



# Creating Art Part 1

The makers' view of pathways for  
First Nations theatre and dance

August 2020

## **Creating Art Part 1: The makers' view of pathways for First Nations theatre and dance**

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are advised that this publication may contain names and images of deceased persons.

This report is based on research conducted by Associate Professor Sandy O'Sullivan and Dr Rebecca Huntley.

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Cover:

Sarah Bolt in *Djorra* - a NORPA Production, 2017. Credit: Kate Holmes.

*“Our stories are complex, hilarious – as contemporary as they are ancient, as metropolitan as they are rural. We’re a whole lot of layers in one.”*

*“I want to really keep creating... Not just for myself but as an Aboriginal person contributing to the continuum of our culture. It is such an honour but also a really big responsibility. Doing that right.”*

*“We’ve got the oldest culture on the planet. It is ours but we want to share that, we want to share that with you, with all Australians regardless of their background and hopefully that creates a stronger future.”*

*Research participants, Creating Art Part 1*



# Foreword

*Creating Art Part 1: The makers' view of pathways for First Nations theatre and dance* is the third in a series of in-depth research pieces commissioned by the Australia Council which builds on our long-term commitment to First Nations arts.

The aim of this series is to provide an evidence base to underpin a strong First Nations arts ecology and a rich and diverse Australian arts sector – a sector that builds audiences for First Nations arts and showcases First Nations creativity, talent and stories.

I know that this research, which was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, is being released into an uncertain environment. In this time of great disruption of our arts and culture, knowledge that can inform the reconstruction and future sustainability of our ecology is now more important than ever.

In the preceding research studies, both audiences and presenters expressed a growing appetite for meaningful engagement with diverse First Nations work. Both groups also acknowledged uncertainty about how to engage. Presenters said they wanted cross-cultural engagement and a two-way dialogue and responded to the provocation of *Showcasing Creativity* with a desire to do better.

*Creating Art Part 1* now focuses on the central voices of artists. I sincerely thank the First Nations dance and theatre makers who participated for their frank and generous contributions to this research.

*Creating Art Part 2* – a quantitative report to follow – will provide national benchmarks for the First Nations performing arts sector prior to COVID-19 and discussion of the impacts of this pandemic on our ecology.

The current research highlights that despite the wealth of diverse storytelling from First Nations artists and despite growing engagement from audiences and programmers prior to COVID-19, First Nations artists were still facing barriers in bringing their work to audiences. It also highlights the strengths, impacts and agency of First Nations dance and theatre makers in navigating the pathways of this unique sector.

We can learn from the opportunities, challenges and needs identified through this research in ensuring First Nations arts can recover and continue to flourish into the future.



Prior to COVID-19, the ground was shifting. This pointed to a need to re-examine notions of 'risk' in programming, test assumptions about audiences' lack of receptiveness to First Nations work, develop pathways for First Nations companies and recognise, embrace and support First Nations artists' connections to community as an asset to enrich the sector.

It is vital that First Nations arts do not lose their hard-won visibility as a result of COVID-19 - that they can continue to develop, challenge and contribute to the ongoing maturation of Australian culture. We know that the First Nations dance and theatre sectors are bracing for long-term impacts from the pandemic and will need long-term financial support. Financial constraints could mean programming is more conservative in future and that cultural protocols could be disregarded.

In this time of uncertainty, we must continue to challenge assumptions, grow opportunities for First Nations creative control and decision-making and empower First Nations creators to self-determine the future of their cultural inheritance.

I invite the Australian arts sector and its champions to draw on this latest evidence to progress this important two-way cultural conversation and advocate for the critical importance of First Nations arts. There is an opportunity through this period of recovery to build a new future together; to further grow this powerful storytelling medium; and to bring First Nations culture, excellence, history, humour, talent and lived experience to the forefront of the national psyche.

***Lydia Miller***

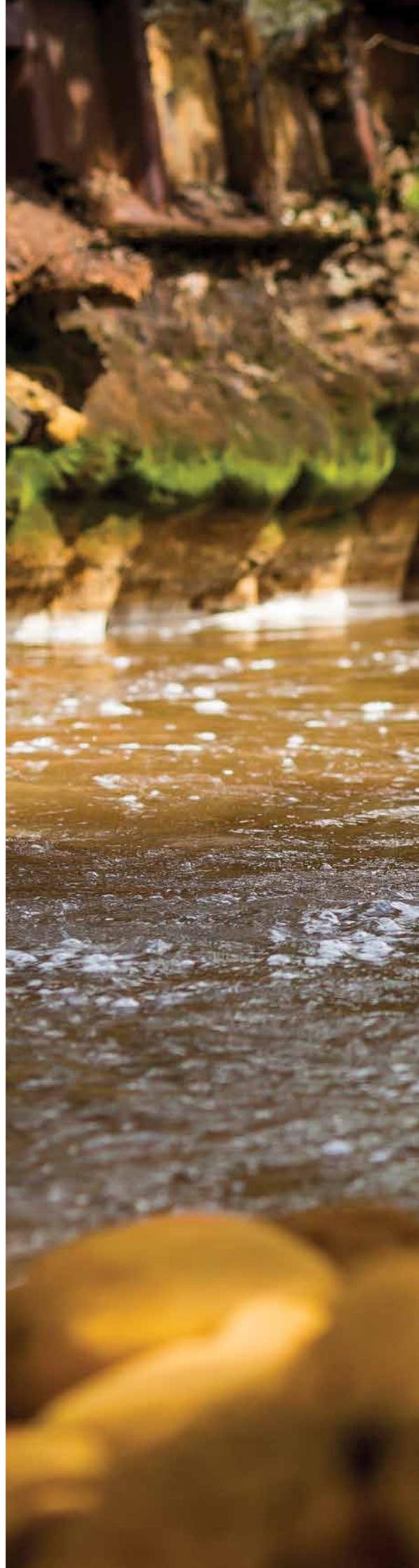
Executive Director

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts

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Thomas E.S. Kelly, *Junjeiri Ballun – Gurul Gaureima*;  
Queenstown Tasmania.  
Directed by Thomas E.S. Kelly, Produced by Tasdance  
Credit: Kim Eijdenberg.





# Terminology

## First Nations

The artists interviewed for this report used a range of terms to describe themselves and their communities, including 'First Nations', 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander', Indigenous and identified First Nations Country names (for example, Wiradjuri).

While using all these terms, this report primarily uses the term 'First Nations' in recognition of First Nations peoples' role as the original custodians of this country and to acknowledge that all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people belong to their own nation/linguistic/clan groups.

### 'First Nations-led' organisations:

Organisations wishing to apply for dedicated funding assessed by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Panel at the Australia Council must confirm more than half (51% or more) Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander membership of the governing body.

The Australia Council recognises the right of First Nations peoples to self-determination of their own identity and membership, and invites applicants to self-identify based on the 'three-part definition': an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which they live.

## Performing arts creators

**Dance makers** interviewed for this research include choreographers, dancers, artistic directors and producers.

**Theatre makers** interviewed for this research include script writers, actors, artistic directors and producers.

In both cases, **producers** are organisations or individuals who both make and sell, or who represent First Nations arts to presenters.

## Performing arts companies

Australia has a variety of performing arts companies working at various scales. Some also incorporate venues at which they self-present the works that they produce.

**First Nations companies** refers to companies led and largely run by First Nations people, and which are committed to developing and presenting work by First Nations artists. Examples include Bangarra, Ilbijerri Theatre Company, Marrugeku intercultural dance theatre, Yirra Yaakin and Moogahlin Performing Arts.

### Major Performing Arts companies

refers to the 28 leading performing arts companies in the fields of dance, theatre, circus, opera, and orchestral and chamber music that were supported by the National Framework for Governments' Support of the Major Performing Arts Sector (the MPA Framework) at the time this research was conducted.<sup>1</sup>

Some interviewees may have also been considering large or 'mainstream' companies operating outside of the MPA Framework when referring to 'majors'.

<sup>1</sup> From October 2019, the MPA Framework was replaced by the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework.

## Presenters

**Presenters** are venues and festivals that curate and present performing arts programs. Presenters range from small independent performing arts venues in regional Australia, to state-based arts organisations and major festivals. This includes presenters who take financial risks on presenting work.

**Mainstream presenters** refers to venues and festivals that present a range of works from and for people and communities from various cultural backgrounds; which are not controlled or managed solely by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and which are not solely presenting First Nations arts. The programming and decision-making of mainstream presenters is the main focus of the Showcasing Creativity report.

**First Nations presenters** comprise First Nations festivals, as well as venues owned and managed by First Nations people that solely present First Nations arts.

# Introduction

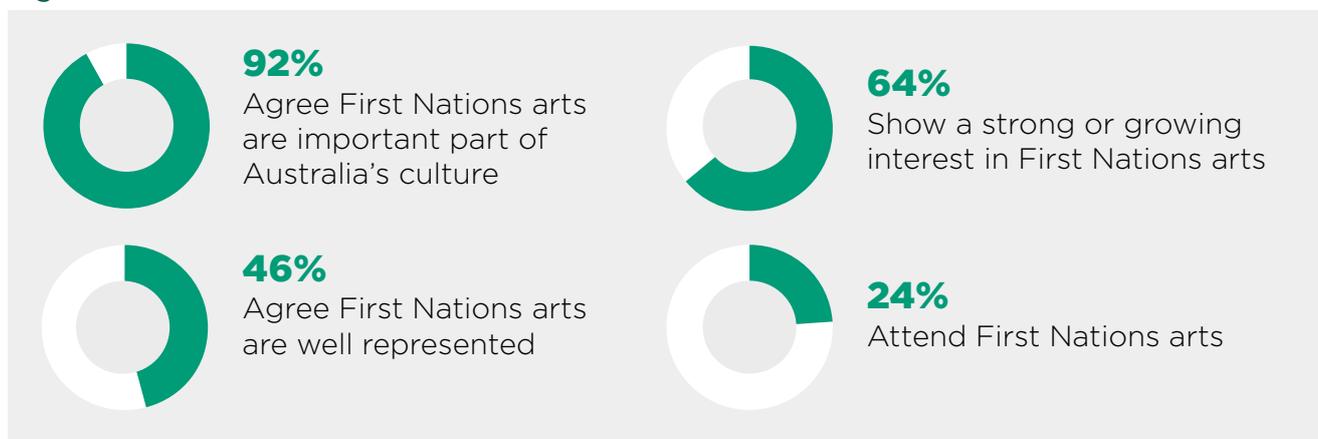
First Nations performing arts are diverse, contemporary expressions of rich cultural heritage and powerful storytelling, knowledge and creativity.

They challenge, enrich, enlighten and entertain. They make a vital contribution to Australia's contemporary culture, world culture and our national story.

**Creating Art Part 1** is the latest study in a series commissioned by the Australia Council with the aim of supporting the First Nations arts sector to connect more Australians to First Nations arts experiences and grow opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists. Conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the research provides vital insights that can inform the recovery and future sustainability of the First Nations arts ecology.

The research series originated with the 2013 **National Arts Participation Survey** which revealed a gap between Australians' interest in, and attendance at, First Nations arts.

Figure 1: Australians attitudes and attendance in 2013<sup>2</sup>



**These results highlighted an opportunity to further develop audiences for First Nations arts, including by ensuring that Australians have access to a variety of high-quality First Nations arts experiences.**

**Building Audiences**, published in 2015, explored this opportunity from the perspective of audiences, both existing and potential. It also captured views from the First Nations arts ecology about barriers and strategies for growing audiences for First Nations arts.<sup>3</sup>

**Showcasing Creativity**, published in 2016, explored how much First Nations performing arts are programmed in mainstream venues and festivals. It captured the perspectives of those who facilitate performing art works being made public and who promote works to audiences: presenters and producers.<sup>4</sup>

2 Australia Council 2014, *Arts in Daily Life: National Arts Participation Survey 2014*.

3 Bridson K, Clarke M, Evans J, Martin B, Rentschler R and White T 2015, *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art*, Australia Council for the Arts.

4 Australia Council 2016, *Showcasing Creativity: Programming and presenting First Nations performing arts*.



*Bukal* by Andrea James with Henrietta Marrie. JUTE Creative Development 12–16 February 2018.  
L-R: Carl Fourmile, Katie Leslie, Maurial Spearim, Alexis West. Credit: Courtesy of JUTE.

**The current report, *Creating Art Part 1*, focuses on the perspective of the makers of First Nations theatre and dance – the artists themselves. It explores strategies and pathways for getting works to audiences as well as challenges and opportunities from the artists’ perspective.**

This will form the basis of further quantitative research in *Creating Art Part 2*, which will look at the amount of work created and presented by First Nations performing artists prior to COVID-19 and the extent to which different pathways were being used and have now been impacted.

**The National Arts Participation Survey** enables periodic tracking of Australians’ interests, attitudes and attendance (figure 2).

Figure 2: The First Nations performing arts industry supply chain and Australia Council research



Each study in this series has helped highlight gaps, barriers and opportunities in connecting audiences to First Nations arts and improving the representation of First Nations arts and artists.

## Exploring audience perspectives

***Building Audiences* found six key motivators for audiences to engage with First Nations arts experiences: an attraction to stories, contemporary experiences, unique experiences, personal connections, and a desire for cultural insight and deeper understanding.**

Perceived barriers for audiences were uncertainty about how to engage, a lack of awareness or visibility of First Nations programming and a ‘serious’ image.

The research highlighted a range of strategies to leverage existing audience motivations and address the current impediments to audience development. These included:

- capacity building in the First Nations arts sector and skills and career development for First Nations arts workers
- greater First Nations representation across the sector to engage with audiences with legitimacy and authenticity
- increasing the visibility and diversity of First Nations work presented
- raising awareness through schools, communities and social media
- works and programming that challenge the ‘serious’ image of First Nations arts
- strategies to help audiences navigate their uncertainty about how to engage.

Since *Building Audiences* was published, results from the latest National Arts Participation Survey in 2016 indicate the gap between interest and attendance is closing. In 2016, 47% of Australians were actively interested in First Nations arts<sup>5</sup> and 35% attended (up from 24% in 2013). More than half of Australians agreed that First Nations arts are well represented (54% compared to 46% in 2013).<sup>6</sup>

This trend reflects the high-quality work of First Nations artists, and initiatives to build audiences for First Nations arts. They also highlight further opportunities to reach interested Australians, increase First Nations representation, and build interest so that all Australians can experience and take pride in First Nations arts.

## Examining the programming and presenting of First Nations works

**The next stage of research, *Showcasing Creativity*, measured the level and types of First Nations performing arts programming in Australia’s mainstream venues and festivals. It concluded that First Nations performing arts are under-represented: they comprised just 2% of the almost 6,000 works programmed in 2015 seasons.**

The report also examined the assumptions on which programming decisions were made across the country, including preconceptions about the content and nature of First Nations work and the placement of work within a program.

Presenters observed that artistic excellence and integrity were key motivators for programming First Nations works, and that audience satisfaction was high irrespective of box office. However, financial risk was the main deterrent to programming these works, along with concerns about challenging themes. The research observed that decision-makers can be tokenistic, and that Australia’s underlying race relations have an impact on programming decisions and are an obstacle to presenting First Nations work.

*Showcasing Creativity* sparked discussion across the sector – including critical interrogation of programming practices – and garnered international attention including honourable mention in the inaugural Createquity Research Prize.

<sup>5</sup> The survey results for interest in First Nations arts are not directly comparable due to question changes between the 2013 and 2016 surveys.

<sup>6</sup> Australia Council 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*.

## Focusing on the perspectives of artists

***Creating Art Part 1* reports the views and experiences of First Nations artists making theatre and dance works for audiences in a range of different contexts – in communities, at markets, on main stages and in other environments.**

This latest report responds to findings from previous research and focuses on the critical perspectives of artists themselves – the lifeblood of the Australian arts sector. This qualitative research also maps pathways and issues that will be examined through further quantitative research in *Creating Art Part 2*.

Based on in-depth interviews with 45 dance and theatre makers, the research explores the experiences of First Nations creatives in realising their work and bringing it to an audience, particularly delving into the opportunities, challenges and barriers faced by First Nations artists throughout the industry supply chain. The report includes:

- the range of work created by First Nations performing artists
- the pathways creative works take to find audiences
- the current mechanisms for support.

Participants perceive that the sector is 'hungry for Indigenous work'. However, they also see many barriers and challenges facing First Nations artists creating art today. These barriers, and ideas and strategies for overcoming them, are explored in *Creating Art Part 1*.

# Key insights

*Building Audiences, Showcasing Creativity and Creating Art Part 1* all highlight the need to break down stereotypical ideas about First Nations arts, among both audiences and presenters.

They also highlight the need to build opportunities for **First Nations decision-making** to ensure appropriate presentation of First Nations performing arts in Australia. First Nations peoples' **self-determination** must be central in theatre and dance-making in Australia, including greater opportunities for First Nations **creative control**.

## Further key insights from *Creating Art Part 1*:

- First Nations artists make a **powerful contribution** to the performing arts industry, including challenging industry ideas about First Nations people and communities. Many dance and theatre makers strive for industry success.
- There is a continuing need to **challenge narrow perceptions** of what constitutes First Nations theatre and dance, including broadening understanding of the **diverse experiences** of First Nations people and communities. Artists see opportunities for more work from across their diverse communities – including Elders, younger people, LGBTQI+ people, people living with disability and emerging practitioners.
- Prior to COVID-19, the **demand** for, and **impact** of First Nations companies' work and role in Australian arts was growing. Growing appetite for First Nations works points to the need for **renewed attitudes to risk** in programming and development of **pathways** for First Nations companies.
- There is a **skills gap** in filling First Nations-specific stage management, design, technical production and producing roles. There is an opportunity for a **strategic whole-of-sector response** to building skills and pathways to employment for First Nations people in these roles, for example through First Nations-specific training or a national mentoring program.
- **Festivals** are a powerful platform for reaching new audiences for First Nations arts, but artists often need to self-fund development of work to get it stage ready. There remains a need to break down stereotypes, and for placement of First Nations work across festival programs and venues to maximise audience exposure.
- **Connection to community** is a vital and inherent characteristic of the work of First Nations artists. Community engagement requires investment in sustained effort.
- **Touring work in First Nations communities** can provide opportunities and pathways for the new generation of First Nations artists and arts sector workers. Ensuring **First Nations audiences** are able to see First Nations work is vital, and work created for First Nations audiences is finding wider appeal.

Conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this research provides vital insights that can inform the recovery and future sustainability of the First Nations arts ecology.

