

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the Cultural and Creative Industries in Victoria

Melbourne – Wednesday 12 March 2025

MEMBERS

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Richard Welch – Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Joshua Lowe, Co-Chief Executive Officer, and

Tim Stitz, Board Member, Theatre Network Australia.

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 all 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 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 live broadcast of these proceedings. I also welcome any other members of the public watching via the live broadcast.

To kick off we will get committee members to introduce themselves to you, starting with Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Katherine Copsey. I am a Member for Southern Metropolitan Region.

The CHAIR: Georgie Purcell, Member for Northern Victoria.

Richard WELCH: Richard Welch, Member for North-East Metro.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Evan Mulholland, Member for Northern Metro.

The CHAIR: And we might have some more members pop in at some point throughout the hearing.

Thanks 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 this hearing, and then transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, can you both please state your full names and the organisation you are appearing on behalf of.

Joshua LOWE: My name is Joshua Lowe. I am the co-CEO of Theatre Network Australia.

Tim STITZ: Hello. I am Timothy Stitz, otherwise known as Tim. I am a board member of Theatre Network Australia and also the executive producer and co-CEO of Back to Back Theatre based in Geelong.

The CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. We now welcome your opening comments but ask that they be kept to around 10 to 15 minutes to ensure plenty of time for questions.

Joshua LOWE: No problem. Thank you. I would also like to begin by acknowledging the lands that we are on, the lands of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people, and I pay my respects to their elders past and present.

As I mentioned, I am the co-CEO of TNA, Theatre Network Australia, and we are a leading industry development organisation for the national performing arts sector, prioritising small to medium organisations and independents. We have 650 members nationally, with a reach of over 5000 more performing arts workers through our communications and research. We service a wide range of the performing arts. It includes theatre, dance, circus, multi-arts, experimental and youth arts. And about 56 per cent of our membership are based here in Victoria, so just over half.

Victoria has long been regarded as the cultural capital of Australia. The performing arts are at the heart of this, shaping how we experience our cities and regions, attracting visitors and making Victoria one of the most livable places in the world. But this title was hard won and needs to be actively maintained. Without decisive action to address critical industry issues, we risk losing not only our standing as a cultural leader but also the vital industry that brings creativity, connection and economic activity to every part of the state.

At a federal level, Victorian artists, organisations and institutions have been highly successful in securing funding. As outlined in our submission, on average in the past decade, when looking at grant funding given by Creative Australia, Victoria has received a proportionally higher share of Creative Australia investment relative to its population, second only to the Northern Territory – that is, on average the Vic population over the last decade has been 25.7 per cent of the Australian population and has received 28.6 per cent of the funding, so that is 2.9 per cent higher. This success is seen across multiple funding streams. If we look at our Creative Australia four-year investment program, Victorian organisations make up a third of those securing four-year investment, and in the recent two-year investment pilot, Victorians make up half of the cohort of 12. In the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework, Victoria is home to a quarter of the organisations within that program. In ARTS8, the national training organisations, half have a base in Victoria, so that is four out of the eight. In project funding rounds, Victorian applicants continue to be highly competitive in securing federal support. In 2024, 40 per cent of the project grants to individuals and 32 per cent of project grants in organisations went to Victoria.

This success is a testament to the depth of talent, ambition and professionalism of Victorian creatives, but federal investment alone cannot sustain the sector. Without a strong state co-investment, the risk is that opportunities will diminish, organisations will struggle to survive and creative talent will be forced to leave. Despite our strength on the national stage, Victoria's per capita state investment in the arts has declined. Since 2017 state arts funding has not been indexed to inflation, leading to a real-term funding decrease of 22.8 per cent as of 2024. Compared to other states and territories, Victoria has the fourth lowest arts spend per capita in Australia at \$63 per capita. South Australia invests \$99 per capita. Investment in theatre is the third lowest in the country, and for investment in dance and circus, Victoria is dead last after every state and territory. Victoria's multi-investment organisations have shrunk in terms of investment amount and number of organisations funded, and there have been just two rounds of project investment since the beginning of the pandemic, when there used to be two a year. And the cap of \$20,000 per application is well below that of other states. In WA it is 80K. In the most recent announced round, the cap was \$5000 for creatives who had not previously been funded. These cuts damage our state's reputation and limit our sector's ability to provide creative experiences for all Victorians. They reduce career pathways for artists, drive creative professionals out of the state and weaken our ability to attract and retain audiences. In an increasingly competitive national and global landscape, Victoria cannot afford to fall further behind.

