vern WALL:** Well, speaking personally from Bendigo Theatre Company's point of view, there are two little issues that we are currently discussing with our members and so on. One of them is the arts shed that we have, which is in the army drill hall. It is on two titles, so we are struggling our way through a lease arrangement with that. It also has created complications, I suppose, with regard to the electricity provision. We have recently had the building upgraded to electricity. We then found that that is going to increase dramatically the amount of costs because even though we are a non-profit organisation, Powercor view us as a medium-sized business, and we are not a medium-sized business. So things like that, where we can get local government to work with us to get through some of those regulations that cause us angst. We also know that with our electricity supply we also supply through our meter box the electricity for the toilet block that has just been provided. They will only provide one meter per title. We are on the same title. So that means we then have to go and read a supplementary meter and try and work out what we will ask council to give us back, because we are paying for their electricity at the thing. So little things like that, where the government can assist us to get through some pitfalls and so on, would be greatly appreciated.

**Richard WELCH:** Yes, and we did hear from another witness about how important the relationship with local government can be, and that if you had a facilitation and a sort of built-in advocacy system you might be able to smooth over some of those things as well.

**Vern WALL:** Yes. From the arts point of view too, I would love to see Bendigo – we have talked about it – creating an arts collective, where we have all of our various art institutions able to have a voice and able to speak for Bendigo. I think that would be really valuable. Anything else you want to add, Connor?

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** That is obviously something I am trying to work on at the moment, but yes, like you say –

**Vern WALL:** An arts alliance.

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** An arts alliance, yes: we have an umbrella organisation representing each of our organisations within Bendigo.

**Richard WELCH:** Thank you, gents. Thank you, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Welch. We will go to Ms Copsey.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you. I just have one for those in the room and one for those on the screen, and I will start here in the room. You have talked heaps about the benefits for people participating in the creative side, like the on-stage side and also a little about set creation and so on. I just wonder if you could touch on some of the technical ability that you produce, for people who are working behind the scenes and all that sort of thing, and also whether you branch out into your community in terms of suppliers that you would work with regularly – catering, all that sort of thing – if there are other benefits that you think you bring locally that we have not covered yet.

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** Certainly with every production there is a huge technical background that goes on behind, in producing the show, and as you touched on, there is set construction, design et cetera. Again, it is all volunteers, but the skills that they gain by coming along to help out with set construction are invaluable to them. We have, as I mentioned earlier, groups that get together on a Wednesday morning and a Saturday morning to come and help in our set construction and design and painting et cetera. I guess they come from maybe the retired age group –

**Vern WALL:** Older!

**Conor CUNNINGHAM:** and older. It is their opportunity to come together in a sort of men's shed-type environment. Again, they are bringing their skills and teaching our younger people tool use – for instance, how to operate power tools et cetera – and also just in set design and construction generally. We have people who

have come through our ranks and other avenues of that, such as audio and lighting design. Some of them have gone on to take up lighting and audio as a profession. We have one individual who is in high demand throughout the whole state and even interstate who started with us as a 12-, 13-year-old operating the lights and sound and now operates his own business, which is far beyond our imagination. But he is so generous with his time and efforts that he still keeps his connection to us with our shows, as large and small as they may be.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Fantastic. Thank you. I just want to come to something, Megan, that you spoke to in your opening remarks, which I have not heard too much from the witnesses that I have been present for at the hearings. I think it is a really crucial thing, which I wonder if you could expand on, and that is your experience, particularly as a woman – the impact that the precarity of creative industries employment has had in terms of the decisions you have faced, and whether you think that there are particular things that governments, state or federal, can do to support women and gender-diverse people in the arts to make it a more viable career.