- First Nations **artists based in regional and remote areas** face particular challenges in creating work and reaching wider audiences. These include higher transport costs, the need to fly artists and presenters in, and less training opportunities.
- Artists report positive experiences creating and **presenting work in regional Australia**, including breaking through racism. The ability of a regional company or venue to provide a great creative environment for First Nations arts depends heavily on the extent to which the organisation is connected to the local First Nations community.
- **International First Nations networks** are strong and enable a range of opportunities for collaboration, exchange and touring. There are ongoing needs for formal and informal networking opportunities and for funding for **international development activity** when it can resume.
- Prior to COVID-19, First Nations dance and theatre makers were touring work internationally to great acclaim. There is an opportunity for greater realisation of the **export value** of First Nations performing arts including market and audience development to fully contextualise it.
- Demand and opportunities to create First Nations performing art **works for schools** are thriving. It is essential that work is developed from a cultural base to ensure diversity and authenticity rather than reinforcing stereotypes.
- **Tourism and corporate work** are seen variously as an opportunity for employment, self-direction and reaching new audiences; and a challenge in presenting authentic work that does not conform to stereotypes. It is vital that any increases in volume of work to meet growing demand are not done at the expense of depth or diversity. First Nations creative control is needed and there is an opportunity for strategic national branding.
- **Long-term funding** is critical to developing a broad range of First Nations dance and theatre work, including riskier and more diverse work. Grant application writing workshops aimed at First Nations artists were suggested.
- **Showcases and markets** give First Nations artists valuable opportunities for networking, career development and getting work seen. However, they can be daunting experiences and some artists feel they are elitist or a 'closed shop'. Showcasing Creativity found the most common ways presenters find First Nations works are peer networks and prior relationships. Informal networking mechanisms, such as an online network, could help grow capacity and opportunities.
- **Mentors** are critically important to First Nations dance and theatre makers at all career stages, but there is a perception that opportunities for mentorship have decreased. Artists called for an increase in **resourced mentoring opportunities** and resourcing for specific **cultural consultant roles**.
- First Nations dance and theatre makers report securing **commissions** to develop work for a range of entities. Many feel major companies and festivals only want to buy work that is fully developed and audience-ready rather than supporting the development of new work.
- **First Nations control and agency** over decisions to mount a work are essential. Presenting is seen as the weak link. Strong partnerships and more First Nations decision-makers are key to increasing diverse First Nations programming.
- First Nations dance and theatre makers are **creating their own opportunities, pathways and structures**. They are committed to continuing conversations and overcoming barriers for the benefit of future generations.

# Pathways summary

First Nations dance and theatre makers navigate a complex ecology. They create diverse work via a range of pathways including forging their own structures and opportunities.

The journey each work takes to reach audiences is unique and may involve a number of the pathways outlined. Each pathway presents both opportunities and challenges from the artists' perspective prior to COVID-19, as well as calls to action that can inform reconstruction of the ecology.





Creative development of Andrea James' *Sunshine Supergirl*, Performing Lines.

Pathways	Opportunities	Challenges	Calls to action
<b>Working with First Nations companies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— demand and impact were growing</li> <li>— development of emerging artists</li> <li>— international acclaim</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— artist burnout and loss to other sectors</li> <li>— uncompensated cultural expertise</li> <li>— skills gap in filling First Nations-specific stage management, design, technical production and producing roles</li> <li>— no major First Nations theatre companies supported through the National Partnership Framework</li> <li>— no multi-year funded small to medium First Nations dance companies except Marrugeku intercultural dance company</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— more active harnessing of export value</li> <li>— support to retain mid-career artists</li> <li>— resourced mentoring opportunities</li> <li>— a strategic national response to the skills gaps in off-stage roles</li> <li>— development of pathways for First Nations companies</li> </ul>
<b>Working with non-Indigenous performing arts companies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— growing interest in commissioning and presenting First Nations work</li> <li>— audiences increasingly open to diverse work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— a competitive environment among First Nations creators due to tokenism (eg one First Nations work per season)</li> <li>— risk averse programming</li> <li>— a need for greater First Nations creative control</li> <li>— expectations First Nations artists act as cultural consultants</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— re-examination of the idea of First Nations work as 'risky'</li> <li>— greater recognition of the diversity of First Nations work</li> <li>— more First Nations people in decision-making and key creative roles</li> <li>— pathways to learn new roles including producing</li> <li>— employment of cultural consultants as a specific role</li> </ul>

Pathways	Opportunities	Challenges	Calls to action
<b>Working with festivals</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— a platform to access new audiences</li> <li>— relationships and networking (First Nations festivals)</li> <li>— developing and experimenting (smaller festivals)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— lack of financial and creative development support</li> <li>— work shown that's not 'stage ready'</li> <li>— stereotypes and marginalisation including decisions of where to place First Nations works in the program</li> <li>— availability of cast for remounts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— increased funding and new avenues to support development of work</li> <li>— commitment at executive and board level to First Nations representation</li> <li>— more First Nations people in decision-making roles</li> <li>— ensuring representation is across festival programs and stages</li> </ul>
<b>Working with and for First Nations communities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— creative inspiration and cultural grounding</li> <li>— creating pathways for the next generation of artists</li> <li>— authentic local stories can translate with a range of audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— getting First Nations audiences into venues</li> <li>— touring schedules that lack consultation or relevance</li> <li>— funding and time limitations for community engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— greater investment of time and energy in engagement with First Nations communities</li> <li>— grass-roots community engagement</li> <li>— removing barriers to access (eg use outdoor or familiar spaces, offer transport, low price/free tickets)</li> </ul>
<b>Living and working outside major cities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— creative inspiration</li> <li>— community access</li> <li>— support from local councils and art centres</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— lack of culturally safe options for working on Country</li> <li>— higher transport costs and the need to fly artists and presenters in</li> <li>— limited training, mentoring and networking opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— access to administrative infrastructure and rehearsal space (in cities too)</li> <li>— networking forums that address geographic isolation (potentially online)</li> </ul>
<b>Regional touring</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— positive experiences personally and creatively</li> <li>— breaking through racism</li> <li>— intergenerational renewal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— funding and time limitations for community engagement</li> <li>— 'closed' touring networks</li> <li>— presenter-driven models</li> <li>— lack of producer support to distribute 'tour ready' work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— engagement of First Nations artists and companies to deliver workshops and community engagement</li> <li>— stronger partnerships with presenters</li> <li>— more First Nations people in programming roles</li> <li>— need to test assumptions about regional audiences</li> </ul>

Pathways	Opportunities	Challenges	Calls to action
<b>Working internationally</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— strength of international First Nations networks</li> <li>— networking opportunities, both formal (eg APAM) and informal (eg Facebook)</li> <li>— international acclaim and export value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— limited funds for international development opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— ongoing need for formal and informal networking opportunities</li> <li>— more active harnessing of export value of First Nations companies</li> <li>— increased funding for international development opportunities</li> <li>— market and audience development</li> </ul>
<b>Creating work for schools</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— strong demand and opportunities</li> <li>— enlightening and renewing audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— constraints of 'educator' role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— need to ensure work is culturally based, diverse and authentic rather than stereotypical</li> </ul>
<b>Tourism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— employment opportunities and growing demand (prior to COVID-19)</li> <li>— reaching new audiences</li> <li>— work for dual-purpose events/audiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— stereotypes</li> <li>— lack of national branding beyond Bangarra</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— support for diversity and authenticity</li> <li>— First Nations control</li> <li>— strategic national branding, eg a national First Nations theatre</li> </ul>
<b>Showcases and markets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— networking and getting seen</li> <li>— career development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— can be a daunting and unstructured experience</li> <li>— sense of elitism or 'closed shop'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— assistance from mentors, producers or the Australia Council</li> <li>— informal networking opportunities, eg an online network to connect with peers, producers and presenters</li> </ul>

# Research approach

*Creating Art Part 1* examines the views and experiences of First Nations artists making performance works for audiences.

The study was carried out primarily by two researchers, with the support of the Australia Council: Sandy O’Sullivan, a senior Aboriginal researcher (Wiradjuri) working within a university; and Rebecca Huntley, an independent non-Indigenous researcher. Both are arts practitioners as well as researchers.

The research is based on 45 in-depth interviews with dance and theatre makers conducted between March and November 2018, either face to face or over the phone. All interviews were confidential.

Dance makers included choreographers, artistic directors, dancers and producers. Theatre makers included script writers, artistic directors, actors and producers.

Information calling for interested participants was sent out to the sector via the Australia Council’s networks, and First Nations dance and theatre makers who responded were then followed up. In addition, the researchers and Australia Council staff developed a list of possible artists for interview. The aim was to ensure a cross section of geographic locations throughout Australia, including those in remote and regional areas, appropriate gender and sector representation as well as a spectrum of career stage.

The findings will be discussed with the sector and used to develop *Creating Art Part 2*, which will quantify the amount of work created and presented by First Nations artists, the extent to which different pathways are used, and the impact of COVID-19 on these pathways.

Total interviews	45	Percentage of sample
Dance makers	19	42%
Theatre makers	27	60%
Female	29	64%
Males	16	36%
Emerging	14	31%
Established	31	69%
Metropolitan	33	73%
Regional/remote	12	27%
NSW	15	33%
QLD	7	16%
VIC	10	22%
WA	6	13%
NT	4	9%
SA	1	2%
TAS	1	2%

Figure 3: Research approach



# 1. The art: First Nations performing artists and their work

This section profiles the range of work created by First Nations theatre and dance artists.

***There is a continuing need to challenge narrow perceptions of what constitutes First Nations theatre and dance, including broadening understanding of the diverse experiences of First Nations people and communities.***

Across Australia, 44,700 First Nations people (10.1%) performed First Nations music, dance or theatre in 2014–15, and 7,300 earned income from arranging or participating in cultural dances or performances.<sup>7</sup>

Across the Australian population, creative participation in performing arts tends to drop off after the age of 25 years.<sup>8</sup> However rates of participation by First Nations Australians in First Nations performing arts are relatively consistent up to the age of 55 years.<sup>9</sup>

First Nations performing arts include classical, traditional and contemporary practice, across all new forms of cultural expression.

**‘We aren’t homogenous. We have different paint, different dance, language, cultural identity. I love that diversity with our people.’**

(Theatre maker, Vic)

While the focus of this report is the perspectives of professional dance and theatre makers, the practitioners interviewed reflect practice that crosses and combines genres – theatre, dance, music, visual arts and film. This hybridity is consistent with the work of all professional artists in Australia who, in most cases, engage across more than one type of work in their career, and frequently with other art forms.<sup>10</sup>

*Hecate* production photo (Centre: Della Rae Morrison. From left: Ian Wilkes, Bobbi Henry, Rubeun Yorkshire, Trevor Ryan, Kyle J Morrison, Cezera Critti-Schnaars, Maitland Schnaars, Mark Nannup).  
Credit: Dana Weeks.

7 Based on ABS data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS). Customised report prepared for Australia Council 2017, *Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing*.

8 Australia Council 2017, *Connecting Australians: Results of the National Arts Participation Survey*.

9 At an overall level males and females were equally likely to participate in 2014–15, with some differences across ages groups. Participation rates were highest in the Northern Territory and Queensland, and higher in remote locations throughout Australia than in regional areas or major cities. Based on ABS data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS). Customised report prepared for Australia Council 2017, *Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing*.

10 Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2017, *Making Art Work: An economic study of professional artists in Australia*, Australia Council for the Arts, p.49.





## Diverse work

*The interviews conducted for this research highlight that the output from First Nations theatre and dance artists is diverse.*

### **This diversity includes work made in a range of ways and with a range of partners:**

- created and performed solely by First Nations people and/or companies
- resulting from collaborations between First Nations artists and other artists and companies
- work that encourages more First Nations people to be involved in creative work and performance, creating pathways for development and employment in the creative arts
- solo works.

### **It includes work made for a range of audiences and markets:**

- for broad domestic audiences
- for specific audiences, including work made specifically for First Nations audiences and communities
- for international audiences
- for schools, education and training
- for corporate and tourist markets
- creative work that develops out of community engagement activities and cultural practices.

### **And it includes work supported in a range of ways:**

- commissioned by companies or festivals
- supported through public money (all levels of government from local to state to federal agencies)
- supported by private money
- made with and within institutions and organisations that operate locally, nationally and internationally
- developed and funded entirely by artists themselves, or with intermittent support or recognition, particularly at the development stage.

**Question for further research:** How much of each type of work is made?

## Whose work, whose contribution?

- First Nations peoples’ self-determination must be central in theatre and dance-making in Australia, including greater opportunities for First Nations creative control.
- First Nations artists make a powerful contribution to the performing arts industry, including challenging industry ideas about First Nations people and communities. Many dance and theatre makers strive for industry success.
- Artists see opportunities for more work from across their diverse communities – including Elders, younger people, LGBTQI+ people, people living with disability and emerging practitioners.

### First Nations creative control

Across theatre in particular, artists expressed concerns about what constituted ‘First Nations work,’ and the marketing of works as ‘Black’ without First Nations creative control:

“It’s complex: first of all you have to ask yourself **what is an Aboriginal play or piece of work**, and of course we all know **it’s an Aboriginal story written by an Aboriginal person**, right? That’s the story. How it gets developed is a different process. Usually there are collaborators at every stage, and they can be Indigenous and non-Indigenous but **as long as the [Aboriginal] person has control of it, it’s still an Aboriginal work.**

**But the majority of productions are not Aboriginal; they are Aboriginal works produced by non-Aboriginal companies.** ... [Just having] one collaborator does not make that production Aboriginal.”<sup>11</sup>

(Theatre, NSW)

Artists frequently raised non-Indigenous shaping of a work during production as a risk to both the authenticity of the work and its capacity to express diversity. This included expectations around the narrative as well as requests to make the work either more or less ‘angry’:

“Some Torres Strait stories, **it is not a linear storytelling tradition. They [venues] wanted me to change my work** so it finished like this so everyone will be satisfied. **But that actually didn’t go with my traditional narrative.**”

(Dance and theatre, regional Qld)

“A lot of people, when it’s their own story, are quite protective of it, wary of companies or fringe producers coming in and telling them what they want them to do.... **“make it more angry, make it political” and you think, that’s not my voice.**”

(Theatre, NSW)

“Firstly, we’ve been telling our stories for thousands and thousands of years ... they want you to tell your story but **they want you to tell it in a way that they feel would be more accessible to a broader audience.** I don’t think that’s right. **I think we should be able to tell our stories our way.**”

(Theatre and dance, Sydney)

<sup>11</sup> Bolding within quotes is emphasis added by the authors to highlight key points.

Artists spoke of pressure to conform to stereotypes to make a living:

**‘If you aren’t fitting the stereotype, what an Indigenous artist looks like, then there’s a barrier... At times we have a romantic view of what black is... a lot of the time these [festival] openings are **cultural porn for non-Indigenous people**, they love it. And **blackfellas will put on the thickest ochre, they will make the biggest smoke, put on the biggest feathers to accommodate that vision and people adore it and love it.**’**

(Theatre, Vic)

Several artists spoke of growing confidence to present their stories and culture with greater creative control and less compromise, and are finding that audiences are embracing this:

**‘I am now trying to create what I want to create and people just have to get used to the idea that this is how I create... Hot Brown Honey have done exactly that. They have created a platform for themselves because everyone told them they couldn’t take them because they weren’t fitting into a particular thing so **they started to do their own thing and now they are international super stars.**’**

(Dance and theatre, regional Qld)

**‘We just have to keep driving our unique humour, our unique way of telling stories and breaking the moulds and just being unapologetic about it and not having to explain ourselves anymore. It needs to be respected **that we are the oldest storytellers in the world** so we can tell it the way we want it and not have to worry about these standards and shoehorn our stories.’**

(Theatre, Vic)

#### **Question for further research:**

How much work is presented with First Nations creative control?

Both *Building Audiences* and *Showcasing Creativity* highlighted the need to break down superficial and stereotypical preconceptions about First Nations arts, among both audiences and presenters, and the need to build opportunities for First Nations decision-making and creative control.

The national mapping for *Showcasing Creativity* found that of the unique works involving First Nations creative involvement, cultural expression or themes on Australia’s mainstages in 2015:

- at least one quarter, and potentially as many as two thirds of the 91 works appeared not to involve an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander producer.
- at least 16% and as many as three quarters of the 67 works which involved directors appeared not to involve an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander director.

Both potential and engaged audiences are attracted to the storytelling quality of First Nations arts, and contemporary, unique and lived experiences that offer them deeper understanding and cultural insight. Audiences value authenticity and seek signposts for trustworthiness and legitimacy. Such authenticity is best communicated by First Nations artists and arts workers.

Several artists interviewed for *Creating Art Part 1* spoke of the importance of their positive relationships with producers and one artist called for pathways to become a producer.



*Blood on the Dance Floor*, Jacob Boehme, Arts House, 2016. Credit: Bryony Jackson.

## Contributing to the performing arts industry

Dance and theatre makers articulated the contribution of First Nations artists to the performing arts industry. They noted there is an act of resistance in challenging ideas about First Nations peoples and communities in the 'mainstream'.

Many artists spoke of their ambitions for industry success. While this was often associated with 'whiteness' there was a clear goal of First Nations representation at the highest levels:

**“At this point of my career I need to work with a white fella. I want to get to a particular place and at the moment there are no black fellas who can take me there.”**

(Theatre and dance, regional Qld).

**“Bigger company more resources, more networks. Best directors, set designers and so on... we need to bring Indigenous art up to this next level. These are the big houses, we have to be in these big houses.”**

(Theatre, Vic)

It was suggested that non-Indigenous performing arts companies could learn much from First Nations companies and producers about reaching and connecting to audiences:

**“You’re not connecting with your communities. Why don’t you let us teach you? ... we’ll show you how to overhaul your systems so you can benefit – and our communities – Black and White – can benefit. We [could] revamp your institutions so they do have a civic role that is well and truly articulated, understood and established within the community in which you sit.”**

(Theatre and dance, Vic)

Input from First Nations artists and companies is not always acknowledged or compensated. This includes expectations on First Nations artists to also fill an unofficial cultural consultant role and the expertise First Nations artists and companies provide to performing arts companies, funding agencies, government, and the sector at large:

**“Your time and your resources, your knowledge, your expertise, your experience ... isn’t always acknowledged or remunerated. If there was a senior practitioner, non-Aboriginal, our age, with our experience, our qualifications, we’d be sitting pretty.”**

(Theatre, NSW)

## Reflecting complex identities

Some LGBTIQ+ artists described the challenge of positioning work that touched on both LGBTIQ+ and First Nations themes. Similar comments were made by artists living with a disability. This difficulty seems to stem from a failure among festivals and presenters to comprehend the diverse experience of First Nations people and communities:

**‘The industry has a tendency to keep people in one category.’**

(Dance, QLD)

**‘Sometimes as an Aboriginal writer you get a straightjacket put on you. ...**

*I do a lot of talks in the disability area. I get more attention there than in literary circles. I have this great body of work ... but I am totally ignored in the Aboriginal literary world.’*

(Theatre, NSW)

Others talked positively about the potential for First Nations companies and producers to bring these stories to the fore through collaboration. They cited several successful examples of this approach to representing complex identities, including Koori Gras, a program of the Sydney Mardi Gras produced by Moogahlin Performing Arts, and the multi-company support for Jacob Boehme’s story of living with HIV, *Blood on the Dance Floor*.