Arts and culture are not just a luxury. They are integral to Victoria's economy, tourism industry and livability. The creative industries, as you heard this morning, contribute \$40.5 billion to the Victorian economy and employ one in 11 workers, more than mining, utilities or agriculture. Melbourne's festivals, theatres and arts precincts drive tourism. In 2019 cultural visitors spent 2.5 times more than other tourists and live music alone contributes \$1.7 billion to the state economy annually, yet many venues are closing or struggling due to rising costs and inconsistent support. I want you to imagine Melbourne without Hosier Lane, without the arts centre, the NGV, the comedy festival, the Fringe Festival, concerts at Rod Laver, RISING lighting up the dead of winter, Fed Square alive with performances. Why would people visit the city? How would Melbourne be different to any other city? Beyond the economic impact, arts and culture shape our identity, create social cohesion and improve community wellbeing. A well-funded, thriving arts sector makes Victoria a better place to live, work and visit.

While the broader economy has rebounded since COVID-19, the arts sector has not. Artists and creatives have always faced financial precarity and were tentatively propped up by a system that was basically a house of cards that toppled over during the pandemic. Costs to produce and present work have now significantly increased. Many projects gain their return on investment from touring, but those costs have risen 30 to 50 per cent. A cost-of-living crisis means that while audiences are returning, ticket prices remain stagnant, limiting income. This is even more so the case in regional areas where willingness to pay is generally lower. Audience behaviours have also changed, and the sector is struggling to adapt. This includes higher risk aversion, particularly in regional areas, and late ticket buying. Audiences are also simply out of the habit of attending performances, with COVID acting as a circuit breaker.

Government investment has not only either reduced or stagnated, as I outlined earlier, but it is also unpredictable. The sector still does not have a funding calendar from Creative Victoria for 2025, and it never got one in 2024. The pandemic depleted the savings and income momentum of many creatives who worked project to project, and some organisations will have to spend reserves due to years of lost income. Because of this, TNA's research found that in 2024, 59 per cent of independent artists had considered leaving the sector and 33 per cent had taken active steps to do so. Reasons for leaving include burnout, lack of employment opportunities and financial unsustainability. Of course the arts will survive all this, but it is important to consider who survives and what kind of art. Public investment exists in part to ensure equity and access for creatives and audiences. When things get this difficult, the first people who are forced out are those from marginalised communities, from regional and outer metro and low-income earners. What we are left with is that only people with a certain amount of privilege and independent wealth can afford to make and engage with the arts, with everyone else shut out.

The arts are also an essential public service, just like health and education. Governments do not rely solely on market forces to deliver hospitals, schools and libraries; they invest in them because they are fundamental to a thriving society. Arts and culture are exactly the same. Government investment in the arts ensures that all Victorians have access to cultural experiences, just as they have access to health care and education. Communities who are underserved or under-represented are supported, just as they are in the health and education sectors, with long-term sustainability, growth and innovation ensuring that today's investment supports tomorrow's artistic and cultural investments and achievements. Like health and education, some parts of the sector require targeted investment to innovate, while others need stable, ongoing funding to ensure viability and access. This is not about handouts – it is about strategic investment that delivers economic, social and cultural returns for all Victorians.

Victoria has the opportunity to reclaim its position as Australia's cultural leader, but we must act now. Without increased and indexed state investment to match the federal investment, we risk losing our creative workforce as artists and professionals leave for other industries and other states, eroding our global reputation and making it harder to attract artists, investment and audiences and undermining our economy and tourism industry as the sector struggles to recover. TNA urges the Victorian government to increase its investment in the arts and ensure that Victoria remains a vibrant, creative and livable state for generations to come.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Did you have any opening remarks?

Tim STITZ: No. I stand behind that statement.

The CHAIR: Beautiful. There is plenty of time for questions. We will start with Mr Mulholland.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Cool. Thank you. Thanks for your presentation today. Could you just expand on – you mentioned it before and in your submission as well – the impact of the state government's lack of investment in the performing arts. You mentioned that funding is not indexed, leading to about a 22 per cent decline, and that Victoria has the fourth lowest arts spend per capita. What kind of impact does that have on the theatre scene in Victoria?