**Megan CHAMPION:** Absolutely. I know that there is already a lot of that written into policy, but I guess it is part of that. The theme for International Women's Day this year is turning promises into progress, because a lot of it is in the policy but we are not seeing it in reality. I know that my experiences as a young person were an extremely long time ago, and it was a very different time back then – but unfortunately it is all still going on now. In regard to unsafe working conditions, that is definitely something that needs to be addressed. I think probably in my remarks as well what I was also speaking about is that we are actually the storytellers. We are the people who can make the change. So hearing stories from women – seeing it on our TV screens, reading it in books, seeing artworks about this subject matter – is important. I know that in the terms of reference we are talking about the ABC and SBS, and I do not really have the answers for that because that is not my expertise. But the TV shows that we are producing in Australia, are they telling the stories that we want to hear? Are we talking about reality? Are we showing reality? Because that is how we learn, that is how we progress – by telling the truth. So that is one side of it, hearing those stories.

The other part is what happens when women have families – it is more than a woman that has a family, usually. The creative industries, as we know, are already underpaid, the creative workers, and up the top, in leadership, it is male-dominated. We have a lot of curators and women that are directors of art galleries, but they are not the people that are leading at the top. Also, the structure of so many institutions, such as art galleries, for instance, is still stuck in the 1950s, where there are gallery exhibition openings or touring shows. I mean, how does somebody with a family do those things? It has not moved to modern times. We need to rethink how we can produce all different kinds of disciplines of artworks, how people can see those and how we can get those stories out but how it does not impact people's lives, families and livelihoods in a way that we are talking about with all other industries – flexible work options. At the Bendigo Theatre Company I am positive that you are still working over 12-hour shifts sometimes, especially leading up to productions. Why are we still having those types of policies necessary – because they are necessary within the creative industry? It is just not viable for people with families. We have understood that from a certain perspective within other industries, but for some reason, because creativity is a passion job and we do it for the love of it, it has not gone across to our industry.

**Katherine COPSEY:** Thank you.

**Leah SERTORI:** Can I build on that very, very briefly and just share a story – and I thank Megan and agree with everything Megan has just said. One of our colleagues and a graduate of the Emporium incubator program, Rhayven Jane, has just founded a community-based initiative called the glimmer room, and I would really encourage you to have a look at it on social media. The purpose of the glimmer room is to provide support for women who are victims of domestic violence in Bendigo, in our region, to create a safe space for them to come in and contribute to some artwork without needing to talk about their experience. It is a restorative practice, it builds community and it fosters a sense of community and wellbeing. But Rhayven has developed this as an entirely unpaid creative professional. Rhayven is receiving tremendous feedback from paid professionals in community health, in the justice system and in council saying, 'Rhayven, your work is really important and valuable, and we would also just acknowledge it's gifted at this stage.' That was a great question you asked about the lack of economic security for women in creative industries. We are seeing a lot of this across the whole spectrum – of people choosing to do very important grassroots community work, bringing their creative practice to the table and then not being paid for their work.

**Megan CHAMPION:** That was actually what my project was about also. It was about that exact subject, *Women of Gold*. Rhayven was actually in my project, and I was also unpaid for that project for the two years

that I worked on it. But it was really important to me and to the other artists involved. All the other artists were paid.

But once again I would answer this to the previous question: how can we make a change? One of them is access to education, and that is obviously something we are passionate about. But the other one is the funding structures. What happens when we apply for funding is (1) we do know if we are going to get it, so we are putting a lot of work into an application to try and get this funding, but (2) in order to get the funding, you need to have a project. You need to give a concept, an example of a project. All of the work that goes into that takes time, and then when you receive the funding, if you get the funding, you are only paid from when that funding starts. So that entire ideation process that comes behind that concept is not paid for. We used to have, built into funding structures, something called research and development, and that is not there anymore. That is what happens with projects like my project and like Rhayven's project – we put these out there because we know that they are important, and we will only get a small portion of the funding. Then we have to make of the rest of it ourselves, and that means us going unpaid.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much. That is right on 5, so it is all we have time for. We all really appreciate you appearing before us today in person and online. It was very, very valuable. That concludes the public hearing.

**Committee adjourned.**