

ACT 2025-26 Budget Submission

Introduction

One of Australia's most successful playwrights, David Williamson, argues that the survival of Australian theatre lies with small-scale independent enterprises, particularly as mainstream and government-subsidised theatres become more risk-averse and less collaborative. The Mill Theatre at Dairy Road was established in late 2022 precisely to address these shortcomings in the ACT.

The current government-funded live performance companies in the ACT fall short. The ability, vision, and skill to foster a thriving theatre ecosystem are missing. The overwhelming emphasis on arts administration and arts administrators at the expense of experienced producers has seriously diminished the opportunities for these companies to fulfil their purpose. Their contribution and these attitudes actively hinder the Government's laudable aim to make Canberra the cultural capital of the nation.

Against a challenging environment, no additional funding should be allocated to any ACT arts venue unless strict conditions of artistic engagement and excellence are applied. The government would serve the community, and its own goals, better by using its available levers to require these companies to engage in high-quality co-productions—not with amateur groups, but with accomplished practitioners who can elevate the standard of local productions.

It is commendable that Canberra has such a vibrant amateur theatre scene, but if we are to build a cultural capital, enthusiasm is no substitute for professionalism and imported talent is no substitute for home grown excellence.

The Problem

ACT government funding for the arts is misallocated. Instead of fostering a vibrant, professional creative economy, funds are being poured into empty venues for hire and programs that fail to generate economic growth.

The misconception that infrastructure funding is arts funding continues to distort investment priorities. In particular, funding for capital works primarily benefits administrators and builders, not artists or creative professionals. Similarly, funding projects that aim for health or education outcomes rather than artistic excellence undermines the arts sector's core purpose. These activities should be supported by the relevant health and education budgets—not the arts budget.

It is not only about creativity per se, Canberra has the opportunity to capitalise on the economic benefits of a strong creative sector, if the right policy decisions are made. Research from the Australia Council in 2020 confirmed that arts tourists travel further, stay longer, and spend more than domestic tourists overall. Local data from The Mill Theatre's first 18 months further proves this point:

- 68% of The Mill's audience also visited other businesses in the precinct, such as restaurants and breweries.
- Over 80% of these patrons spent more than \$50 at those establishments.

Recommendations

In view of the above, I wish to recommend the Government takes the following actions in its forthcoming Budget:

1. Direct Funding to The Mill Theatre

- An allocation of \$150,000 per year for four years to The Mill Theatre at Dairy Road.
- This investment would generate approximately 55 paid employment opportunities annually, including work for actors, designers, sound designers, lighting designers, and stage managers.
- Unlike current ACT arts organisations, The Mill Theatre actively produces and supports high-quality creative work, driving artistic excellence, economic activity and community engagement.
- There are other professional producing venues around Canberra which are large employers of creative workers and act as tourism hubs that could benefit from a similar short-term support. Smiths Alternative and The Basement are two such examples.

2. Enforce Co-Production Requirements on ACT Arts Companies

- Any ACT government-funded arts organisation be required to engage in co-productions with accomplished practitioners.
- This policy will ensure that funding is directed towards fostering artistic excellence rather than sustaining ineffective bureaucracies.
- Co-productions need to be developed with professional, experienced producers rather than amateur or community theatre groups.
- Similar to the QAPE expenditure threshold for the screen industry, these funded venues should be made to engage and support the few outstanding local professional theatre makers in the ACT. For example, when a quarter of a million dollars is provided to a Sydney company to open their show in Canberra, a condition of those funds should be the employment of the few nationally recognised lighting or sound designers in this city.

3. End Further Venue Funding Without Demonstrated Impact

- No additional funding should be allocated to any ACT arts venue without clear evidence of its contribution to the creative economy.
- Future funding for existing venues must be contingent on their ability to generate professional opportunities, attract audiences, and engage in meaningful partnerships with independent producers.

- Far more acumen needs to be applied to funding new works development programs. Funding promising new works development is admirable. Funding misguided and low quality new works development programs is counterproductive and a waste of scarce funds.

Conclusion

The ACT Government has an opportunity to make a real difference in the future of Canberra's arts sector. The 2023 Creative Australia Audience Monitor reported that only 4 in 10 venues have rebuilt their audiences to 2019 levels, and spending habits have shifted post-COVID. If we are to sustain and grow the creative life of the National Capital, we must fund those who create the performances—those who produce, sing, dance, design, and manage productions.

Informed and bold funding commitments that prioritise professional artists and producers, not administrators and empty venues, will give us a much better chance to transform Canberra and reach the Government's stated desire to see our city become the nation's cultural capital.