Joshua LOWE: As I mentioned towards the end, a lot of our sector relies on the investment from government to function. It is not purely driven by the market. There are of course really successful mainstream, commercial ventures that do not need public investment, but if we are looking to ensure that Victorians have access to a breadth of opportunities across all art forms of all sizes across the whole state, then of course there needs to be investment to do that. When you see investment stagnation or decline, things start going missing, so certain communities will start missing out, certain artforms will start missing out. You will then start to see an erosion of the sector, because our sector is a really complex ecology that supports each other. For instance, most of the workforce are actually independents. They are sole traders who are then engaged on a project basis by other sole traders or by organisations. If there is not enough work to sustain that workforce, then they will start leaving, the bigger players start struggling and then the workforce starts collapsing. We really rely on all parts of the ecology to be supported, and if that investment stays low or is stagnating, you will start to see some of that decline and collapse. Then I guess what we see are that the only things left are things that are financially viable on their own, which is the really big end of town – your commercial ventures, your concerts at the stadium and that kind of thing.

Tim STITZ: I would just add that I know anecdotally but also from Live Performance Australia, who look after a wider area, not just the not-for-profit sector, that the commercial area are finding, particularly in technical and production areas, that there are huge deficits in their workforces and the ability to staff those very big events. If all goes well for them, they return really handsome profits, obviously for investors but for the state. Just think of examples like Harry Potter, which brought huge economic stimulus to the state in terms of locals and people travelling to see that production.

I just want to back up what Josh said. There are some organisations that are funded through Creative Victoria, through the government, that do receive the indexation, but so far that is only the NPAPF, the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework, organisations. Back to Back, where I work, is one of those organisations. We have just joined that framework, which used to be the old majors framework – the Melbourne symphony and the Melbourne Theatre Company are both part of that framework. It is great that it is becoming more diversified as a framework. There is some sort of CPI increase for those companies. The way that framework works is that it is through the cultural ministers of each state and territory working with the federal cultural minister, and it is a co-investment model. So there is a pressure because other state jurisdiction and the fed are indexing, whether it is CPI or it is an agreed indexation per year.

What is tricky – and I have been part of other organisations that are four-year funded or are not necessarily multiyear funded – is where there is not that indexation. That really does speak to this stagnation of funding levels, but then it is a net decrease. It does become harder. We have all experienced cost-of-living pressures that are economic in particular – we could talk in great detail about that if you want to know more. It just becomes too hard for those organisations to survive, and particularly we are often talking about micro organisations. They are called small to medium arts organisations, but if you compare them to other sectors, they are micro. Sometimes there will be an equivalent full time of 2½ to five people, so they are really, really small businesses, which as Josh said, have a huge impact over the wider creative industries. Again, I come back to Back to Back. We are a world-renowned theatre company that is doing fantastic work both in our community in Geelong but also we went to the La Biennale in Venice last year and won this amazing award. The company would not exist, though, without the freelancers, the technicians and the staff that we have to build up when we go touring. We have to build up tours. It would not exist without them.

Again, I just want to accentuate that it is a very, very fine ecology, and it is different and similar to, I suppose, for-profit enterprises, but it does require a strategic investment. I have just been in Adelaide for a week. It was extraordinary. Obviously this is a pretty big time for that state, but it is bursting at the seams, with tourists particularly. Some are coming for motorsports – they cannot get over the fact they lost the grand prix, I think. You have WOMAD, you have the festival, you have the Fringe festival. People from all over the country and some internationals are going to that state. I can see the benefits to that state. Victoria does have those examples, absolutely, but that is why it requires the investment.

Evan MULHOLLAND: I think, Tim, you would be well placed to talk to one of the key points of the terms of reference, which is regional Victoria's share of national cultural funding. How can we better work together at the state and federal levels to support, particularly, regional Victoria?

Tim STITZ: I think Back to Back at times has benefitted and at other times been excluded, because Geelong is not always classified as regional and sometimes is closer to outer suburban. We could argue about that, but it is what it is, really, in terms of the classifications. I think it is a really encouraging step, though, that companies like Back to Back – and there are other examples in regional and remote Australia – have been funded now through the partnerships framework. I am thinking of Marrugeku in Perth. There is Artback NT, which is in the NT. Ilbijerri Theatre Company joined that framework in 2021 along with us, and apart from Bangarra, they were the first First Nations self-determined company in the framework.