Throughout this research series, members of the First Nations performing arts sector have consistently highlighted diversity as a strength of First Nations arts. This contrasts with a perception of ‘sameness’ among audiences and presenters that can be a barrier to engagement.

Greater recognition of the true diversity of First Nations artists, cultures and identities, including their powerful contribution to the industry, will continue to break down barriers and grow presentation and audiences for First Nations arts.

## 2. The pathways: navigating a unique ecology

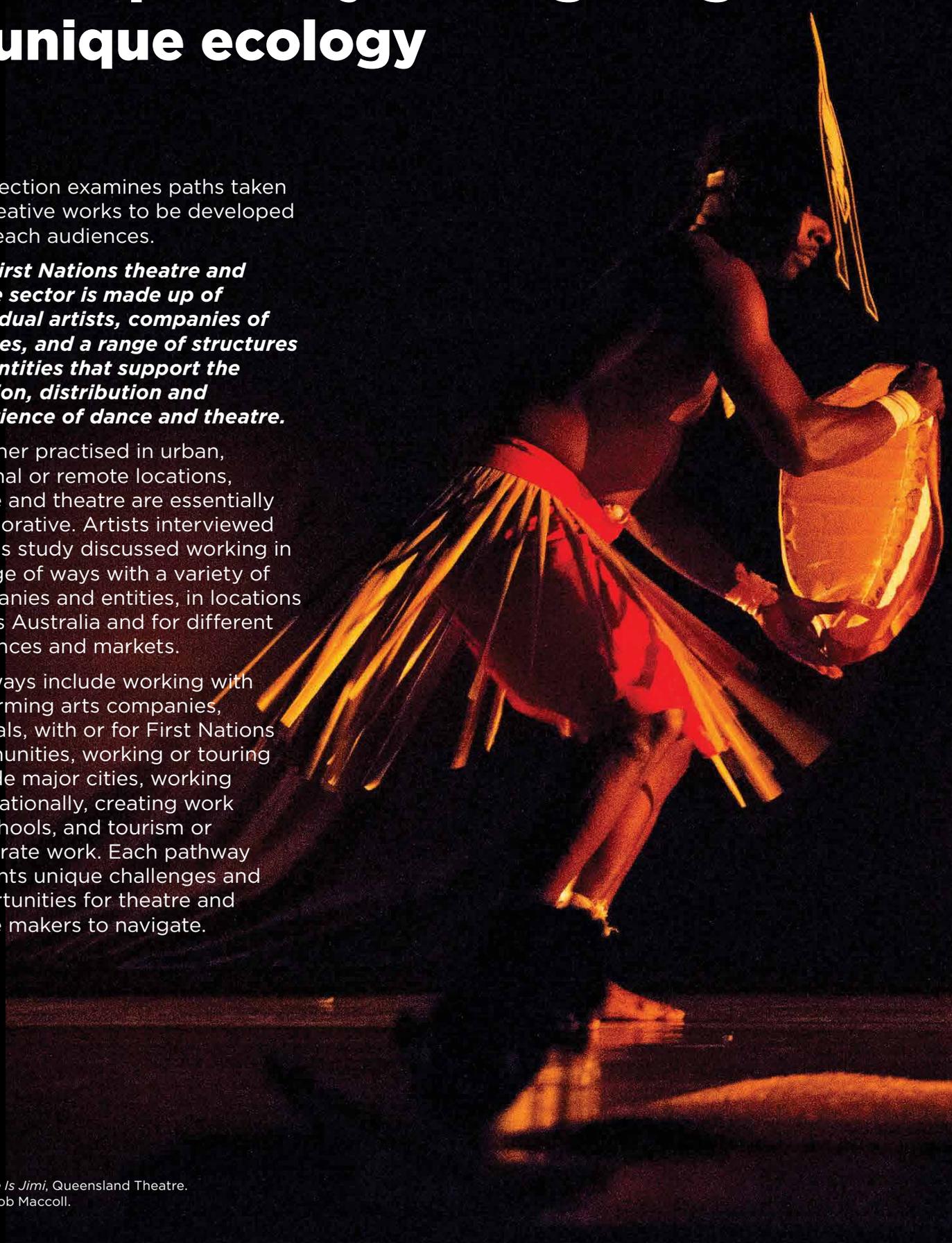
This section examines paths taken for creative works to be developed and reach audiences.

***The First Nations theatre and dance sector is made up of individual artists, companies of all sizes, and a range of structures and entities that support the creation, distribution and experience of dance and theatre.***

Whether practised in urban, regional or remote locations, dance and theatre are essentially collaborative. Artists interviewed for this study discussed working in a range of ways with a variety of companies and entities, in locations across Australia and for different audiences and markets.

Pathways include working with performing arts companies, festivals, with or for First Nations communities, working or touring outside major cities, working internationally, creating work for schools, and tourism or corporate work. Each pathway presents unique challenges and opportunities for theatre and dance makers to navigate.

*My Name Is Jimi*, Queensland Theatre.  
Credit: Rob Maccoll.





## Working with performing arts companies

- Performing arts companies can provide pathways by commissioning new work either individually or jointly, supporting the development of work and careers, facilitating collaboration, or touring work.
- The demand for, and impact of First Nations companies' work and role in Australian arts is growing.
- There is an opportunity for a strategic whole-of-sector response to building skills and pathways to employment for First Nations people in stage management and production roles, for example through First Nations-specific training or a national mentoring program.
- Growing appetite for First Nations works points to the need for renewed attitudes to risk in programming and development of pathways for First Nations companies.

### First Nations companies

Interviewees frequently referred to companies largely run by First Nations peoples that are committed to developing and presenting First Nations stories and supporting First Nations artists.

Companies such as Ilbjerri Theatre Company, Yirra Yaakin, Marrugeku intercultural dance theatre and Moogahlin Performing Arts create diverse and innovative works and tour these works nationally and internationally. They focus on increasing awareness and knowledge of First Nations cultures and issues, growing and sharing First Nations storytelling, expanding audiences and sharing First Nations culture and stories with a new generation. The demand for, and impact of their work and role in Australian arts, is growing:

**“...ten years ago it was very difficult to get Indigenous work up on a main stage and touring, whereas now, what I have seen is that there is such an incredible appetite and companies know that. I think audiences are up for different work.”**  
(Theatre, Vic)

**“Ilbjerri Theatre is now in a place to be a touring presenter. That is ground breaking. They have the relationship with the presenters themselves, rather than a third party, giving them the power.”**  
(Theatre, Vic)

Many of these companies support the development of new and emerging First Nations artists through initiatives and partnerships. Yirra Yaakin's Next Step Trainee Program, for example, supports First Nations artists to enter the performing arts. Moogahlin Performing Arts' collaboration with festivals in Wellington and Toronto increases exposure of First Nations artists to international audiences and supports ties with international theatre and creative communities.

However, for smaller companies employing mostly or all First Nations practitioners, risks were identified from burnout and the low income relative to the artists' capacity to earn across other industries. This was cited as a concern across all geographies, art forms and career stages, with a particular concern for the sustainability of engagement for mid-career and beyond:

*“Why would we stay... making work year in and year out while others can afford to buy a house or go on holidays... it's important, but, like, **what's the financial incentive for us to keep doing this?**”*  
(Theatre, NSW)

And while there has been considered effort by First Nations companies and some non-Indigenous companies to hire and create pathways for First Nations creative teams, there remains a skills gap in filling First Nations-specific stage management, design, technical production and producing roles.

An emerging theatre maker mentioned a lack of pathways for First Nations actors interested in producing:

*“I feel like there's not a lot of pathways to take, like if for instance I could work as an actor but I also wanted to get my head around becoming something else in a company. **There's no artist pathway or support mechanism there for me to take that path. I'd have to kind of fumble my way through it.** I'd really love to learn how to be a creative producer.”*  
(Theatre, Vic)

One theatre maker called for a national mentoring foundation to support First Nations engagement across the spectrum of roles in the arts:

*“I would love to have mentored young people to realise that you don't have to be a performer to be in the arts, you know, there's a lot of other jobs. I think there's a lot of our young kids that want to be creative or expressive in that way. Like, I can't believe **we have only a couple of Aboriginal stage managers in the country** that can actually take a show on tour. Why is that? I did a tour last year in Cape York and **some of these kids are so switched on when it comes to technology but they have no pathways.***  
*We can only tell them well this is how I came up but that's my story. I jumped all over the place and I did it the hard way really but **I'd love honestly to direct some kind of national mentoring program in the future. I'd love to see some sort of foundation set up...** I just want to tell my mob's stories because it helps me heal and these young kids, the world they're growing up in, it's even harder.”*  
(Theatre, Vic)

The need to increase the number of First Nations arts workers across the spectrum of arts and cultural roles was highlighted in both *Building Audiences* and *Showcasing Creativity*. Producers and presenters commonly mentioned the need for First Nations-specific training and professional development.

The *Creating 'Experience'* case study research by JUTE Theatre Company and Central Queensland University highlighted gaps in First Nations expertise in technical production, design, stage management and producing. JUTE's desire to engage a fully Indigenous creative team for the First Nations work *Bukal* proved an 'impossible task' even when trying to employ across the national landscape:

**“Try and find a black lighting designer. I think there's two. One of them works full time at Bangarra.”**

Yvette Walker, Indigenous Producer<sup>12</sup>

The *Creating 'Experience'* report calls for investment in strategies to address these gaps:

**“...specific strategies to recruit and train professionals in these areas are worth investing in. There is also a need to support opportunities at regional, state and national levels and assistance with brokerage, navigation and mentoring.”**<sup>13</sup>

One of the few First Nations stage managers in Australia, PJ Rosas, would love to encourage more young First Nations people to consider careers in these areas:

**“My main aim will be to find some young person out there, just let them know that this is what you can get out of being a stage manager, or production manager in companies... It'd be nice too, if we had a young person, an up and coming person who could work under me – we could both learn from each other.”**<sup>14</sup>

Australia Council research on pathways for artists with disability found that visible success stories, role models and mentors are key to building opportunities. The research also points to the importance of activity that profiles, celebrates and acknowledges the achievements of trail blazers and leading lights at all stages of career development.<sup>15</sup>

There is an opportunity for a strategic whole-of-sector response to building skills and pathways to employment for First Nations people in off-stage roles, for example through First Nations-specific training or a national mentoring and brokerage program.

12 Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, *Creating 'Experience': Career trajectories and the development of new First Nations work in the performing arts - Case Studies related to JUTE Theatre Company's 'Dare to Dream' project*. Rockhampton: Central Queensland University, p.42, emphasis added.

13 Davis S and Walker Y 2019, p.47, emphasis added.

14 PJ Rosas interviewed by Yvette Walker, profile by Susan Davis.

15 Australia Council 2018, *Creating Pathways: Insights on support for artists with disability*.

### **First Nations performing arts beyond Bangarra**

Bangarra Dance Theatre is currently the only First Nations-led company supported through the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework (formerly known as the Major Performing Arts (MPA) Framework). After 30 years it is one of Australia's leading performing arts companies with a strong national and international touring presence. Bangarra works are performed everywhere from remote locations in Australia to the world's most iconic venues.

The pride and respect for Bangarra was palpable among artists interviewed for this research. It is seen to be at the centre of the First Nations arts sector. Bangarra's success and impact is evidence of what long-term investment in First Nations arts can achieve – Bangarra is a household name and one of the few companies presenters will program without seeing the work first.

However, across both theatre and dance, artists expressed concern that presenter expectations and public perceptions tend, through no fault of the company, to be based on ideas seeded by Bangarra, and that this frequently needs to be challenged.

The perception is that Bangarra has become a prototype for First Nations dance, rather than an individual, exceptional company:

**‘When people find out you are a First Nations dancer, the first question they ask is, have you danced for Bangarra?’**

(Dance, NSW/QLD)

As well as this one major performing arts organisation, nationally the First Nations dance sector boasts:

- approximately 150 independent choreographers and makers
- at least 200 community dance groups
- approximately 100,000 cultural dance practitioners
- 7 youth dance groups<sup>16</sup>
- 8 project-based emerging small to medium dance companies<sup>17</sup>
- one intercultural dance company (Marrugeku).<sup>18</sup>

The First Nations dance sector is the oldest in the world but is still ‘emerging’ in regards to embedded multi-year funding for First Nations-led companies beyond Bangarra. Except for Marrugeku intercultural dance company, there are no multi-year funded small to medium First Nations dance companies.<sup>19</sup>

According to BlakDance, First Nations dance remains under-represented:

**‘Severe under-representation of First Nations dance in Australian and on international stages means that instead of understanding the broader myriad of possibilities for contemporary First Nations practice, most Australian audiences of First Nations dance expect the work to reflect stereotypical cultural motifs.’**

Theatre makers also raised concerns that without a similarly funded major First Nations theatre company, public perceptions of First Nations performance are more skewed to dance:

**‘Bangarra is great, but we’re not Bangarra. And we often have to challenge ideas that are right for Bangarra but that won’t fly for us as theatre makers.’**

(Theatre, Vic)

Unprecedented demand for First Nations performing arts (prior to COVID-19) points to the need for development of pathways for First Nations companies.

<sup>16</sup> Including Kurruru, Pryce Institute, Merriki Performing Arts, Wagana Dancers, Digi Youth Arts [multi dis] Inala Wangarra [community development] Of Dessert and Sea).

<sup>17</sup> Including Gary Lang NT Dance, Idja Dance, Karul Projects, dubaikungkamiyalk, Moonfish Dance Company, Muggera Dance Company, Ochre Dance Company.

<sup>18</sup> Information courtesy of BlakDance, April 2020.

<sup>19</sup> The peak body BlakDance receives Four Year Funding from the Australia Council but is not a producing company.

## Major companies

First Nations artists recognise that major performing arts companies are showing greater interest in commissioning and presenting their work, including on mainstages. They believe this interest may continue to increase in years to come as audience interest in First Nations work builds:

“**The theatre companies are hungry for Indigenous work. I think it’s something that’s not going to back down and I think *with us writing and creating our own works and now directing.***”

(Theatre, NT)

The National Arts Participation Survey has found increasing interest in and attendance at First Nations arts. In 2016, seven million Australians, or 35% of the population, attended First Nations arts – a record level of attendance and double that of 2009.

More people are attending First Nations arts across art forms, including dance (16% of Australians attended in 2016, up from 8% in 2009) and theatre (7%, up from 4%).

Securing support from, or a position within, a major company is seen as a pathway to developing a body of work that is more adventurous:

“**I feel like I’m at a stage in my career where I’d love to be picked up by a mainstage company that is interested in taking risks so that you can have two or three works sequentially. You can generate an audience ... be really ambitious. If I know that this company is going to really hold me and encourage me and push me creatively, perhaps I can take all the learnings from that production or even add to that *so that we can think really large-scale.***”

(Theatre, NSW)

“**I’d like to see a greater acceptance within Major Performing Arts companies of Indigenous performing arts. I would love to see a greater investment [by] the majors [in] Indigenous performing arts. I feel what that would do is that would directly connect with grass roots performances, *it would raise everything.***”

(Theatre, Vic)

While improvements have been noted, the processes of making the art itself – conversations with the artists, understanding of First Nations storytelling, meaningful connections with the First Nations community – need to be improved across the sector. One theatre maker proposed that established First Nations peers could show leadership by having an open discussion with the majors and work closely with them on improving First Nations representation.

While demand is growing, artists recognise that it is a highly competitive environment. First Nations artists believe that their work is assessed in comparison to other First Nations artists rather than compared with non-Indigenous commissioned and presented work. They tended to see this as a shortcoming rather than an opportunity:

**‘My work doesn’t get pitted against all of the other works. It just gets pitted against the other Aboriginal work.’**

(Theatre, NSW)

**‘It seems that a lot of the companies, they do their little Brown tick and that’s it. They do their one or two works a year and then that’s it and if you’re not one of those one or two works a year then you can forget about it.’**

(Theatre, NSW)

*Showcasing Creativity* highlighted that decision-makers can be tokenistic when considering First Nations works, picking their ‘one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work for the season.’ This was reflected in the mapping data, with around one third of mainstream presenters in Australia programming one First Nations work in their 2015 season.

Rachael Maza and Dalara Williams at Yellamundie, 2019.  
Credit: Jamie James.



## Small to medium companies

Interviewees singled out some smaller performing arts companies as committed to supporting First Nations artists and developing and presenting First Nations work. It was noted that this was often due to having First Nations people in senior roles within the company.

There is some perception that working within small to medium companies gives more artistic license than with larger, more conservative major companies:

“**You’re a bit more flexible and a bit freer within the small to medium sector.**

*The majors are still very much catering to a demographic that I would call Baby Boomers, who’ve got money.*”

(Theatre, Vic)

Some of the challenges facing First Nations artists hoping to produce work for smaller companies are like those they face with larger ones. Namely, it is a competitive environment, where First Nations work is pitted against other for limited opportunities:

“**You know that the small to medium companies realistically can only do two or three new works a year and that each company is either drawing on their own local stories or trying to capture a national voice.**”

(Theatre, NSW)

With fewer works in a season and tighter resources, participants believe this means smaller companies are even more concerned about presenting First Nations work in terms of return on investment and audience reception. There is a widespread concern that this conservatism reflects a belief that confronting work is perceived as riskier:

“**There are a lot of considerations taken around what shows are brought in. They don’t want to lose money on them. There is not a lot of risk taking in the programming and so it’s pretty stock standard material people will get.** I am trying to push a bit more for that but people don’t want to spend a lot of their hard-earned money on something they are not sure about.”

(Theatre, NSW)

“**I just think Australian theatre across the board at the moment is really conservative. It’s really risk-averse.** There’s not a lot of avenues for experimentation and the form we’re working in is really really narrow.”

(Theatre, regional NSW)

“**I think it’s about trusting your audience. I have been pitching a lot of Indigenous work here. And it’s been politely refused because they feel like their audience isn’t ready and so, well how is your audience? You are underestimating who your audience is, you need to give them the chance to be ready.** You have to give them something and they will take what they want from it.”