I mean, coming back to your point around, particularly, regional and rural Victoria, we are right next door to the Geelong Arts Centre, and that has been an amazing investment. It was shovel ready obviously when all the stimulus around the pandemic happened. It is terrific, and that is a real *pièce de résistance*. It is something the state should be very proud of. It is more like, if you do not know, Arts Centre Melbourne; it is a statutory body of the government and it is funded that way. Most other sorts of smaller towns or regional centres have council-run, privately run or even not-for-profit-run venues. Of course the infrastructure needs to be maintained and invested in from time to time, but what I would like to see and what I think needs a more strategic and really well thought through response is our federal government and our state government working towards programs

and programming that support those practitioners and that support people in the regions and audiences being able to engage in the creative industries, and that is also as an audience. I think at times we can go, 'I'm not really into the creative industries.' But it is like, 'Well, do you listen to music? What music do you listen to? What books do you read?' Not everyone has to love classical ballet, but I would wager a lot of the community's kids are learning ballet or are doing dance, and they are also doing sport. It is part of this.

I was going to touch on education later – and I would be happy to talk about it – but it is not just health; it is education and it is thinking about multiple levels of participation for our communities. It has not always been supported well enough regionally and in rural areas. There have been programs that I am aware of that bus kids to Arts Centre Melbourne. That is fantastic; kids should have the experience of coming and seeing what metro kids can see any time of the year. But those communities should also have the ability to see things and to go to their local theatre to see things, whether that is music, dance, circus or whatever it is.

There are shining examples, I reckon. I think Albury–Wodonga is a special case because it straddles two state governments and federal. It has got the Flying Fruit Fly Circus there, so there is this hotbed of the circus community there, and a lot of those young people come from Fruities down to NICA. That is another one that has been through a bit of a time recently, in terms of its own funding and stability, but that is something that Victoria should be hand on heart, I think, really proud of and investing in, because that is the pathway. Those young people will go from Fruities to NICA or they might join Circa, which is in Brisbane, Queensland, or Gravity & Other Myths in Adelaide or they might go across to Cirque du Soleil. They might also be working as independents; they might start a company in Victoria that we do not know of yet. But without those pathways there, that is not possible. I just think that community in particular is so lucky to have those training institutions and those companies. HotHouse Theatre is another one which is based there, and it does fantastic, really interesting multi art form programming, particularly around theatre but also community programs, participation and workshops. You need all of that.

Evan MULHOLLAND: Great.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Mr Mulholland. Ms Copsey.

Katherine COPSEY: Thank you. Thanks very much. You touched briefly before on the need for a spread across capital expenditure on physical venues and so on versus programmatic funding. I would love you to expand a little bit more on that. But also I am really interested in the benefits of both ongoing organisational funding that is spread over a number of years versus project-based funding, the benefits and negatives of both of those, what kind of spread there is and whether there are trends in the way the funding in Victoria is going through those streams that you would like to see changed or improved.

Joshua LOWE: I will touch on your first question around infrastructure and venues versus programming. If you look particularly in Victoria over the last decade or so at the investment in arts performance venues, the graph looks like this: it just goes up. We have got significant investment in the arts precinct in Southbank happening, which is partly driving that, but we have to make sure that those incredible venues are not empty. We have to think about what goes in those venues, what goes on the stages and what gets put on the walls. Unless we want it to be exclusively interstate and international artists, we need to make sure that people can have sustainable careers and that they have the resources to make that art here in Victoria. I imagine it is very attractive for a government to build a building and cut a ribbon – I would be delighted if I got to cut a ribbon – but it is not as exciting to invest in something that remains hidden until the performance or the exhibition happens. I think it is really important to have a balance of both. As Tim was saying, particularly in somewhere like regional Victoria, we want to ensure that the venues are connected with the community, that those local creatives can make and present work in their community, but also that that venue is resourced so that it can do proper audience development, it can reach out to audiences, it can make them feel welcome and it can put things in place to let local audiences know that what is going on is for them and is something that is of interest to them. We often see that being a struggle for the sector – that audience development is kind of no-one's job. You cannot just put a poster on the wall and expect people to come. It does not work like that.

To your second question, around ongoing multiyear investment versus project investment, for organisations to be sustainable they have to have that core investment to know that they can just keep the lights on. That multiyear investment a lot of time purely goes to operational costs, paying your staff wages, your overheads, that kind of thing, just keeping the lights on, and then other streams of income – the earned income, the

ticketing income, other project grants and philanthropy – will contribute to making sure that that organisation can put on shows or exhibitions or what have you. That is where project investment comes in. It not only allows organisations who have got the investment to run their operations, it means that they can then actually do something with that investment. You can capitalise on that further and expand your reach and the amount of work you are producing. But for independents that project investment is their only thing; they do not have that multiyear investment. If you are an independent wanting to put on your own show or do a development, you really rely on project funding. That is essential not only for the ecology and to see different scales of work but because you do not become the artistic director of Chunky Move or Melbourne Theatre Company overnight; they all had independent careers where they built up their body of work and their experience. Any artist that runs any of our major institutions started as an independent. That is where project grants are really essential.

Finally, the project grants in particular and other strategic initiatives incentivise artists and organisations to address the things that Creative Victoria and the state government see as priorities. If we want to ensure that our First Peoples have access to the arts and are included in our sector, that needs specific investment. If we want to make sure that deaf and disabled people and people from other disadvantaged communities and regional Victorians – that is where project grants and those different initiatives from Creative Victoria can say, ‘Hey, you can have this extra amount of money, but you have got to do something in regional Victoria’ or ‘We want you to engage with this particular underserved community.’ That really helps the sector move in directions that are beneficial to the community.

Katherine COPSEY: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Copsey. I will go next. You obviously in your opening remarks shared some statistics from surveys about retention in arts and creative industries. Could you tell us a little bit more about the impact that that is having on the sector, with people either considering moving away or actively doing so, and in the future what the outcome will be if that trend continues?

Joshua LOWE: There is a stat from the *Artists as Workers* report. I think it is half of creatives earn less than \$10,000 a year from their creative work. Let us all imagine what it would be like to live on \$10,000 a year. That would not even cover part of my rent. What we are seeing is that artists are now having to make the choice between doing the thing that they have spent years and years training for and working on – the thing that they are passionate about, the way that they contribute to community – and paying the rent and having a sustainable career. When we see investment, particularly that project investment, stagnate or disappear, and be really unpredictable at the moment here in Victoria, independents do not know when the next grant round is coming. They might be like, ‘I’m going to put a show on at Melbourne Fringe in October, but is there going to be funding for that between now and then?’ Who knows? It puts a lot of financial precarity on the sector, a lot of unpredictability and then a lot of stress. It drives mental ill health, so we start to see people make the decision: ‘Am I going to keep doing this? How long am I going to keep doing this? Is it going to get better?’ Then, as we have seen in our statistics, they decide to leave. They train and go to other industries. A lot of people might become teachers. In dancing people go to things like physio. They use their transferable skills to then retrain and go elsewhere.

Then what we see is the ecology shrink, the diversity of what is on offer shrink, and that starts to have a roll-on effect to the rest of the sector. What if Melbourne Fringe does not have any independent artist programming, because they have all gone? Then we might lose the Fringe. That is a big call. That probably will not happen, but the Fringe will be diminished. Every time a larger organisation goes to cast a show to put a tour together, there are not enough artists or technicians or production workers to do that, so they have to change how they operate and maybe make things smaller. That then reduces their revenue and reduces their audience reach, and it keeps escalating. Things just start shrinking, and you will get to a point where it starts collapsing. An example is in Tasmania: when Mona Foma finished and Dark Mofo paused for a year, that created a huge gap in employment for a lot of the sector. Their jobs were based on a kind of annual cycle of projects and festivals, and they were like, ‘I can’t stay in Tasmania if there’s now a three- or six-month gap in my plan.’ So they leave. I am from Tasmania. I left because of that very reason.

We are very fortunate in Victoria. We have had a history of really great investment and an identity as the cultural capital. But it is like a plane when the engine is turned off. It is going to keep going, but it is going to start going down. It will not burst into flames and drop out of the sky, but it will decline.

Tim STITZ: It is gliding. It is fragile. If it is not cared for, looked after and maintained, that will begin to happen. I think the pandemic, like in a lot of industries, did create that effect, and people also took the time to go, 'I don't know if this is worth it. I'm doing so much unpaid labour as an artist, even as an arts worker.' If you are an administrator, you might be in a small company that, for better or for worse, is underfunded. But you still put in 60-hour weeks or 50-hour weeks, and you are not getting paid for all of that or you might be getting paid four days a week as opposed to full time. People are happy to do this, or have been happy to do it, but I think in recent times that is why we have lost people. Of course more people want to be an artist or want to be an actor than probably can make a living in it. That is known. But what we have witnessed, certainly from independent artists and arts workers, is that that has spread even further afield. It is producers, administrators and managers that know they can make more, 'I'll go and work in a tertiary institution. I'll go to my local council. I can earn twice or 1½ times what I'm currently earning.'