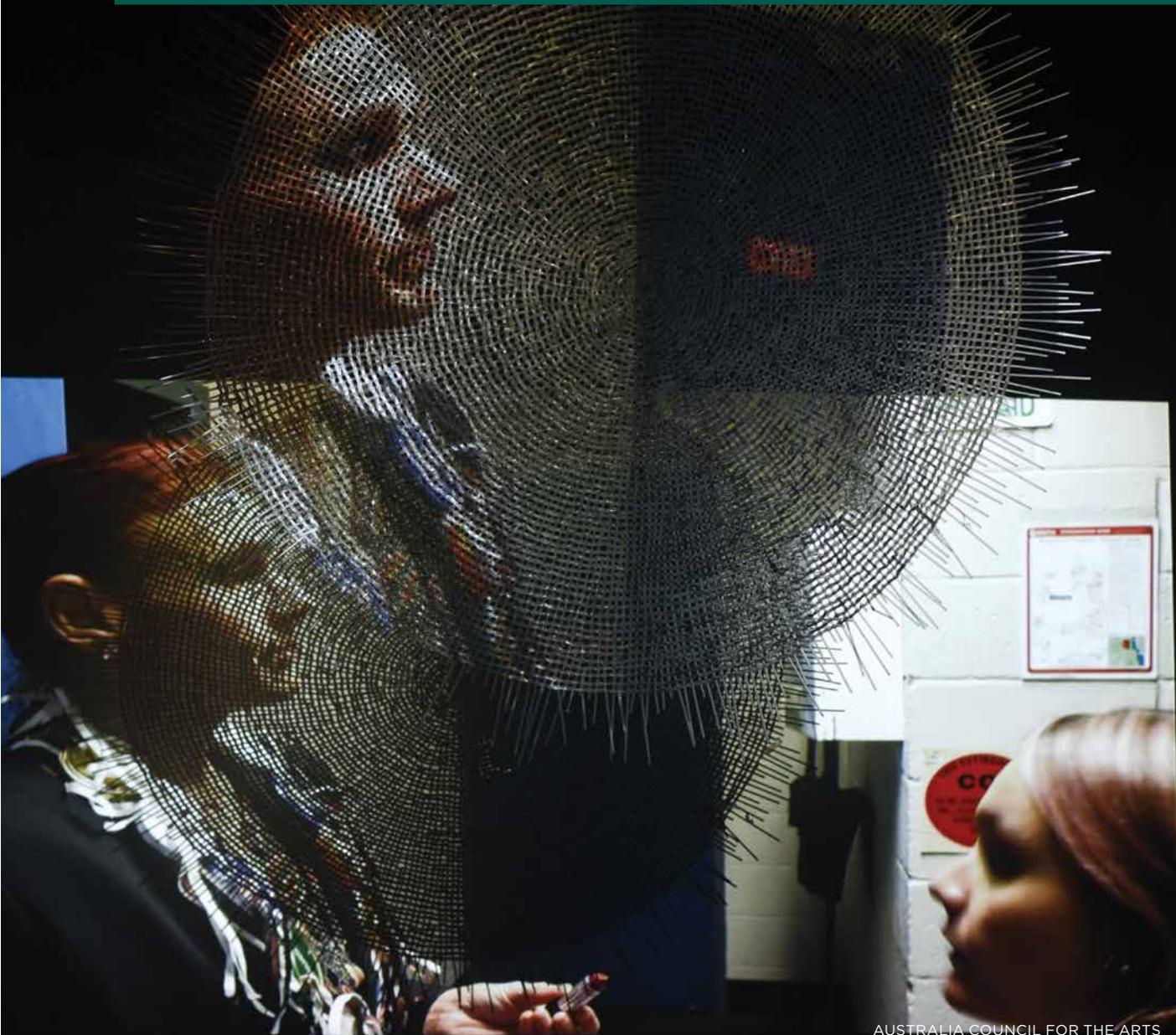
(Theatre, WA)

In *Showcasing Creativity*, presenters said financial risk was the main deterrent to programming First Nations work. Available, brand-name First Nations works are often too expensive, whilst smaller works are considered financially risky because they lack brand recognition.

*Building Audiences* noted that some audiences perceive First Nations art to be a serious and educational experience. Whilst these qualities can often be a virtue, when competing for audiences' leisure time and entertainment dollar, it can also be a barrier to attendance.

But *Showcasing Creativity* also showed that audience satisfaction is high, even when box office was low. This suggests that problems with filling house capacity may be about the marketing of the work rather than the quality of the work or its likeability with audiences, and that there is a need to build marketing skills to reach new audiences. The development of specialised First Nations marketers was also a recommendation of *Building Audiences*.

The current research calls for a re-examination of the idea of First Nations work as 'risky', especially given the growing audience appetite for such work.



## Working with festivals

- Festivals are a critical and growing component of Australian arts ecology and a powerful platform for reaching new audiences for First Nations arts.
- Festivals can provide valuable opportunities for experimentation and networking but artists often need to self-fund development of work to get it stage ready.
- There remains a need to break down stereotypes, and for placement of First Nations work across festival programs and venues to maximise audience exposure.

For artists, the role of festivals can involve commissioning/co-commissioning new work, supporting development, facilitating collaboration and networking, showcasing work to other presenters, opportunities for experimentation and a platform to grow audiences.

Participants discussed two kinds of festivals relevant to First Nations dance and theatre:

**Non-Indigenous festivals** are those that present a range of works that represent people and communities from various cultural backgrounds; are not controlled or managed solely by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and are not solely presenting Indigenous arts.

They include **major state and territory art festivals**: Adelaide Festival, Brisbane Festival, Darwin Festival, Melbourne International Arts Festival, Perth International Arts Festival, Sydney Festival and Ten Days on the Island. They also include a wide variety of smaller festivals throughout Australia, from the laneways of major cities to regional centres.

**First Nations festivals** are held throughout Australia and include YIRRAMBOI Festival, Garma Festival, Barunga Festival, Spirit Festival, Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre (KALACC) festivals, Dance Rites Festival and Yellamundie, a biennial celebration of national and international First peoples' playwriting.

### Access to audiences and development support

Dance and theatre makers see festivals as a platform for reaching new audiences:

“**Sitting within festivals is really helpful in terms of audience, in gaining difference audiences.** I have been involved in many other shows in festivals like the Sydney Festival, Adelaide and Vivid. You get bigger audiences so it is a bit of a goal.”  
(Dance, NSW)

“The Dreaming Festival gave me a platform to bounce off and I was invited back twice. ... YIRRAMBOI they **gave me a platform which made me reach broader audiences** and then encouraged people to come up and ask me to work for them. So festivals have been great for me.”  
(Theatre, NT)

“The [major festival] subscribers who don't know who we are are often just saying “ooh it's an Aboriginal work”, and then **in their ten-ticket subscription, they'll say “oh I'll pick this as my wildcard”.** I think this crowd is delightful: they want to talk about all things Aboriginal after the show, and that's OK because we want to talk about it too. **Our stories are complex, are hilarious** – as contemporary as they are ancient, as metropolitan as they are rural. We're a whole lot of layers in one. **And first timers to our work don't always realise that about Aboriginal people.**”  
(Theatre, NSW).

The National Arts Participation Survey found that one in five Australians attended multi-art form festivals in 2016 (20%) and 6% of Australians attended First Nations festivals, with males more likely to attend First Nations festivals than females.

Many artists aspire to present their work in larger festivals and feel these festivals have become more open to presenting First Nations work. Smaller festivals are seen as places for developing and experimenting with work:

“*There are still a lot of festivals I’d love to reach and be involved in... I find most festivals approachable now. **Smaller festivals (represent) a chance to experiment and that’s a chance for it to grow into something bigger.***”

(Dance, NSW)

However, the capacity and willingness of festivals to support First Nations art and artists is seen as uneven across the sector and artists often need to self-fund the work.

Some participants have felt exploited, believing that festivals represented a particularly difficult way for First Nations artists to develop their work, despite the opportunity to expand their audience. These sentiments applied to both First Nations and non-Indigenous festivals.

The main criticism of festivals was their lack of financial and creative support. Namely, that they provide the ‘platform’ but the artists themselves have to support all other aspects of the work:

“*Festivals certainly aren’t interested in commissioning work, they want to buy something cheap. ... Obviously having the festival credential helps but it’s a lot of hard work to get the money and **if you don’t get the money, they don’t put you in a program.***”

(Theatre, NSW)

“*...you are almost paying to access that audience. It’s a structural thing, they have the independents over the barrel.... So the festival gets us basically for free and then they can put their money into the international artists.*”

(Theatre, Vic)

One participant with experience within festivals believed that improvements in how festivals operate could be achieved by leadership at the executive and board level as well as allocating funds for First Nations development for work aimed at the festival audience and format:

“*It starts when you are recruiting for **senior management to executive management at Board level roles. They have to prove that they have a commitment to engagement with First Nations people.***”

(Theatre and dance Victoria)

Another producer suggested that funding should be set aside for the development of work to go into festivals, not just for the presentation of that work:

“*If there was a pot of money that was specifically for getting work up for festivals [that would be ideal]. ... **Our artists no longer can find money to develop a work. First Nations artists specifically, they don’t have Bank of Mum and Dad to rely on to fund two weeks of development.***”

(Theatre, Victoria)

## **Sydney festival now leading commissioner of new work**

Both the Sydney and Perth Festival had 2020 programs that demonstrate increased commissioning and presenting of First Nations works. Wesley Enoch's 2020 Sydney Festival featured 46 co-commissioned works, which made Sydney Festival 'the single largest commissioner of new Australian works in the country.'<sup>20</sup>

First Nations works were at the heart of the program, including several co-commissioned productions, and works commissioned through the Major Festivals Initiative.

**The Major Festival Initiative** is an Australian Government initiative that supports the commissioning, development and showcasing of new Australian performing arts productions for the nation's state-based major international arts festivals. The Confederation of Australian International Arts Festivals selects projects for support and manages the development of selected works.

When asked about the importance of commissioning work, Enoch said:

*It's about supporting the small to medium sector or individual artists who have no infrastructure around them.*

*Sure, they can sometimes get small amounts of money from funding bodies, but the MFI (Major Festival Initiative) often allows us to take greater risks. And maybe this is part of a bigger argument around the majors stepping into that environment and really helping those works to occur, but for festivals, because of our agenda and our appetite for risk ... the MFI is a great environment in which shows get commissioned in lots of different ways.*

*The challenge we have is about the ongoing life of these shows, but that's a whole other conversation.*<sup>21</sup>

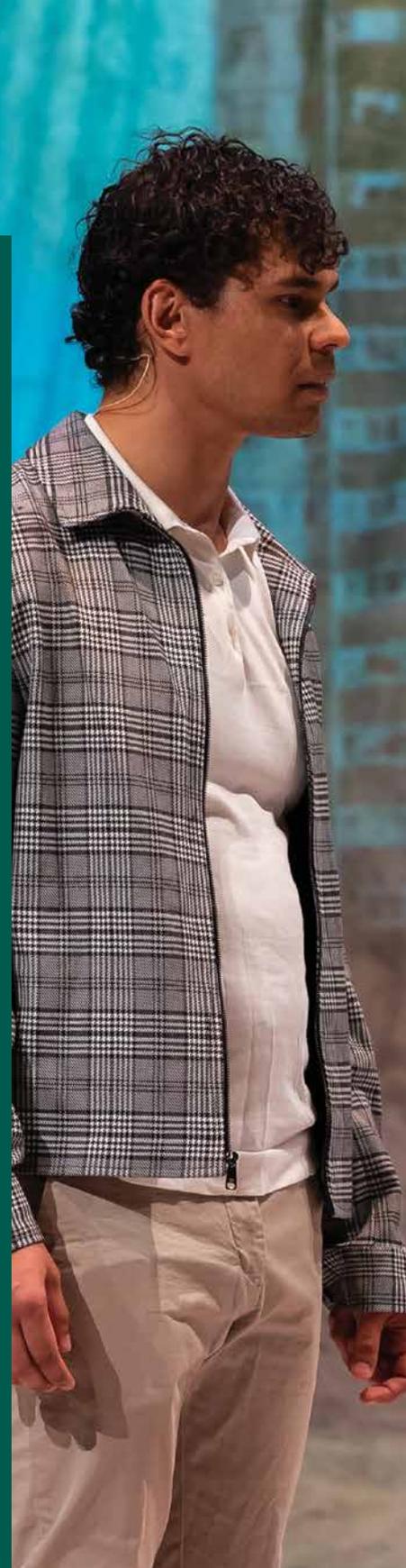
Iain Grandage, the new Artistic Director of Perth Festival from 2020 dedicated the first week of his inaugural program exclusively to First Nations works, in a powerful statement about the central place of First Nations arts in contemporary Australian culture. Grandage said:

*If people come to this Festival from outside Perth, I'd like them to get an absolute sense of this place. And so the prime reason for placing that much emphasis on Indigenous culture in my first festival – there won't be so much in other festivals – but in my first festival is to acknowledge those millennia of cultural practice that have existed here, but also the strength and breadth of it going into the future.*<sup>22</sup>

20 Richard Watts 2019, 'Sydney Festival becomes Australia's single largest commissioner of new Australian works,' *Arts Hub*, 31 October 2019.

21 As cited in Richard Watts 2019, 'Sydney Festival becomes Australia's single largest commissioner of new Australian works,' *Arts Hub*, 31 October 2019.

22 As cited in Richard Watts 2019, 'Perth Festival dedicates first week exclusively to First Nations,' *Arts Hub*, 1 November 2019.



Photograph of Uncle Jack Charles as 'Uncle Mick', and Mark Coles-Smith as 'Kane', in ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and Te Rēhia Theatre Company's *BLACK TIES* By John Harvey and Tainui Tukiwaho, featuring AV design by James Henry. Photographed by Tiffany Garvie, Perth Festival 2020.



**Questions for further research:**

How much First Nations work is commissioned by festivals?

What is the ongoing life of shows?

How long is the life of a work before it gets picked up?

How much has the level of First Nations programming increased since 2015?

## Strength of First Nations festivals for relationships and networking

First Nations dance and theatre makers see First Nations festivals to be vitally important because they build and consolidate relationships between First Nations artists and provide a unique space for work to be presented, for emerging artists in particular. First Nations festivals are also seen as important places for artists to network and identify informal mentoring opportunities:

**‘I think festivals are very important, not necessarily for developing audiences but for developing communities, those people get empowered for being involved in that festival. At YIRRAMBOI, we are all seeing each others’ shows and we are not the minority. That is really empowering in terms of developing audiences, developing new artists coming through.’**

(Theatre, regional NSW)

Interviewees placed an overwhelming emphasis on the importance of providing opportunities to engage with other First Nations artists and producers, and the potential for reaching appropriate presenters.

The need for networking both within these contexts and outside of them is seen as pressing:

**‘I wish there was some way of us getting together and learning about what one another is doing outside of these very formal events. Maybe something online, or maybe it could be something that helps us connect.’**

(Theatre, SA)

Interviewees also placed a high value on mentoring combined with opportunities to connect, grow their practice, and be seen or get their work seen at all career levels. First Nations festivals such as Yellamundie were mentioned in this context:

**‘Yellamundie, they will give you a go. We sometimes hear of these First Nations actors, no one is giving them a go. Are they 100% ready? Maybe not. Let’s give them an opportunity. So Yellamundie does this. They have mentorships at each festival with dramaturgy. They bring people from across Australia – fly them in. It’s during Sydney Festival time so they get exposure to that audience. You’ll have casting people come and say, ‘I never realised there were so many emerging young First Nations actors’, and we say, ‘yes they are out there’. ... Yellamundie provides for people at all different levels.’**

(Theatre, NSW)

**‘if it’s not performed nobody sees it. It’s just a thing on the page and then if I wanted to work non-naturalistically or in a non-text-based way, well then unless it’s performed or filmed which is really difficult to do in a theatre performance or live performance context, nobody sees your work...If you get a reading you’re lucky. Yellamundie is the main thing but then again, it’s only six works every two years and really only about one or two of those works actually see the light of day. Just so you know!’**

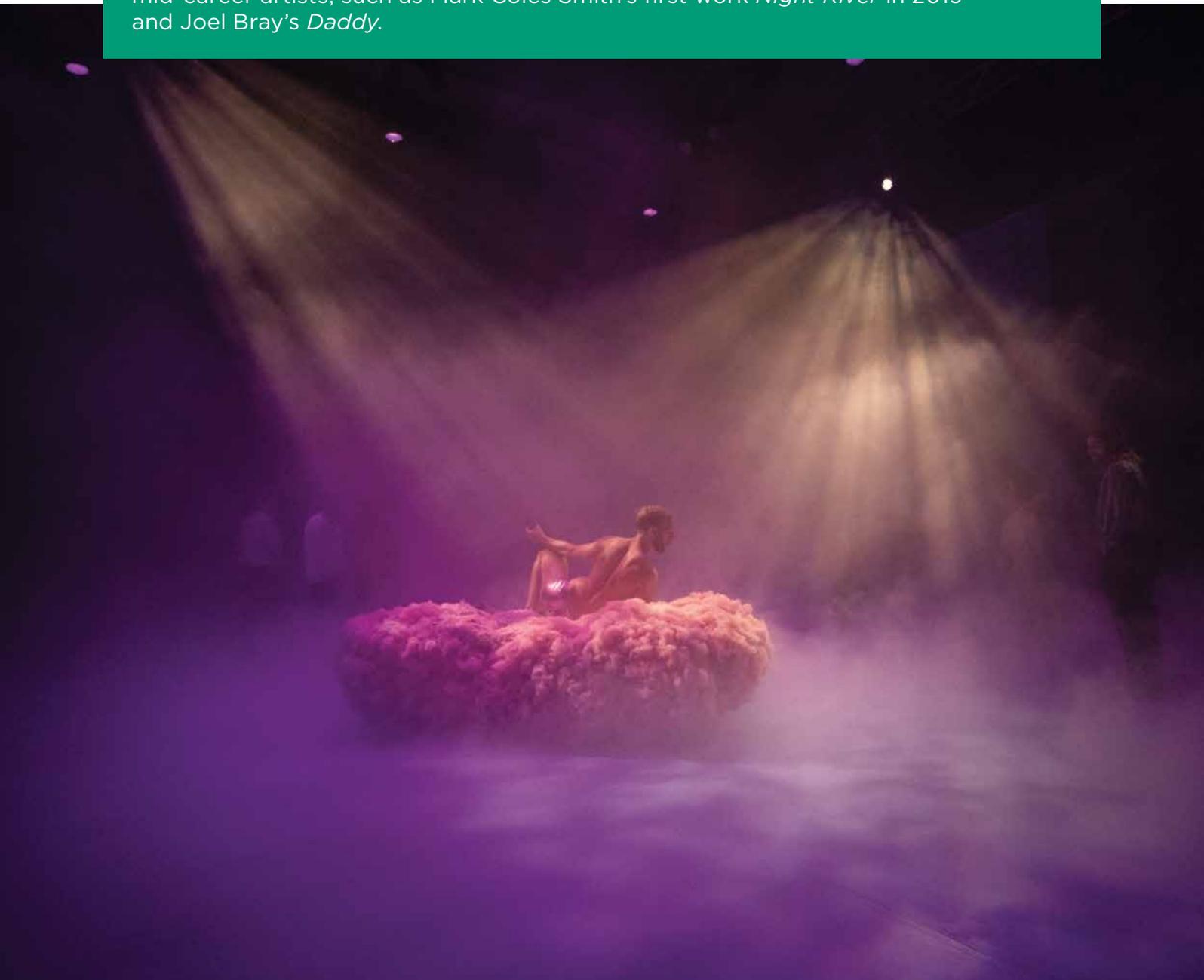
(Theatre, regional NSW)

***YIRRAMBOI – a future-focused celebration of the sophistication and diversity of First Nations culture***

YIRRAMBOI means ‘tomorrow’ in the shared local languages of the Boonwurrung and Woiwurrung peoples and the festival has this idea at its core, presenting a future-focused celebration of the sophistication, diversity and continuous evolution of the longest living culture in the world.