Joshua LOWE: If you are looking for a marketer or a comms manager at the moment, good luck to you. Anyone who has got any level of skill can just go to another sector and earn double.

Tim STITZ: A lot of stage managers and production managers went off and worked in other sideline industries or went off and worked in other operational roles. They love the arts and the creative industries, but actually they are making a judgement call for themselves. Is it worth what you said in terms of their mental health, their families and what support they need to provide, what money they can earn? It does then come down to the fact: who is privileged enough to work in the arts? Something again that I am aware of in Geelong, and Back to Back being founded in the northern suburbs of Geelong, which we know is Corio, Norlane – it is a post-industrial place. When the Ford factory closed, that whole city needed to look to different sectors and it has been very innovative in a lot of instances. Businesses have flourished, some have failed. It is the same thing now – the whole region is trying to change its identity around the creative industries as one of the knowledge sectors.

We are hearing, both in terms of the data and the reporting that Theatre Network Australia does, that it has never been more fragile, particularly for the independent freelance sector and some of those small to medium companies who are just finding it harder than ever to survive, and some have crashed or they have had to down tools.

The CHAIR: We did hear from other witnesses about, I guess, this almost like glorified struggle of artists as part of the experience. Then obviously right now coupled with other challenges like cost of living and housing it is creating this absolute avalanche that is coming down on certain sectors and industries resulting in the retention problems that exist right now. We heard from a council, for example, that spoke about the need to have this intersectional lens over it to recognise the other areas like support with housing and places for artists to go, reducing some of the costs that come with their work. Do you think that the government is doing enough to see the intersection of issues right now? What can they do to support people that are living in this moment? Does that make sense?

Joshua LOWE: Yes. Artists, like any other Victorian citizen, are not immune to all the other effects – the rising cost of groceries; rents in inner-city Melbourne, if you live there, are becoming really unmanageable – so it is not just the lack of investment that is driving the precarity. It is lots of other more macro factors. In fact we had a joke in the group of arts peak bodies: should we stop advocating for arts funding and jump in with the housing people, because that might actually deliver some really tangible benefits to artists in making sure that they can still live in the city. You are starting to see in bigger cities like Melbourne and Sydney where once upon a time all the artists lived in the CBD where it was cheap, where things were being converted, and it really made the CBD alive. Now they all live in Brunswick, but the increasing costs and gentrification just keeps pushing them out. They are making work where they live, so you will start to see a shift in what the inner city looks like.

The short answer is yes, there are other things that government, both federal and state, can be doing to alleviate the costs and burdens of artists, just like any other Australian person. But also what we have wrote about and recommended in our submission to *Creative State* consultation last year is better communication and collaboration between government portfolios. I outlined really extensively in that submission how the arts contribute to mental health, to education, to social cohesion, but there is very little communication, collaboration and co-investment that happens between those portfolios. It is very much like, 'Well, this is our bit; that your bit.' So we think there could be a lot of advantage but also a lot of cost efficiencies that could be

driven by seeing those portfolios work together inside government but also then to connect with the sector and to feed each other. I think that is a big opportunity, and you know the sector has been calling for that in every jurisdiction for years and years. It is quite challenging, but –

Tim STITZ: It is especially challenging when you then try and weave in a federal response. You obviously have *Revive* as an amazing go at a policy. It needs a second go, just like *Creative State* in Victoria is having multiple iterations and is constantly trying to improve on that intent. I think also, just coming back to some of these questions of regional and rural – it is the council engagement. It has been harder because some councils are very good at integrating the co-arts or creative industries connections in terms of community hubs or libraries – libraries are often where a lot of this happens – but it does require that organisation or that working together.

I was going to make the point before that I really want to back up Regional Arts Victoria's submission. I know they have appeared as a witness earlier at this inquiry, but I think they are doing some of the work in terms of linking that infrastructure and then the programming of local hubs and nodes with what happens across regions. We have certainly seen in the Greater Geelong region and in all the LGAs around it a huge exodus of people coming from a metropolitan Melbourne situation to living in Greater Geelong or Golden Plains or Surf Coast – wherever it is. Some of the best projects that I have seen in recent times have come out of a strategic intent and then where the Victorian government has actually co-funded this. There is G21, which is an advocacy alliance of all the local LGAs in Geelong, I am sure you are aware of them. They did a great piece of work in writing a creative industry strategy. They got consultants to do it; it is a great strategy. But without that strategy then being put into action, it was just a strategy that sat on the shelf. I am really pleased to see, though, that Geelong Arts Centre and a couple of other advocates brought it to government coming out of the pandemic. That money was put out on the table by the state government. Regional Arts Victoria won the tender, and they created this project called Making Change, which I have seen do fantastic things in terms of linking independent artists and arts workers, groups and collectives across all of that G21 region. They have had reference groups and have created really excellent community building.