Over ten days, the biennial festival takes over Melbourne with nearly 100 events across 25 venues. It spans music, dance, theatre, film, fashion, talks, exhibitions and workshops. The festival celebrates and demonstrates innovative, modern practices of First Nations creatives, showcasing unique talents and perspectives.

YIRRAMBOI’s KIN Commissions premiere new work from emerging and mid-career artists, such as Mark Coles Smith’s first work *Night River* in 2019 and Joel Bray’s *Daddy*.



*Daddy* by Joel Bray, YIRRAMBOI KIN Commissions 2019.  
Credit: Jalaru Photography.

## Dealing with stereotypes and marginalisation

On the down side, some participants have felt ignored by festivals or reported having experiences that were difficult for them personally or creatively. They raised specific issues such as logistics, as well as concerns about expectations of festival organisers:

“Festival experiences have been a really incredible support for me and the show. The things that weren’t positive were going to some regional festivals that aren’t used to putting on Indigenous work. At one festival, **we were put in the Indigenous venue** and told they were doing whatever they could to get an Indigenous audience in. **But we could have been put in the main theatre and sold very well.**”

(Theatre, WA)

Others described stereotypical preconceptions about First Nations creative expression:

“It’s quite hard to navigate festivals when they know you are of Indigenous origin because they immediately go with the sand circle situation. ... I have learned to dance on the sand but **not every Blackfella comes from a land with sand**. I learned on grass. If they had that conversation with me ... look **I am a contemporary dancer, I do perform inside.**”

(Dance and theatre, regional QLD)

At a broader level, participants questioned the placement of First Nations work within festival programs, in terms of whether it is presented on the mainstage, smaller stages or spaces dedicated to First Nations work. The view is that it should be placed across the program, in a variety of venues to maximise audience exposure:

“In a festival stage there is **some Blackfella stuff but it’s on a Blackfella stage and that’s how it’s programmed**. We have to engage with an advisory group that’s connected [and] they have huge influence in terms of what gets programmed in that stage. I’m not ignorant as to why that’s there but it’s limiting. ... **This should be a story that sits on the mainstage not a smaller stage.**”

(Theatre, Vic)

*Showcasing Creativity* observed that Australia’s underlying race relations have an impact on programming decisions and are an obstacle to presenting First Nations work. This includes preconceptions about the content and nature of First Nations work and the placement of work within a program.

Conversely, there is also a perception that work has been presented that was not stage ready:

**‘I am seeing these opportunities for our artists but *it’s almost set them up for failure because they haven’t been really ready to perform at that place.* Sometimes even smaller stages. It’s good they have been thrust on that stage through the love and support of their people. It’s a beautiful thing and great, but there are some things where they are not ready.’**

(Theatre, Vic)

Even remounts prove a challenge due to availability of cast:

**‘When you want to remount you very rarely get all the same cast, so you have to recast. You have to rework people in. The festivals never want you to – they don’t seem to have an understanding of that, that really the pool of Aboriginal actors we want to work with is very limited and nine times out of 10 we’re going to need to recast and rework people up from scratch, often up to half your cast, and they won’t give you money to rework it with the new cast.’**

(Theatre, regional NSW)

Of presenters surveyed for *Showcasing Creativity*, 23% said an obstacle to programming was that not enough works are available or mainstage ready. Interviewees explained that First Nations work needed significant support from programmers and funders to get it stage ready, and that some works are ‘rushed’ through which need more development.

Similar sentiments have come from art makers in the current research: that there is a lack of support for the development stage, meaning works are either rushed or are going unproduced, unrepresented and sometimes unseen beyond the page unless they can be self-funded.

The lack of available First Nations actors was also raised in *Showcasing Creativity*. Interviewees suggested that to increase the presentation of First Nations performing arts there needed to be an increase in the number of First Nations arts workers across the spectrum of arts and cultural roles. These include performers, makers, technical and administrative staff, marketers and decision-makers. The need for training and professional development was a commonly mentioned issue.

#### **Question for further research:**

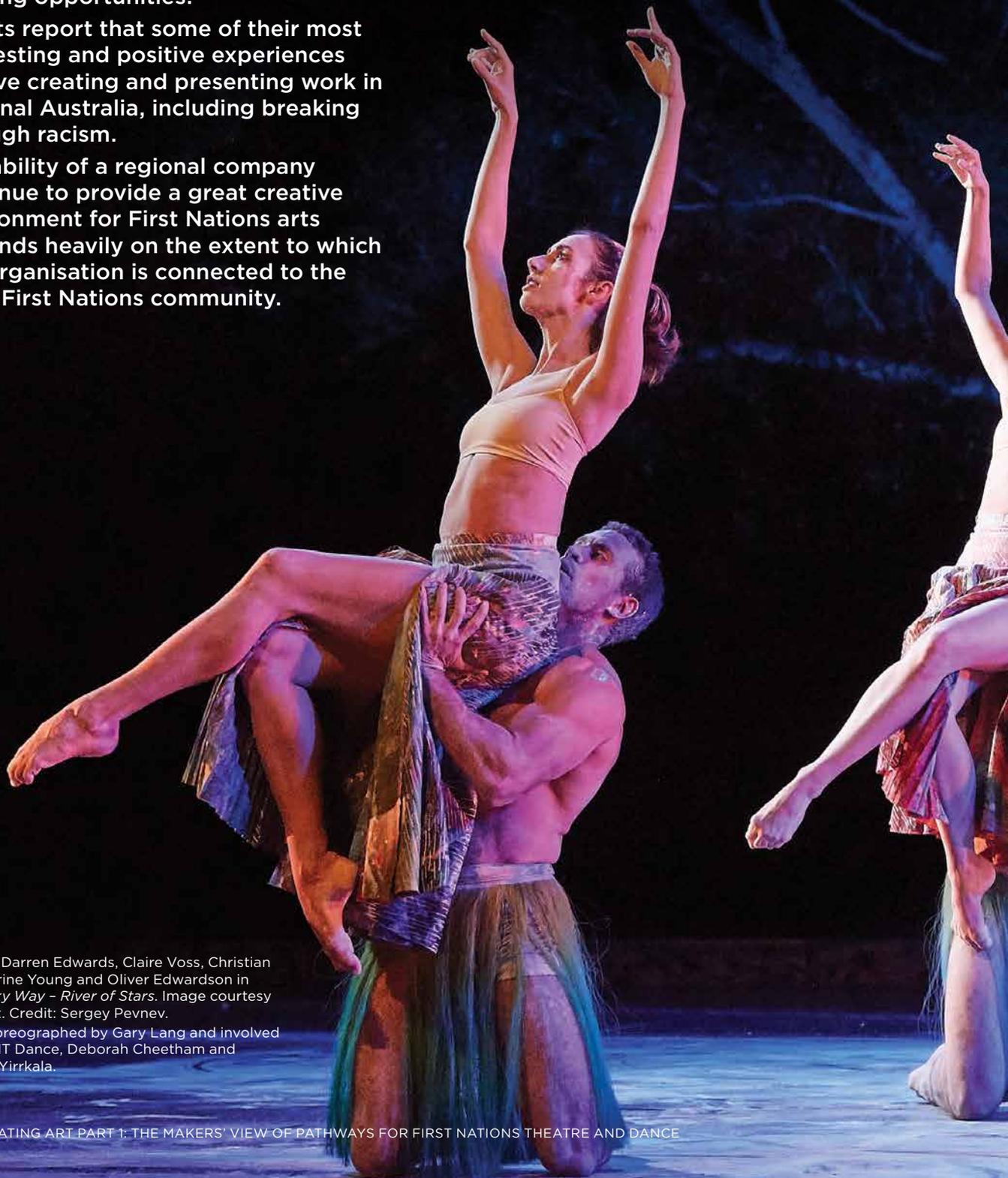
How many First Nations works are remounted?

How many works are not programmed due to casting shortages?

How many First Nations works go unproduced?

## Working outside the major cities

- First Nations artists based in regional and remote areas face particular challenges in creating work and reaching wider audiences. These include higher transport costs, the need to fly artists and presenters in, and less training opportunities.
- Artists report that some of their most interesting and positive experiences involve creating and presenting work in regional Australia, including breaking through racism.
- The ability of a regional company or venue to provide a great creative environment for First Nations arts depends heavily on the extent to which the organisation is connected to the local First Nations community.



Polly Hilton, Darren Edwards, Claire Voss, Christian Luck, Catherine Young and Oliver Edwardson in Milnjiya, *Milky Way - River of Stars*. Image courtesy of WA Ballet. Credit: Sergey Pevnev.

This was choreographed by Gary Lang and involved Gary Lang NT Dance, Deborah Cheetham and artists from Yirrkala.



*Showcasing Creativity* found that more than half of First Nations programming takes place in major cities (59%). First Nations work comprised only 2% of the total works presented in major cities in 2015, 3% of programming in regional Australia, and 7% in remote Australia.

David Throsby and Katya Petetskaya are currently leading a national survey of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in remote communities, aimed at understanding the conditions of art and cultural production in this context.<sup>23</sup>

It is being undertaken progressively across six regions in remote Australia.

Initial results indicate:

- While the majority of artists in the first four regions<sup>24</sup> are engaged in visual arts, around half of artists in each region are engaged in performing arts (acting, dancing, playing musical instruments, singing). Over 60% in each region have been engaged in performing arts at some point.
- While the majority of visual artists are paid for their work, between half and 60% of those engaged in performing arts in the previous 12 months were paid.
- For most performing artists, work tends to be incidental, most commonly accounting for approximately one full day per week or per month, depending on the region.

According to BlakDance, there are multiple challenges for dancers wanting to work on their Country:

*‘Dance makers who aspire to working on their Country lack culturally safe options, resources and they often face unethical ways of working in creative development.’<sup>25</sup>*

<sup>23</sup> Throsby D and Petetskaya K, *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in the Central Desert (NT) and the APY Lands (SA)*, April 2019; *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in North West NT and Tiwi Islands*, May 2019; *Integrating Art Production and Economic Development in Arnhem Land Northern Territory*, July 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Kimberley, WA; East and West Arnhem Land, NT; North-West NT and Tiwi Islands; and Central Desert, NT and APY Lands, SA.

<sup>25</sup> Information courtesy of BlakDance, April 2020.

## Living and working

Many participants expressed concern that the bulk of the professional activity is, or has to be, centred in and around Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane.

Even cities like Perth and Adelaide are seen as 'regional' in terms of artists' capacity to engage in the national scene:

**“We aren’t even in a regional area, here in Adelaide, but for theatre and dance in Australia we might as well be. It’s hard for performers or producers to stay here when the pull to Melbourne or Sydney or even Brisbane is constant... If you stay, you do it as an act of resistance. There just aren’t that many opportunities.”**

(Theatre, SA)

Artists based in regional and rural areas talked about the challenges of funding art in areas where there are higher transport costs and where artists might need to be flown in to realise the work. They spoke of limited training and mentoring and difficulty in accessing appropriate networking opportunities:

**“Being based in North Queensland means that there are limited trained professionals that we can engage for projects so even if we get funding, most of it is chewed up with bringing performers in from other places around Australia. That also means the creative element of the show may not be the quality of standard we were hoping to achieve in the end.”**

(Dance, regional QLD)

They also feel that presenters and producers are uninterested or unable to seek out works from regional areas without funding provided to them to do so:

**“We find it really hard to get presenters up to Darwin [to see the work]. It’s too far. They think we don’t have the ability to put on bloody good shows. So we paid, we covered airfare and accommodation and we had six presenters come up. That was good. But that’s because we paid.”**

(Theatre, NT)

## Touring and presenting work to regional audiences

While regional and remote artists face unique challenges, artists more broadly spoke in positive terms about the experiences they have had presenting work in some regional and remote areas.

While acknowledging this is not the experience of everyone who tours to regional areas, several artists reported extremely positive experiences of working or touring in regional areas, both personally and creatively:

**‘I’m always blown away by regional audiences. In my mind, I think they are going to be behind. And they are not. ... In terms of putting shows on in regional areas, a lot of the times, they have to support each other but people come and they are so receptive. You can’t just judge an area, think they are not going to get it, you need to test it.’**  
(Theatre, NSW)

**‘I think the regional audiences are underestimated, particularly in [this] region. It is quite a colourful cast of people around here from the queer identifying community to pastoralist, white Pauline Hanson voters. There is an extreme colour palate.’**  
(Theatre, regional NSW)

These observations contrast with findings from *Showcasing Creativity* around instances of both overt and systemic racism among regional audiences, as well as venue staff, suppliers and programmers. These issues appeared to arise more frequently in regional areas.

Notions that regional audiences are somehow less interested or receptive to First Nations work should be questioned and tested.

Some artists spoke of the power of First Nations arts to break through racism in regional areas:

**‘It’s been really weird to think that a regional town like Mildura could accept you, after being won over. They were still close-minded at the start but I won them over by the second song.’**  
(Theatre, NT)

**‘There are absolutely differences between capital city and regional audiences. They did a bit of a creative development presentation of that work and invited community people to it, around 60 people there in a small theatre. And the Elder involved... he used to be a shearer and he has worked on a lot of properties in that area and all the white farmers came in to see the show. They came because they know him but for a lot of those people it was the first time they’d stepped into a theatre space. And hearing the stories told in this way... a lot of racist experiences in his life that he has never spoken about and then the white farmers coming up after the show saying, I never knew that, that he had those experiences even though they’d known each other for decades. Then that started a conversation around that...**

**It’s not a city based work to be exported regionally. It has to resonate there, with those local audiences and to spark conversations locally and if we can do that then we have got it right.’**

(Theatre, Vic)

There is also a perception that some regional First Nations audiences may get more out of a specific work than their city counterparts:

“It was incredible to know we were getting this diverse range of audience members, especially regionally. Darwin, Adelaide, Stolen Generation survivors. It could often depend on where we were and what building we were in but **we worked very hard to connect with local Indigenous audiences to get them in.**

**Touring regionally, it felt as if those audiences were most connected, as if those stories were for them, about those small towns that feature in the show.** In Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, you get the theatre going audience but audience in regional Australia they think, these are our stories and you get that diversity.”

(Theatre, regional/remote WA)

Many regional and remote presenters interviewed for *Showcasing Creativity* described audiences’ interest in works with local connections. This could include a cast member who came from the region, or a storyline that pertained to the area.

Having a local angle to the content and local ambassadors for the work are two ways regional presenters can build both non-Indigenous and First Nations audiences (and sometimes, paying audiences) for works.

According to BlakDance there are distribution barriers for artists with tour-ready work:

*‘In distributing work, artists with tour-ready work lack producing support and are unable to respond to opportunities.’<sup>26</sup>*

**Question for further research:**

How many First Nations works tour?

26 Information courtesy of BlakDance, April 2020.

## Engagement with local First Nations communities

The ability of a regional company or venue to provide a great creative environment for First Nations arts depends heavily on the extent to which the organisation is connected to the local First Nations community:

*‘I’ve done tours throughout regional Victoria and worked in lots of venues. **It all depends on their interaction with the local Indigenous community.** It all depends on the politics within the council and the region, everything that’s going on within the postcode. **Some are really progressive when it comes to Indigenous equality, some have that distant, colonial mindset, stuck in their ways.**’*

(Theatre, VIC)

*‘I took [a show to] NORPA (Northern Rivers Performing Arts) in Lismore and we [had] great numbers for the audience. And **that’s a credit to NORPA because they have really been doing the audience development.**’*

(Dance, NSW/QLD)

*Showcasing Creativity* found that NORPA (Northern Rivers Performing Arts) was one of six presenters in the small-to-medium sector for whom First Nations work comprised almost a fifth of their total work programmed in 2015.

One issue mentioned by touring artists as well as artists creating work specifically for a regional presentation was the importance of connecting with the community prior to the development and presentation of the work.

Appreciation and support, particularly financial support, for this important cultural outreach and connection among venues and producers was not uniform, with the responsibility for this work often falling on the artists themselves. This speaks to the concerns across many participants that funding and time limitations across the development of the work can present a less meaningful experience:

*‘All of the consultation and cultural protocol issues are the same. It’s just that when you work regionally, especially **when you’re not from that area, it’s really hard to impress upon the producers that, “Actually, I’m not from there and there’s a whole lot of relationship-building that I’m going to have to do as an artist to work with them”.** I can’t just rock in and create a story out of thin air.*

***There’s this sort of fly-in/fly-out mentality** and I understand that because particularly a lot of regional companies are really under-resourced but at the same time, if they want to have outside people to come in and do that work that **there has to be some relationship-building time or an Aboriginal producer on the ground who can really broker those relationships and just keep the community and the key Elders informed of what the project is.**’*

(Theatre, NSW)

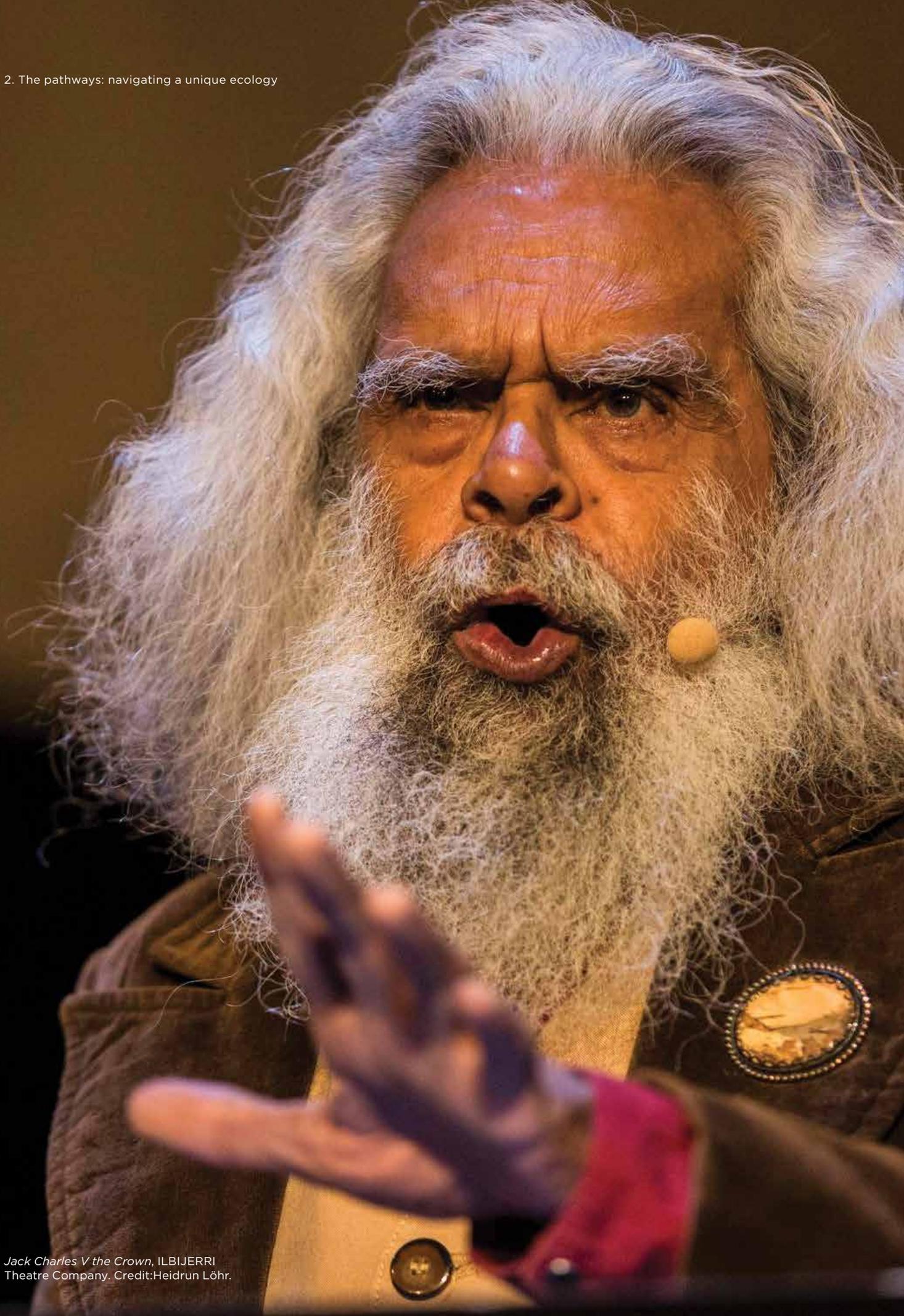
Concerns were expressed about the capacity of larger performing arts companies doing the community-engagement work, particularly around touring:

“We’re connecting people who come along to our workshops and meet each other in a relaxed way and hopefully things go from there. **We wouldn’t want them (mainstage companies) to do it, we want to do it. Give us the money to do it.**”

(Theatre, Vic)

*Showcasing Creativity* highlighted that opportunities for increased audiences in regional areas included investing in long-term community engagement.