To me – as an example of going, 'Well, there's some infrastructure here' or 'There's a grant there' – it is just sharing knowledge and sharing connections. It is not saying, 'We can't do all of this.' It is quite grassroots. It is saying, 'We'll provide some of the framework and then you go ahead and do it,' because artists and creative industries people are very good at finding those connections, and they are crying out and just hungry for them. It is really a very small amount of investment, and I think Regional Arts Victoria are looking for further investment to continue that project with the G21. It needs federal government, it needs local council and it needs the state to come on board. It is in everyone's interests because of the way the funding and each of those communities relies on different levels of government to service them.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. I will go to Mr Welch.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thanks, guys, for coming in. As a failed former professional musician, I understand the struggle – I do. One thing you said that struck me – I think you said we have lost the crown as the cultural capital of Australia. Is that your view?

Joshua LOWE: I do not know if we have lost it yet, but Adelaide is certainly coming for it, as is Sydney.

Richard WELCH: I would presume that, in your view, it is the funding that is the catalyst or the difference in that, and that if we do not arrest that, we will lose it. How soon would we lose it?

Joshua LOWE: I mean, how long is a piece of string? That is difficult to answer because it relies on a huge number of factors, one being: how long will people hold on? I cannot answer that. But if you look at some of the data of per capita investment, in South Australia the line is just kind of along the top, and you see the impact of that investment – like Tim was saying about what is happening right now in Adelaide, the amount of activity that is happening, the amount of tourism that that is driving and the identity of South Australia being the place for that kind of elevation. As I said, there will not be a plane-falling-out-of-the-sky moment; it will be a very gradual decline.

Richard WELCH: But gravity will have its day.

Joshua LOWE: Exactly. It will just be a really slow and probably invisible departure of a lot of the workforce, of organisations maybe shrinking their programming and then maybe at some point deciding, ‘Well, that’s it; we’ll shut up shop.’ But as I said in my opening address, the arts will never stop. They will not disappear, because of course in the end there are profitable commercial ventures but also there are people with independent wealth and privilege that can just fund it themselves and make it themselves. But the richness and the diversity and the breadth and the scale, that is what will disappear.

Tim STITZ: I think the funding and investment is one of the key levers that the government can do in terms of ensuring that that continues. I speak to colleagues across the country, and there are times we always think, ‘Oh, the grass is greener in your patch,’ or they look to us and go, ‘Look what’s happening there; that’s really exciting.’ All of us probably look to Tasmania with the MONA effect and try to replicate it in certain jurisdictions and perhaps unsuccessfully. I think the thing that Victoria has been so good at, particularly Melbourne as the capital city, has been how multifaceted our creative industries are – what Josh illuminated in terms of independent art workers and artists, and there is quite a good small to medium companies band as well, which of course needs better support, I think. There is quite a good majors group. You then look at the big institutions, like what is happening at the moment with the NGV – I think they are crown jewels in our state that we should be proud of and that we look to, creating a huge amount of stimulus. The current exhibition is I think breaking lots of records. Just anecdotally, I know if a family member mentions a show or an art exhibition or a band they went and saw, I go, ‘Something’s getting a bit further out, outside of perhaps just the creative industries bubble.’ I still think we are ahead, but it does require that maintenance. It requires care, and it requires I think what you are doing in terms of asking the questions and going, ‘How can we be pulling the right levers and making the strategic choices to invest where it is going to have excellent impact?’ That impact of course we want to be economic, but we also want it to be social. We want it to help communities. I think of –

Richard WELCH: Actually, just for time – thank you for your answer – I have got two questions left. One can have a very short answer; the next one is slightly longer. Is there any scenario you can imagine under which we have a sustainable arts industry without government funding?

Joshua LOWE: No, not to have a diverse industry where there is equitable access.