*Jack Charles V the Crown*, ILBIJERRI Theatre Company. Credit: Heidrun Löhr.

## Working with and for First Nations communities and beyond

- Connection to community is a vital and inherent characteristic of the work of First Nations artists. Community engagement requires sustained effort.
- Touring work in First Nations communities can provide opportunities and pathways for the new generation of First Nations artists and arts sector workers.
- Ensuring First Nations audiences are able to see First Nations work is vital, and work created for First Nations audiences is finding wider appeal.

First Nations performing art works can develop in collaboration with community or out of community engagement activities and cultural practices; and First Nations communities can be the first audience for a work. Artists are also making work that encourages more First Nations people to be involved in creative work, creating pathways for the next generation of artists.

First Nations artists find untold creative inspiration in their work with First Nations communities – whether in urban, regional or remote areas – and see the community’s access to the work as an important part of the relationship:

**“We work really hard to make sure that our community and the communities we work in are involved in the work and therefore they bring their people along to the work. Because everything we do is by us and for us.”**

(Theatre, NSW)

The presence of Elders was particularly emphasised:

**“I think we have a good mix of audience. I have loved that we’ve had more Elders come to our work. Significantly more across a whole lot of our projects. For (a particular work) we had one regional arts centre make sure that there was an Elder’s bus to make sure that any Aunties and Uncles that wanted to come along could, and we had Elders at every show. Which was amazing. We are seeing more of our own people understanding that this is ours too.”**

(Theatre, NSW)

### **Question for further research:**

How many works are shown in communities or predominantly to a First Nations community audience?

## Towards the next generation of artists

Touring work in First Nations communities can also provide opportunities and pathways for the new generation of First Nations artists and arts sector workers – although this seems to be an undervalued and underestimated impact of First Nations creative output.

**‘In the end artists, particularly emerging artists, just need to be supported. A space needs to be created for these people. The expectations need to be very flexible...And we are shortcutting into the making with these young people who would never have access to a focused workshop space unless they applied for it or unless it was given to them.’**

(Theatre, regional NSW)

**‘We’ve realised that we need to go out to communities to run workshops. Workshops are about bringing people together, connecting people in the community and surrounding communities of the sites that you visit, and you get to know each other, you’re intermittently creating these networks just by being there and bringing these people together.’**

*I think that’s a model we’re going to work with in the next couple of years in getting partners in regional towns so that we can go out there and run these **playwriting workshops**. You know, **we can’t just keep expecting people to pull out these plays from nowhere.**’*

(Theatre, NSW).

A dancer from regional Western Australia told the story of meeting a young man in a gymnasium in a remote community while delivering workshops. The young man was a poet who had never been in a theatre before. His work was then developed for the stage. This example highlighted the importance of regular touring and conducting workshops, despite the fact that audience and student participation might not always look ‘good on paper’:

**‘That’s why we want to continue to tell these stories in these local and remote contexts. They shouldn’t miss out, especially since the stories are from their places.’**

(Dance, regional WA)

L-R Jacob Tiger and Cameron Young, Amata Community. Credit: Rohan Thompson.



### ***The Chosen program – community-led apprenticeships for cultural renewal***

For the First Nations performing arts sector to be sustainable there is a need to nurture talent for ongoing arts and cultural activity.

Data from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey shows that older First Nations Australians are more likely to participate in and earn income from First Nations arts than their younger counterparts, and that participation rates have declined in remote Australia since 2008.<sup>27</sup> This highlights the importance of supporting Elders to pass on cultural knowledge to younger generations before it is lost, and of investment to engage young First Nations people in the arts.

The Australia Council's Chosen program is a strategic initiative that aims to ensure the vibrancy of cultural inheritance for future generations of First Nations artists by supporting community-led cultural apprenticeships and residencies. Chosen empowers First Nations communities to take control and plan for how they will nurture younger people from their community in the arts. Chosen ensures that artistic and cultural knowledge is passed on to the next generation in the most culturally appropriate manner, which is by empowering Senior First Nations people.

Chosen was piloted in 2013 and a three year program opened for the first time in 2016 with support from states and territories. Within its current budget over its first three years, the program has supported 21 of 45 applications received, providing \$2.1 million in funding (of \$8.4 million requested). The unmet demand for culturally based programs is immense.

Chosen aims to reinvigorate the 'master and apprentice' style of mentoring within the arts.

<sup>27</sup> Australia Council 2017, *Living Culture: First Nations arts participation and wellbeing*, based on ABS data.

## For First Nations audiences and beyond

There were participants in this study who, although they stated clearly that the intended first audience for their work was a First Nations audience, they didn't believe this necessarily meant such work couldn't be understood and enjoyed by non-Indigenous audiences.

Indeed, they believe non-Indigenous audiences are often more capable of understanding and enjoying this kind of work than some producers and presenters think:

‘**We are very committed to the local and global aspects of our work.** If a show speaks to someone in a small community of 300 people in one way, the show will be received in a particular way in **Fitzroy Crossing**, and then we take that exact same show to places in **Europe and Canada** to a very different audience. **In our process we are making sure our work in multilayers, so our work can speak to those different kinds of audiences and we are committed to both.**’

(Dance, regional WA)

‘**I write for Aboriginal people** and I don't sway from that. In making that commitment, it might mean I don't get my work in big venues. But if your work is strong enough ... **I think Australian audiences are starting to embrace Aboriginal performing arts ... we can actually see not a sanitized version of Aboriginal life.**’

(Theatre, NSW)

## Challenges attracting First Nations audiences

Artists talked about the challenges of getting First Nations audiences into venues to see First Nations work. Sustained effort is required to ensure this happens; more than just mounting a community night, it needs commitment from the governance, artistic leadership and executive level in an organisation and an ongoing relationship with community organisations and Elders.

Issues around complimentary ticketing for Elders and accessible ticket prices for First Nations community members were identified as difficult conversations and highlighting cultural differences:

‘**[My show] was a piece of theatre that was put into smaller, newish venues because they wanted to build their Indigenous audience. The company that produced [my show] was a non-Indigenous company and even those conversations were difficult to have around cultural safety and simple things like wanting to offer complimentary tickets to the community.**’

(Theatre, WA)

‘**There is always going to be cultural differences. Us going into a space and trying to explain that we need to show our work to our Elders, to the Traditional Owners, to the families who own the stories, we have to show that to them first.**

So we’ve had to determine: is that a paid show, a dress rehearsal? Because we need them to approve the show before it is shown to anyone else. **Still trying to work in with the venues how that would work best...** The venue up here created a policy because of us. So for preview, in their mind its 10 or 15 people. **For us, we need to invite family and black families are very large.** Each person that we had in the performance, they had a row for their family. **So that was a shock to the venue, that all these people were coming in.** They were shocked but I said, we are black so you should know everyone comes. We had a giggle about it, there was nothing that was negative, it was just a curve for them.

... In our shows we would make sure one of the mums would do all the catering, providing dinners. The spaces don’t allow for that so we have to set up in the car park and if it’s very hot or raining, that makes it uncomfortable. **Cultural differences that spaces don’t cater for.**’

(Dance, regional Qld)

The research for *Showcasing Creativity* found that long-term community engagement and removing barriers to access were successful strategies for presenters who were building their First Nations audiences. This included holding works in familiar venues or outdoor spaces, offering transport and low price or free tickets to First Nations audiences, as well as building relationships with influencers within the community:

‘**The biggest success was working a long way out from the production and we connected, we did lots of things, but one of them was working with the truancy officer and the education officer in the local schools.** They ran a competition for kids with the best attendance records to get tickets for them and their families to come. **We put a bus on to help with transport issues** and we got sponsored through one of the local mining companies. **We offered Elders and adults in the community free tickets** if they wore t-shirts that said ‘Friends of the [Indigenous band X], Friends of the [Theatre Y]’ and they really helped with the whole evening. **There was a huge amount of work in the lead up and really connecting into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community locally up there.**’

‘Engagement with local Indigenous communities has been somewhat ‘hit and miss’ in the past, **but developing positive, on-going relationships with those members of the community** who can and will influence others to become engaged, is probably the most effective long-term strategy.’<sup>28</sup>

28 Unpublished interviews for Australia Council 2016, *Showcasing Creativity: Programming and Presenting First Nations performing arts*.

## The need to invest both time and energy

Investing time and energy in developing connections and relationships with First Nations communities was extolled as key to building and maintaining interest among First Nations audiences, and this investment is seen as crucial to ongoing success:

“**Last year we saw the results of going back to a community continually, that has made some impact for building an audience.** On the first night you might get 50, the next night you might get more. This time when we went back on the first night we had 100 people. **They remember you from last time.** We still have to get better at the lead up. We aren’t always sure if it will go ahead until the last-minute cos of funding or whatever.”

(Dance, regional/remote WA)

“**Then this year our festival (held in regional NSW) had the biggest turnout from the local community that we’ve ever had. It’s taken these years and the trust and the ownership from people in that town to build up.** The space is a gathering place, and so it’s about that community, but also about the different nations that are connected there. It is a model that can be replicated.”

(Theatre, NSW)

Some First Nations communities are concerned about touring schedules that seem to lack consultation or relevance:

“**This is my Country, I am here for a long time not a short time.** I’ve had people come in, do things and leave. Especially in communities, when *The Intervention* hit the Territory, even I was questioned why I was there by Elders. I told them, Auntie, Uncle, we are here for 5 weeks. **We aren’t just here for a couple of days, tick the box and leave.** And they said ok. **The community are sick of people flying in and out, doing workshops, and there is no follow up.** When I have stayed for a period of time, these are the conversations. A week for people to get to know you, a week the kids come, and then you are staying.”

(Dance, NT)

It is clear that in general it is First Nations artists themselves who are doing the sustained, often unpaid, work in developing First Nations audiences for their work. They are also assisting producers and presenters in the task of working with communities around making and presenting First Nations work:

“**You put on a show and you have to be able to communicate to as many people as possible. I never relied on the venue to get that done, I used my own local networks, I would get on the phone to people I know,** hey I am coming to Shepparton, let everyone know, who should I be talking to, who shouldn’t I be talking to?”

(Theatre, Vic)

“**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are craving to see their stories being told in new and different ways. As a majority of our people are not familiar with the theatre, they are a community of audience that are almost untapped. We make sure we reach our audiences by promoting our shows at the grass roots level.** If it means putting our posters in corner shops and walking in the streets of our community giving fliers to everyone, that’s how we choose to do it.”

(Dance, regional QLD)

The work of building audiences has also been successfully taken on by some of the smaller companies, at a considerable cost:

‘*If we went there with a show, we’d get a week... easy. You know, the whole of the town and all of the surrounding areas, they’d come. **But that took four years to build that trust in that community.** And this is the thing, like, **we’re wanting to do things in the proper way so you can’t just fly in and fly out of a town and just expect an audience to be there.**’*

(Theatre, NSW)

The importance of engagement, acceptance and interest from First Nations community participants is seen as central to being able to deliver into remote and less centralised spaces:

‘*In the communities themselves we are **offering our performances for free, so there is no cost.** Cost and location can always come into it so we try to have things central, where people can get to places while they are working. We fully fund the shows in the communities. **We are often reliant on the community to beat the drum in terms of advertising. Posters and Facebook.**’*

(Dance, regional/remote WA)

### **Community partnership achieving whole of community engagement**

*Milpirri*, established in 2005, is a long-term, hand in hand partnership between Lajamanu Community and the Northern Territory's premier contemporary dance company Tracks.

A bilingual, bicultural, intergenerational project, *Milpirri* culminates in a spectacular outdoor performance that brings together dance and music, young and old, past and present.

The 7th biennial performance; *Milpirri Jurntu* was held in November 2018. In a remote community with a population of 608\* it featured 141 local performers and an audience of around 520, demonstrating whole of community engagement.

The project involves a range of community, commercial and government partners; Building Better Regional Fund (Commonwealth Government), Newmont Tanami Pty Ltd, Northern Territory Government, Warlpiri Youth Development Aboriginal Corporation, Lajamanu Store, Central Desert Shire, Warlpiri Education and Training Trust, Warnayaka Arts Centre and Lajamanu School.

\*2016 Census Data



Tracks Dance Company. 2018 *Milpirri Jurntu*. Youth dancers. Credit: Peter Eve.



## Creating work for domestic audiences

Many First Nations dance and theatre makers acknowledged that their main audience is a predominantly white theatre and dance audience. Sometimes this includes First Nations people and sometimes it does not:

“**In my solo show, the majority of my audience were elite white people that go to theatre shows.** But I also want black fellas in there so they see other black faces on stage.”

(Dance and theatre, regional Qld)

“**The majority of our audiences are still I guess your traditional old white theatre goers who have subscriptions to theatres and what not.** That’s kind of what you see across the board I guess.”

(Theatre, Vic)

“**My audience is the greater public. I don’t niche myself where it is just black fellas or white fellas...** Most of the blackfellas come for matinees from schools, Indigenous kids doing dance at schools. Another blackfella creating something they can aspire to.”

(Dance, NT)

“**The theatre definitely knows who their subscriber base is and who their single ticket buyers are. In terms of an Indigenous audience ... I can probably count on two fingers the Indigenous people there on an opening night.** Maybe because they have rarely seen their lives represented.”

(Theatre, WA)

Some spoke of challenging or developing this audience with the kinds of works they program:

“**...we believe those stories can benefit and teach the world. That’s where art and dance and theatre can break through that wall.** They can learn through a different way. And look the people who come to see dance theatre, they are open hearted from the beginning. It’s the ones that don’t go to see shows that we somehow need to connect with.”

(Dance, regional WA)

“**I used to think audiences were coming for a “black healing reconciliation theme”,** coming to the theatre, crying and feeling reconciled by the end of it, “great, I am a greater citizen because of it.” That’s the cynical me. And I wondered, **how far can we push this, instead of being educators be artists?**”

(Theatre, Vic)

“**Our audience here is undoubtedly white, middle class people...**We don’t go out of our way but, through that awareness, **we program performances shows that aren’t always the norm or the most popular...** It’s like every audience, you grow your own network and it becomes like a family. When you program, you program for the season and you have structure in what you program and you are trying to take people on a journey. **We always think that our audience comes to see every show and we are trying to grow our audience.**”

(Theatre, Vic)

Presenters interviewed for *Showcasing Creativity* said that introducing audiences to accessible First Nations works provides an opportunity to grow audiences over time, slowly introducing more challenging works. Presenters felt that works which dealt with difficult topics could still attract audiences if they present a ‘fresh’ take on the matter, and that this is needed to attract audience members deterred by a perception of the sameness of First Nations works and topics.

Some dance and theatre makers feel that their audience influences the work they create, or its marketing, to differing degrees:

‘*Art is not culture, art is a by-product of culture. I think as a result we are just making art for art’s sake, we are not making it a by-product of culture because **we are now adhering to stereotypical norms of what that should or shouldn’t be like to appeal to these white audiences.***’

(Dance, NSW)

‘*Culturally giving context is really important... **you don’t want to sacrifice the integrity of the work but you do need people to understand it.** When context is giving in a sharing, inviting way, then that’s a beautiful thing. **I’ve seen shows where there is a lot of [Indigenous] language and the artist has decided not to include subtitles** and I like that, just sit and open yourself to that language, you can get a feel for what is being said. **There are different choices you can make around that.***’

(Dance, NSW/Qld)

‘***You always have to have a focus on who your audience is.** Often I find that’s one of the downfalls of a lot of Aboriginal artists. They think everyone is going to embrace their work. **You have to market your work and so you have to understand who you are marketing to.***’

(Theatre, NSW)

Some companies and producers find it difficult to fund potentially useful activities such as audience research:

‘*We don’t have the resources to collect data on who our audiences are, or ask who they are, or what they would want. **I have bugger-all data on who our audiences are, other than there are a lot of white faces in the audience** when we do put stuff on.*’

(Theatre, NSW)

Through the *Building Audiences* research, problems with audience development were tied to a lack of skills development. This skills development related specifically to training in the marketing frameworks that are used in the performing arts sector, such as market segmentation, target marketing, branding and marketing communication. There is a recognised need for First Nations arts workers to be equipped with the same marketing skills.

## Working internationally

- International First Nations networks are strong and enable a range of opportunities for collaboration, exchange and touring.
- There are ongoing needs for formal and informal networking opportunities and for funding for international development activity when it can resume.
- Prior to COVID-19, First Nations dance and theatre makers were touring work internationally to great acclaim. There is an opportunity for greater realisation of the export value of First Nations performing arts.

Amrita Hepi, *A Call to Dance*.  
Image courtesy Performing Lines.  
Credit: Anthony Gattari Photography.



## Cultivating international networks

The development of global relationships is invaluable for promoting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and their work on the world stage; as well as enabling collaborations with First Nations artists in other countries for both career development and artistic expression.

First Nations Australian artists are developing, creating, presenting and training with First Nation artists from around the world. They are involved in cultural exchange, workshops, co-productions, festival work and touring, and they derive artistic inspiration and personal support from First Nations colleagues in other countries.

They are making these connections through formal and informal networks:

**“In terms of cross-cultural work, these relationships have been built over time. We can hardly be recognised in our own country so First Nations people have reached across borders to people in Canada and New Zealand and Taiwan and Indonesia. We have a shared perspective around the coloniser and loss of culture.”**  
(Theatre, regional NSW)

**“I use Facebook and social media a lot to speak directly to an audience local and international. Facebook connections have led to international commissions. I’ve never been able to get an agent and so I have to promote myself.”**  
(Theatre, NSW)

Many artists indicated that they need to fund international development work through their existing practice, and that they build these connections into existing work by trimming some of their own incomes:

**“We had an amazing project that ran earlier this year, and it was our second time hosting it, but we had to pay for all of the internationals to participate. I was glad we got the funding to do that, but it would have made sense if we could have connected with others to subsidise the cost... and we got them here, but we had to take less of the financial support for the overall event. If we could network, connect up, if someone was doing that, it would make so much more possible for us and others.”**  
(Theatre, NSW)

Prior to COVID-19, heightened interest from international First Nations artists in connecting with their counterparts in Australia was seen to be creating a nexus of activity. However, there was no clear sense of whether, or how, taking advantage of this opportunity could be funded:

**“It’s no surprise that cross-cultural work is such a hot bed of action. It’s slowly gathering momentum. At APAM [the Australian Performing Arts Market] this year, there was an incredible turn out of First Nations People [from] across the globe, interested in connecting and growing networks and what work we were making. These connections can happen through festivals and program work. In the end it is about money to support that.”**  
(Theatre, regional NSW)

### ***The Global First Nations Exchange***

The Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) 2018 saw the strongest representation of First Nations artists, presenters and producers to date, and a large contingent of First Nations pitches.

The Global First Nations Exchange was an evolution of the peer-to-peer capacity building that the Australia Council has supported at APAM since the first Blackfella Boot Camp in 2014.

The exchange was for market-ready First Nations performing artists and producers from around the world including official APAM showcase and pitch artists. It brought together 42 established First Nations artists and producers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan and the United States and built on the Tri-Nations market development goals at APAM 2016.

For the first time, this program ran over the entire week of APAM weaving a journey of engagement for artists, producers and presenters. This was a significant opportunity for global Indigenous performing arts sectors from around the world to network, increase visibility and mobilisation and promote Indigenous-led market development discussion and outcomes.

The Global First Nations Exchange was produced and presented by First Nations peak body BlakDance.<sup>29</sup>

Australia Council for the Arts First Nations Exchange & Boot Camp, 2016. Powerhouse, Brisbane. APAM 2016.



29 See: <https://www.blakdance.org.au/apam-2018>

## International touring

Prior to COVID-19, First Nations dance and theatre makers were touring work internationally to great acclaim. Some participants felt there could be more scope to promote their work overseas and greater recognition of the value of First Nations performing arts as an Australian export:

**‘There is a huge issue in this country in terms of really understanding our worth in the international market. And the way to do it is not constantly setting up partnerships between Australia and Canada and Australia and Europe and all of that but it should be more about working on what we’ve got and taking it other places.’**

(Dance, NSW)

**‘A lot of black companies, they find more work overseas that here in Australia. But that speaks to what our country is not doing.’**

(Dance and theatre, regional Qld)

**‘Non-Indigenous people don’t get how valued Indigenous arts are overseas.’**

(Dance, regional WA)

There is a need for ongoing market and audience development to fully contextualise First Nations Australian work and harness its export value.

### **Questions for further research:**

How much First Nations performing arts work is exported overseas?

What types of work are achieving international success?

*A Call To TOPP (The Original Peoples Party),  
by TOPP Mob at APAM 2018, Brisbane.  
Credit: Rob Maccoll.*





## Creating work for schools

- Demand and opportunities to create First Nations performing art works for schools are thriving.
- The education sector provides First Nations dance and theatre makers with opportunities to educate young people, generate income, sustain creative work, share diverse cultural expression, ensure young First Nations people see themselves represented and build audiences of the future.
- It is essential that work is developed from a cultural base to ensure diversity and authenticity rather than reinforcing stereotypes.

### Enlightening and renewing audiences

Some artists had started to create art specifically for a school audience. This work sometimes develops into art for a wider audience or feeds creative development into other areas, but not necessarily.

‘*The way that I got back into the industry is [my daughter’s school] didn’t even have any NAIDOC activities. So she wanted to create a performance based on her grandmother’s story, who was part of the Stolen Generation[s]. **We created that piece of work and that went really well so after that we continued to do 10-minute performances around the place.***’

(Dance, regional Qld)

While other artists are creating work for festivals or companies or specifically to tour, they also aim to reach a schools audience in particular, both because they want their stories to educate the next generation of non-First Nations people but also to ensure First Nations students see their stories told.

‘*I really wanted to tap into 9, 10, 11 and 12 years at school. ... And if it gets off the ground and goes on tour, **I specifically want to target that audience for schools shows, because of the domestic violence and foster families, White or Black, I want to open up a dialogue.***’

(Theatre, NT)

Participants believe that presenting First Nations work in primary and high schools is an important way to build future appetite for that work in the community, to continue to build audiences:

‘***Education is critical here.** There has to be more hands-on experience of Aboriginal culture. That’s a must. **That’s developing our audiences.** We need to get the cultural and the artistic and the educational outreach right.*’

(Dance, NSW)

‘*I am so passionate about getting younger audiences into seeing my work. I’ve had a lot of conversations about this [within the company]. **We need to give these young people every chance to hear diverse stories, to develop empathy.** They are coming to theatre during school but being able to nurture those young people and **give them every opportunity to see theatre. I feel like my work is in safe hands with these young people.***’

(Theatre, WA)

Presenters interviewed for *Showcasing Creativity* said that primary and secondary schools are a potentially significant market for First Nations performing arts, across all locations.

Almost two thirds of presenters surveyed had worked with local schools when presenting First Nations works, and around one third had used education activities or resources.

Several interviewees described unmet existing demand and urged content producers to make work for school engagement. They also saw school engagement as a valuable step in reconciliation and developing audiences of the future.

**Questions for further research:**

How much work is created specifically for school audiences?

How much work is presented to school audiences?

While employment in educational institutions and the desire to educate audiences on First Nations issues drives and sustains some artists, others believe that the impetus to always create work that educates white audiences becomes constraining and tiring:

**“I don’t feel the pressure to educate people any more, I just want to make good work and there are different access points within it and you can take it as you want to take it.”**

(Dance, NSW)

**“We don’t have to educate. I am not here to educate. If I wanted to do that I’ve be in education and probably get paid more.”**

(Theatre, Vic)

### ***Creating art for schools – the shaping of work and its impacts***

*Bukal*, produced by JUTE Theatre Company is a story about Henrietta Marrie who went from Yarrabah to the United Nations to promote the status of First Nations peoples. Following the first creative development for the new work, JUTE struggled for a couple of years to fund further development.

JUTE worked on securing funding for the Dare to Dream program which involved touring new First Nations works to schools and communities in Far North Queensland with a one week residency in each community.

The requirement to tour *Bukal* and tour it to schools set some parameters that shaped the work. For example, it would include three actors and run at under an hour. The content had to be engaging and accessible for primary school aged children as well as for adult audiences. The staging also had to be adaptable and demountable so that it could fit in a 4WD trailer to be toured to remote communities.

While some people were concerned that the play might be too 'intellectual' and distant from the lives of the mainly primary school audiences, the feedback affirmed the importance of the story, the value of the work and its potential to educate and inspire.<sup>30</sup>

The team also stayed in each community for up to a week to guide the kids through workshops about their own daring and dreams. The kids performed their own pieces of theatre at the end of the workshops, stunning their teachers and parents with their new confidence. The Dare to Dream program slowly changed the way some of the participants think of themselves and their future and the way their teachers, peers and community perceive them.<sup>31</sup>

***‘I’m all about making a difference and making lives for our people and our kids better... If I can reach young people of today and tomorrow and the future (with my story and this play), I hope to inspire them to go for great heights, dream, dream, but capture those dreams and move forward with them.’***  
Henrietta Marrie<sup>32</sup>

30 Davis S and Walker Y 2019, *Creating 'Experience': Career trajectories and the development of new First Nations work in the performing arts - Case Studies related to JUTE Theatre Company's 'Dare to Dream' project*. Rockhampton: Central Queensland University.

31 Ash K, *Theatre's Daring Dream*, JUTE Theatre Company. Viewed 9 March 2020 at <https://jute.com.au/theatres-daring-dream/>

32 Interview cited in Davis S and Walker Y 2019, *Creating 'Experience': Career trajectories and the development of new First Nations work in the performing arts - Case Studies related to JUTE Theatre Company's 'Dare to Dream' project*. Rockhampton: Central Queensland University, p.27. Emphasis added.



JUTE Theatre Company -  
*Buka!* Dare to Dream Remote  
Tour and Residency Program.  
Images by: Raw Lens  
Media Co (from video).  
Filmed during Cape York Girl  
Academy residency.

## Tourism and corporate work

- Tourism and corporate work are seen variously as an opportunity for employment, self-direction and reaching new audiences, and a challenge in presenting authentic work that does not conform to stereotypes.
- It is vital that any increases in volume of work to meet growing demand are not done at the expense of depth or diversity. First Nations creative control is needed and there is an opportunity for strategic national branding beyond Bangarra.

### Responding to rising demand

The growing and lucrative tourism market for First Nations work (prior to COVID-19) reinforces the need for greater support for diverse work – work that reflects the spectrum of First Nations creative output. There is concern that efforts to meet rising demand could result in an increase in volume rather than in depth.

There is some evidence of artists performing work for a tourism and corporate marketplace, especially companies like Bangarra. Many Queensland-based artists had been commissioned or employed to create work in and around the 2018 Commonwealth Games. One spoke of reaching a new audience through this opportunity:

*“That was really interesting in terms of the outdoor space, that was something I really wanted because the work was about connection to earth and sky. **I found a whole different audience compared to what I am normally performing in front of.** This was passers-by because it was on Southbank out the front of QPAC. **Immediately it was taking down that barrier, opening up to people who usually wouldn’t go.**”*  
(Dance, NSW/Qld)

Artists and companies in major cities, as well as in regional locations, are often incorporating their work into dual-purpose events, such as festivals that become major tourist destinations. But for direct tourism opportunities, many are not separately considering ‘tourist audiences’ in their work.

One artist adapted a ten minute piece developed for schools to present at national and international conferences, forums and symposiums; and one artist had extended work developed for schools into the tourism market, supported by their regional council:

*“We have partnered with Cairns Regional Council and **we are involved in one of the productions that is a satellite event as part of the Commonwealth Games. A bit a musical story about the history of Cairns, which is what we love doing.**”*  
(Dance, regional Qld)

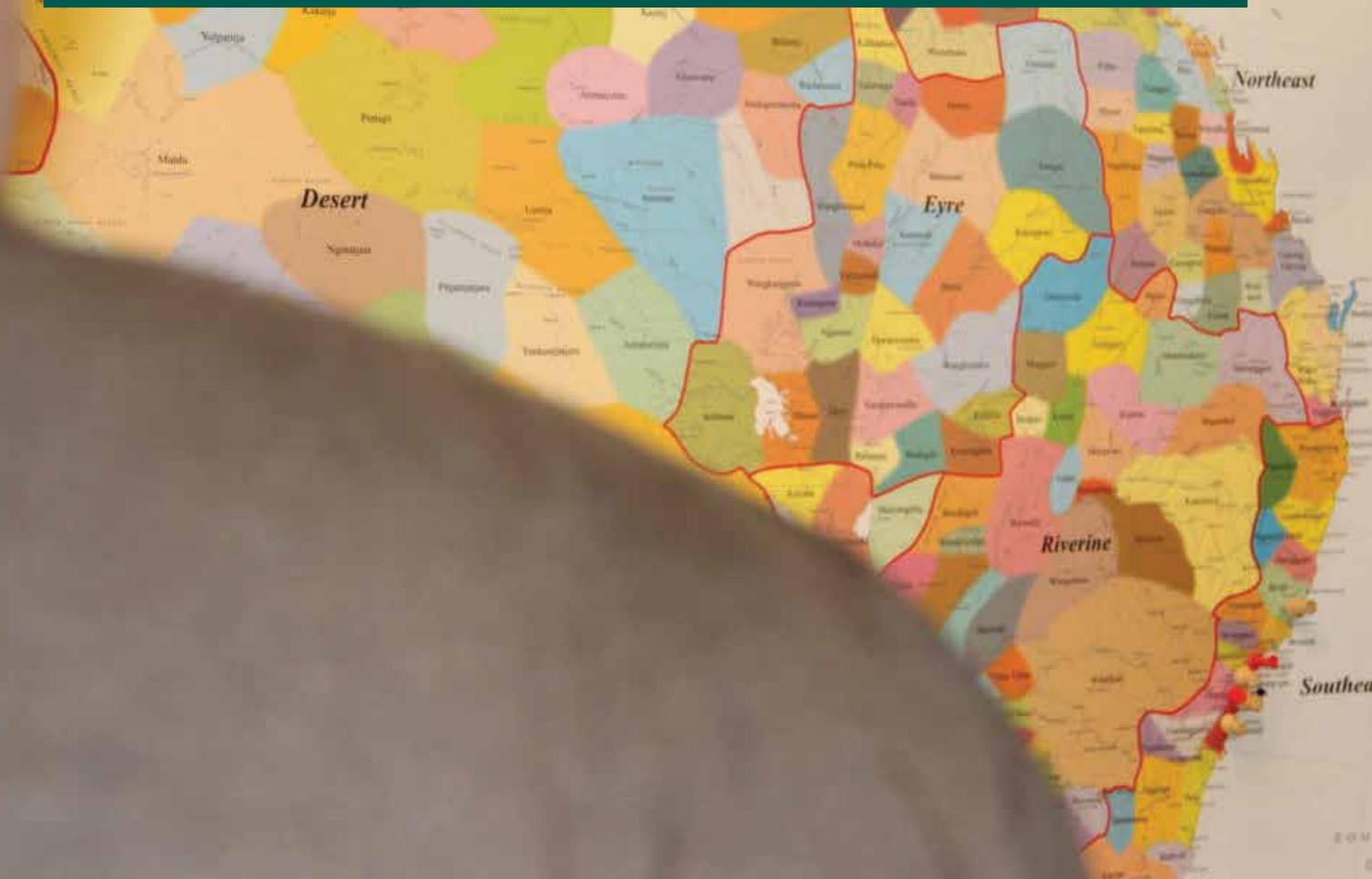
Growing demand for First Nations arts experiences among international tourists (prior to COVID-19) was demonstrated in the Australia Council's 2018 research *International Arts Tourism: Connecting cultures* (based on Tourism Research Australia's International Visitor Survey data).

This research showed that nearly 830,000 international tourists engaged with First Nations arts while in Australia in 2017, an increase of 41% since 2013. This included 300,000 who attended a First Nations performance. International tourists are more likely to attend First Nations arts while in Australia than sporting events.

One in four arts tourists (those who engaged with the arts while in Australia) engaged with First Nations arts, as did more than one in four international tourists travelling in school tour groups.

Arts tourists who visited regional areas of the NT had particularly high levels of engagement.

In remote First Nations communities, where there are strong interconnections between sectors, a successful tourism enterprise can stimulate local production of visual and performing arts and contribute to the growth and increased activities of the local economy overall.<sup>33</sup>



Australia Council staff look at the AIATSIS map of Indigenous Australia, NAIDOC Week 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Throsby D and Petetskaya K 2019, *Submission to the Committee on Indigenous Affairs: Inquiry into the pathways and participation opportunities for Indigenous Australians in employment and business*. (Sub.5), p.10.

## Strategic concerns

The lack of specific engagement in tourism may be strategic, as there were many concerns expressed about tourism as a blunt instrument that can stereotype or reduce the stories coming from First Nations artists. In particular, there is a concern that there is no national strategic branding for First Nations performance outside of Bangarra:

“**The tourism slope is a slippery one. Because you’re objectifying your work.** Even beyond that, what’s difficult about that space is that not **one Black theatre in Australia has its own space**, so they can’t go there and say that’s where Aboriginal theatre is. **So when I go to New York, I go to the national Harlem theatre, and I can get a photo there, and say this is Black theatre in America. How can you build a tourism thing when none of us have a place where we are continuously showing our work?**”

(Theatre, NSW)

Tourism is also seen to be challenging due to a focus on stereotype and forms that are already tested with audiences:

“**Tourism isn’t working for us, because it requires us to focus on what will work in high art for the funding agencies, what will work for our mob and then what will work for tourists, both Australian tourists and overseas ones. It means we have all of these masters and the tourism one is often the more dumbed down version.** I think international audiences can engage with really sophisticated work, but it requires some translation and it’s hard for one company to do that in their promotional literature.”

(Theatre, TAS)

“**At the moment I’m co directing a show that is going to be performed at the Commonwealth Games that still speaks to me but still kind of speaks to a western narrative, well at least easily digestible. I am still trying to work out how to get things into these venues without compromising myself so much anymore.**”

(Dance and theatre, regional Qld)

“**That’s the difference between cultural authenticity and cultural performance. The marketplace drives the product.**”

(Dance and theatre, regional WA)

Others talked about an imperative to have the process controlled by the First Nations company:

“**We worked with tourism authorities on a performance piece in (a prominent location in Sydney), and it was a performance piece telling stories about resistance. If ever we engage with tourist audiences, that’s how we want to do it, so not just to give them what they expect and challenging tropes of identity.**”

(Theatre, NSW)

### Questions for further research:

How much work is created for a tourist or corporate audience?

How much work is presented to tourist or corporate audiences?



# 3. The infrastructure: current mechanisms for support

This section explores key support structures for creating First Nations performing arts.

***In creating art, regardless of place and context, artists spoke of a mix of support structures, tools and strategies to see that work through.***

Clearly what can work for one artist won't be helpful or available for another. This inconsistency and lack of a formal network was articulated as problematic.

National and state-based funding is seen as key, as is support from local councils and community arts centres.

## Funding

- **Long-term funding is critical to developing a broad range of First Nations dance and theatre work, including riskier and more diverse work.**
- **Navigating the application process can be challenging for First Nations artists including whether to apply for First Nations-specific or general theatre and dance funding programs. There are concerns about whether funding for non-First Nations organisations employs First Nations artists and creatives.**

Direct funding for First Nations performing arts can support all stages of the creative process including the development, presentation or touring of particular works; the practice of individual artists, such as through fellowships or workshops; and the operations of performing arts companies engaged in developing and presenting new work.