Richard WELCH: No is good. The other one is a slightly different one. Given the dependency on government funding and given dependency on grants, is that having an effect of effectively corrupting the intent of the artists in order to tick boxes to get the grant? Because the best way to make tedious art is to lace it with ideology or make it serve two masters and things like that. Is that a phenomenon in Victoria?

Joshua LOWE: I would not say so. We have a peer-assessed, arms-length model of grant giving here in Victoria, as there is at Creative Australia, where, as Claire Febey spoke about this morning, there are industry experts brought in to assess grants. There is a big pool, and they change over quite a lot. As I mentioned, there are certain rounds of grant funding that are for certain things, and you might be a more competitive applicant if you address certain criteria of our state strategy or if you are addressing an underserved group. I would not say that those are limiting scope or creativity. But what they are doing is creating equity. We are looking at the data going, ‘What regional communities or what demographic communities at this point are historically underserved or underengaged, and how can we fix that? How can we make sure that the door is open for them?’

Richard WELCH: I am not questioning the merits of that at all, but that must have an effect on how an artist presents in that, ‘Well, I was going to do this, but if I just do it slightly this way, then I will get the grant.’ That has to be a factor, doesn’t it?

Tim STITZ: I think it sometimes is a factor, but generally my experience of being on assessment panels is when someone is reaching to make a project fit because of what the guidelines are, they are not funded. There is still a huge amount of unfunded excellence. I was going to make this point federally. You will know the statistics better, Josh, but in terms of what we get from Creative Australia from the federal government in terms of arts funding, Victoria is so well represented in both what is funded and what is unfunded excellence. What to me signifies the strength of the creative industries in this state in particular is that this is where a lot of artists and arts workers live. There are more on the ground – there are more artists per capita than other places.

That has that effect, but I mean, I would just say that art has always been political. You can like or loathe anything, like a piece of music or a play. I think where art becomes dogmatic or didactic and where that is sniffed in those kind of reviews, it is not funded because it is by its nature divisive or becomes kind of propagandist, certainly nothing that I am seeing. You know, the best pieces of art – and you know, again I can only speak to my own experience. At Back to Back we just try and make the very best art. Some will argue that it is political, but it really is that we are trying to make the best and engage people in I suppose the humanism of theatre and trying to provoke sometimes, challenge sometimes but also go, ‘What is our shared humanity here?’ That is what has had impact, and I can see the impact locally and then nationally and internationally certainly in my experience working with the company.

Richard WELCH: Thank you, Chair. Thank you. Thanks for the answer.

The CHAIR: I think Ms Copsey just had one more question.

Katherine COPSEY: I was hoping – I was just looking at your full submission to Creative Victoria, and I thought some of your key messages seem to have a theme around developing access for young people and then developing a pipeline of talent. I was wondering if you could take us through some of the key needs that you see that need to be included in the next phase of the strategy but also funded.

Joshua LOWE: Yes, and I think that has been really well heard by Creative Victoria. I heard Claire Febey this morning mention that that was one of the key takeaways that they got from their consultation with the sector and with the community. I guess from my perspective children and young people in and of themselves are citizens and deserve equal access and engagement with arts and culture just like adults, so we need to ensure that when we are looking at our strategy and our investment that that includes offerings for them. They are not just people that are waiting to become adults that then consume art; they are in and of themselves cultural citizens.

But also our children and young people are really key to our sector in terms of the future of our workforce development and our audience development. When you are a young person is often the time when you fall in love with the arts, when you go to things for the first time, and particularly if you are from a remote location or you are from a low-income family, it can be really challenging. So sometimes the only time you experience something is through your school or if a program is really heavily subsidised and the barriers are kind of removed.

I guess what we tried to emphasise in our submission is that there are things that the state government can do through its policies, both financial and not, that can help remove some of those barriers and capitalise on some of the opportunities. For instance, dance is the third most engaged-in physical activity I think after swimming and soccer. There are between I think 1000 and 1200 dance schools operating in Victoria. There are huge amounts of young people dancing, but then what we know is as soon as they turn 18, it drops off a cliff, and there is little to no connection between being a dancer as a child and then going to the theatre to see dance as an adult. We are calling on the strategy to look at things like that to find strategic, intelligent ways to connect where people are naturally engaging with art and then to fill the gaps to help particularly children and young people engage better and have better access, I guess.

Katherine COPSEY: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Ms Copsey. That is about time. Thank you so much for appearing before us today, for your submission and for answering our questions. We really, really appreciate it. That concludes the public hearing.

Witnesses withdrew.