Funds may come from:

- national or state/territory governments
- non-arts government initiatives at all levels of government
- commercial sponsorship
- philanthropic sources
- community partners.

Appropriate funding for the development of the sector – particularly grants, fellowships and ongoing investment – was a major topic for conversation and critique among First Nations artists. Alongside this need to secure funding for development and presentation are the limitations of the current funding processes, including the pressures to produce art when you are ‘constantly chasing the funding cycle’ (Dance, NT).

Many of the participants in this study have benefitted enormously from fellowships and grants provided at all levels of government:

*‘I’ve got a \$30,000 grant off Australia Council and without that money we wouldn’t have been able to develop any shows. **We did it off our own back for so long but when that money came along it just changed things up a bit and we were able to write a show that was different and people liked.** The partnerships from that took me to APAM this year.’*

(Theatre, NT)

Securing funding to start with is seen as particularly difficult for First Nations artists. Part of this is the application process itself:

*‘When you start writing the applications, your vocabulary is already different, so **we need someone on the panel that can understand what we are trying to say without changing the way we communicate. It took me a long time to learn how to write so people would take me seriously.** A friend of mine is an English teacher, she helped me pull the thing apart. Another one of my early producers helped me. **Learning how to do that was bloody hard.**’*

(Theatre and dance, regional Qld)

*‘Going through the grants process can be a bit tricky to navigate. It’s not ideal and it’s definitely not Aboriginal-friendly in that you can’t print it off. You have to have good access to the Internet and if you’ve got dodgy Internet [in a regional or rural area], it makes it really hard.’*

(Theatre, NSW)

*Showcasing Creativity* observed that systemic discrimination can be present in the expectation that minority groups communicate in the dominant language and cultural paradigm. Several interviewees made the point that First Nations artists need support in communicating with non-Indigenous decision-makers.

A suggestion made through this research was grant and application writing workshops aimed at First Nations artists.

One participant believed that mentoring and encouragement to apply for grants and fellowships is critical and can build confidence and skill over time, as well as helping hone the aims of the work and artist:

“I apply for whatever I can. **My mentor instilled in us, apply, apply, apply** especially if it’s an Indigenous program because if people don’t apply it might be defunded. I feel like I have a successful approach to grant applications and I can write them on my own. I feel like doing that as much as possible is important because **it really forces you from the beginning to think about what it is you want, and how you want to do it. Those questions are really critical as an artist, especially if you want to build audiences.** It’s not just about trying to get some funding, but also because it makes me confront, who am I, what am I doing?”

(Dance, NSW/Qld)

Artists, particularly those in regional and rural areas, mentioned the difficulty of source funding from philanthropic and private sources to augment or provide a bridge between government grants:

“You get told all the time, soon the funding will run out so you have to start looking elsewhere. But where do you look? **A lot of small to medium sized dance companies, we don’t have the staff, the accountants or other people that can help us find that funding.** We don’t have DGR (deductible gift recipient) status. **We eventually got our DGR status and so it’s now easier for people to give but it was a long process.** It was a two-and-a-half year process. There are so many wealthy people here but they are interested in putting their money into sport and youth.”

(Dance, NT)

For First Nations artists seeking funding there are also strategic issues to consider, namely whether to apply for funding set aside for First Nations work or to general theatre and dance funding programs:

“When I was working with a lot of artists who were Black and doing super contemporary stuff, the feeling was that it was possibly immoral or it just was a waste of time to ask for money from ATSI [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts] and so we started applying to the other pools. ... **They should just go after general pool funding because they’re just as good and just as entitled to it and that was a strategy that worked.**”

(Theatre, Vic)

“It is getting harder. I work in mainstream and I do Indigenous work in the mainstream and sometimes it’s demonised. And also funding, I am really conscious there is minimal funding out there. **We get funding from different grants but don’t get specific ‘Black’ money. It’s bloody difficult, step through that minefield of how to get money, you don’t want to take Blackfella money but we want to tell Blackfella stories.**”

(Theatre, Vic)

On the flip side, one artist reflected that there are non-First Nations players in the sector applying for funding dedicated to First Nations work not because of their commitment to telling First Nations stories but because of the funding opportunities:

“**We are now getting our voices out there, we know there is an audience for our work but how do we sit in the middle of that? How can we be the ones who draw on those funds?** There has to be an Indigenous business model for that, for our storytelling on screen and in theatre. **There are a lot of non-Indigenous people who are jumping in the water not because they have a real interest but because there is money to be made.**”

(Theatre, Vic)

A range of respondents from organisations talked about the work involved with applying for and acquitting single year funding, and the work and time that would be saved, and the work that could be accomplished if longer-term funding was available even as a one-off amount:

**‘What would happen if they decided to give Aboriginal companies more money, fund them for three years? Just a one-off, here are, here’s a load of money that is going to a bigger company producing less work than you, and let’s see what you can do. Here’s the confidence that we have in you to deliver, produce work of a high standard. That would really change the world.’**

(Theatre, NSW)

There is also a concern around the commitment from government to funding, and how difficult it is for organisations like the Australia Council to have impact given its budget:

**‘The entire budget of the Australia Council Aboriginal arts board is less than the entire amount just for one art form. And then they’re like, well you can come in through the main theatre round but it’s four times as competitive, with four times as many theatre companies also in that bunch. And normally only one or two companies might get funding, compared to 30 companies.’**

(Theatre, NSW)

The concern about sustainability within a precarious industry was reflected in responses from both individual artists, and more worryingly, from established companies:

**‘We get a very small stipend and yet we work pretty much fulltime for [the theatre company]. So, we notice that we spend most of our funding on projects rather than staffing. We’re trying to change the balance of our spending, but it’s going to take a while to turn that around because it’s how we’re funded. I’m having to supplement my income with university work, but I think its complementary in a lot of ways because you have access to other types of thinking around practice, as well which always informs your process.’**

(Theatre, NSW)

### **Australia Council support for First Nations arts**

The Australia Council undertakes a broad range of activity to support First Nations arts and cultural expression, including investment in the creation, development, production and distribution of artistic and cultural works.

This is delivered through project grants and multi-year organisational funding; targeted investment through the Chosen, Cherish, Signature Works and First Nations Audience and Market Development programs; the First Nations Arts Awards; and capacity building and strategic development nationally and internationally, including a new Custodianship Program, and research that investigates the First Nations arts ecology and promotes greater participation in First Nations arts experiences by all Australians.

Demand for Australia Council programs is high. The mismatch between the investment potential of the sector and available funds impacts the ability of artists to make a living and their artistic ambitions.

## Space and infrastructure

- Rehearsal and office space is critically needed to create First Nations performing arts works and run companies.
- Support from local councils and community arts centres is key.

In addition to funding, support for First Nations artists includes the provision of administrative infrastructure and 'space'. This kind of support tends to be offered at the level of local councils and arts centres, for both city and regionally based artists.

**“Our biggest challenge at the moment is rehearsal space... The spaces that are available are being over used.”**  
(Dance, regional Qld)

**“We are still working on the space we need. We have only had an office for a couple of years, now we are at the Civic Centre. We feel we can go well developing that relationship with the Shire, but it’s still a struggle. We have been able to give them feedback about how to support us and other artists in the community. We have had a good contact that has been there for a number of years so she understands what we do. That’s made it a bit easier but if she was to go, we’d have to start again.”**  
(Dance, regional/remote WA)

**“Council have been incredibly supportive of me, providing space, we’ve done creative development presentations there. It’s better than being at home working at the kitchen table... having a dedicated space. It’s hugely important for me professionally and psychologically. As an independent maker of stories, you feel like someone else has got your back. Accessing space is so important because it’s so expensive. You can spend a lot of money on space. Having an office space and all the in-kind stuff does make a difference.”**  
(Theatre, Vic)

The councils and centres best placed to support First Nations artists in this way are those that are connected to their community, that understand cultural protocol, and have internal champions within the organisation committed to further educating the organisation:

**“The local council still needs to know more about cultural protocol. But [our council is] certainly not the worst council. They are open. I think we are fortunate where we are engaged, a good relationship with council and the industry body.”**  
(Dance, regional QLD)

**“In the case when you’ve got good leadership and you’ve got good representation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at a council level, or if you have a good Indigenous community along with that, who are actively interested and have good relationships, Aboriginal programs are potentially then guaranteed because whether it ends up being the Community’s Development Officer stuff or if it’s Aboriginal people, individuals or if it’s groups, Indigenous-based or non-Indigenous based, there will be programs that will happen.”**  
(Dance, NSW)

## Showcases and markets

- Showcases and markets give First Nations artists valuable opportunities for networking, career development and getting work seen.
- However, they can be daunting experiences and some artists feel they are elitist or a 'closed shop'.
- *Showcasing Creativity* found the most common ways presenters find First Nations works are peer networks and prior relationships. Informal networking mechanisms, such as an online network, could help grow capacity and opportunities.

***Opportunities for networking, pitching and securing sales or commissions are offered through a range of events around Australia. Some events are specifically focused on First Nations arts.***

The Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM) provides opportunities for contemporary Australian theatre, dance, and emerging and experimental art to connect to international and national market development opportunities. Previously a biennial industry event providing opportunities to showcase work to targeted presenters, agents and influencers, APAM now works year-round and across Australia through a series of gatherings at different festivals around the country (see page 91 for more on the 2018 gathering).

**Performing Arts Connections (PAC) Australia** (sometimes referred to by its previous name, APACA, by interviewees) presents the annual Performing Arts Exchange (PAX), a networking and development event. It brings together producers, programmers and presenters from across the country to create and maximise touring opportunities and build relationships, with a range of pitching and networking opportunities. PAX is held in conjunction with the annual PAC performing arts conference.



Ngioka Bunda-Heath, *Blood Quantum*. YIRRAMBOI KIN Commissions 2019. Credit: Jalaru Photography.



Art fairs such as the **Cairns Indigenous Art Fair (CIAF)** and the **Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair (DAAF)** celebrate multi-art form collaboration, and include talks, forums and performances. They support professional artistic development and serve as a meeting place for First Nations creatives to share ideas, explore their practice and build connections with other artists from across Australia.



Cairns Indigenous Art Fair 2018. Image copyright CIAF 2018. Credit: Lovegreen.

## The market experience

Both APAM and PAC Australia's Performing Arts Exchange were mentioned by artists as important forums for the industry and worth engaging in as a First Nations artist. Mostly they are seen as 'useful in making connections, networking and getting seen' (Theatre maker, NT).

However, attending a market can be an overwhelming and unstructured experience for some, especially those relatively inexperienced at converting networking into actual work.

Overall artists find the process of talking about and selling their work daunting. Assistance from mentors, producers or the Australia Council is appreciated:

***‘I had never been to APAM and Australia Council put something together on the Sunday. Me as a presenter, going on my own and talking about the show, I could have done that til’ the cows came home. But selling myself, just going up and talk to people ... It’s all very busy, bang, bang, bang you have 10 minutes. Talking off the cuff. But by the end of the week, I came away with so much knowledge about the process, contacts and so on.’***

(Theatre, NT)

***‘I went to APAM and APACA and that was cool. Presenting and pitching and talking about yourself can be really awful for people. I think if you feel that way, outsource your work - get someone else to do that for you who can speak in front of other people.’***

(Dance, NSW)

There is also a sense that presenters have a very fixed idea of what they are looking for, and some artists feel shut out of that process:

***‘It all depends on who likes you. When I’ve gone to APAM and APACA, the buyers know what they want to buy. They have in their mind what they want for their festivals. I haven’t gotten into that circle yet. Maybe the too hard basket again.’***

(Dance, NT)

***‘APAM was great but to be honest with you ... we got told people wanted to pick us up - international acts and that - but when we actually went to find out who they were, nobody had written anything down, nobody knew anything. So it was kind of annoying.’***

(Theatre, NT)

There are also concerns that forums such as APAM can prove elitist, and that they do not necessarily help with more fundamental networking needs that would support growth across the sector and address the geographic isolation:

***‘I have a lot of time for APAM, but I know that not many people I’m working with day to day are there. I wish there was some kind of forum that would connect us up, like the old networks that existed ten or more years ago. But also, it would be good if they brought in the regionals and younger artists somehow. It might make more sense for it to be online, but it would be good if there was a way that people could also come together, but maybe not always in this formal sense.’***

(Theatre, Vic)

*Showcasing Creativity* showed that the most common ways presenters find out about First Nations works are:

- peer networks and prior relationships with artists, producers or community members (72%), including relationships with organisations like Blak Lines and Yirra Yaakin
- performing arts showcases, such as APAM, APACA's<sup>34</sup> Performing Arts Exchange (PAX), Long Paddock or State-based showcases (59%) and Indigenous arts showcases (10%)
- direct pitches (46%).

This highlights the importance of making connections and showcasing works, and building sector capacity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander creatives to connect to presenters.

Informal networking opportunities, including those that might exist as online network, were a suggestion raised by artists through this research to help grow capacity and opportunities.

**Questions for further research:**

How many First Nations works are pitched or showcased at markets and how many get picked up?

34 Now called Performing Arts Connections (PAC) Australia.



Tania-Rose Gibuma, Malu Kiai Mura  
Buai Torres Strait Traditional Dance  
Company, at Australian Performing Arts  
Market 2018. Credit: Rob Maccoll.



### The Australian Performing Arts Market (APAM)

Established in 1994 by the Australia Council to stimulate national and international touring opportunities for Australian contemporary performing arts, APAM has expanded into a crucial platform for building networks, capacity building and exchange.

In 2018 there were 168 First Nations participants in APAM, including artists, presenters and producers. The First Nations opportunities and programming at APAM included:

- the Australia Council's First Nations Market Readiness Workshop with 20 artists and producers new to APAM participating
- The Original People's Party featuring 19 outstanding First Nations artists from around the world<sup>35</sup>
- the Dhumba Wiiny (fire talk) facilitated by YIRRAMBOI, offering audiences the opportunity to gather, to sit and to talk about the work they've just witnessed
- the BlakDance Presenter Series, a professional development opportunity for Australian and international presenters who want to program First Nations performing arts, with 40 national and international presenters participating
- the Global First Nations Exchange, which brought together 42 established First Nations artists and producers from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan and the United States.

<sup>35</sup> The Original People's Party was curated by Jacob Boehme of YIRRAMBOI Festival, produced by Angela Flynn and Kukuni Arts, and produced and presented by BlakDance. See: <https://www.blakdance.org.au/apam-2018>

## The support of mentors

- Mentors are critically important to First Nations dance and theatre makers at all career stages.
- There is a perception that opportunities for mentorship have decreased. Artists are forging their own mentor relationships and more established artists are giving up enormous amounts of time and energy to mentor other artists.
- Artists called for an increase in resourced mentorship opportunities and resourcing for specific cultural consultant roles.

Artists see the ability to access mentors as critically important, regardless of their career stage. Those who fall between emerging and established, and those trying to take a new direction with their artistic career, find mentorships are often one of the most important support mechanisms they have.

As well as creative challenges, artists particularly benefit from First Nations mentors to assist them with navigating applications for funding or industry events, navigating cultural content, answering questions or simply ensuring they see their work:

**“Without having her as a mentor at that early stage, I would never have been OK with what I am doing now. I actually would have just tried to keep changing my narrative just to get a show into a venue. Because I knew they wouldn’t accept my form. I also have two other dance mentors who talked to me how they navigate with their cultural content with non-Indigenous performances and venues given a lot of their venues are international.”**

(Dance and theatre, regional Qld)

**“Having someone there to ask a question I think was the big thing that I felt that enabled my confidence because I was making such a big jump from being the talent to teaching dance and meeting with Elders and speaking with school teachers and designing the show and all that sort of stuff.”**

(Dance, NSW)

Artists value and called for more mentorship opportunities that are resourced, as well as recognition of the importance of resourcing for specific cultural consultant roles:

**“Whenever I’ve had the opportunity to work with mentors and to have them resourced, that has just been fantastic. It’s just worth its weight in gold. You can’t even really put a value on it particularly when we work on works that are really complex and require a lot of negotiating or there is varying tricky cultural protocol issues to navigate.”**

(Theatre, NSW)

**“...you always have to suggest that role [cultural consultant] and also reiterate how important that is as part of the creative team, so nine times out of 10 they don’t do it and you have to make the suggestion and request. Other companies I’ve worked for completely get it, particularly those that have really great community cultural development processes or that’s their bag, that’s just a given and it’s just all done. Consultations are just resourced and they’ve got relationships already with Elders from their community but that’s pretty rare.”**

(Theatre, regional NSW)

Overall artists seem to be forging their own mentor relationships and more established artists are giving up enormous amounts of time and energy to mentor other artists. For some artists the effort of making and sustaining their careers without much financial support makes mentoring very difficult and can be costly to their own practice. There is some perception that the opportunity for mentoring has decreased:

**“Mentoring is very useful but I feel like the opportunity for that has really decreased, I feel. ... I’ve known other companies who have had to pull theirs. I am not sure if that’s just funding. Sometimes as a young artist you feel a bit invisible but when you got to the right person at the right time, they would give you that gem, that contact to keep you going, to get you to the next thing.”**

(Theatre, NSW)

One theatre maker called for a national mentoring foundation to support First Nations engagement across the spectrum of roles in the arts (see page 31).

In various contexts – festivals, commissions for example – artists also discussed the important role the right producer can help them in developing their work and also developing their broader skills as artists:

**“I am extremely grateful I have a producer but I am also in a company so I have access to two producers who understand what I am trying to do and they will help me push forward. I actually have a stepping stone. I have people voices that can help me.”**

(Dance and theatre, regional Qld)

The 2019 National Indigenous Arts Awards (now First Nations Arts Awards).

Back row, left to right: Ali Cobby Eckermann, Rhoda Roberts AO, Vicki van Hout, Aunty Lola Greeno, Rachael Maza, Uncle Jack Charles, Jacob Boehme, Jenna Lee, Vernon Ah Kee. Bottom row, left to right: Thomas E.S. Kelly, Lee-Ann Tjunypa Buckskin, Wesley Enoch.



## Commissioning and development support

- **First Nations dance and theatre makers report securing commissions to develop work for a range of entities.**
- **However, many feel major companies and festivals only want to buy work that is fully developed and audience-ready rather than supporting the development of new work.**

The interest in First Nations work within performing arts companies, both large and small, has already been canvassed along with the challenges for First Nations work within those contexts. First Nations-run companies are seen as essential to retaining control and agency, but are working with limited resources. Artists highlighted the importance of presenters and large-scale festivals understanding the function of the work and the profile of companies.

Some artists have found commissions through local arts centres and other arts organisations, or through education bodies and visual arts organisations like public and private art galleries. Some of these commissions are also collaborations between artists and an established company, a way for that company to access First Nations talent and storytelling as part of the company's body of work.

One artist working on a collaboration with a music company sees the project as a way to 'potentially gain new audiences of people who have never seen Indigenous dance'. There are also international collaborations happening, mostly between First Nations artists here and First Nations artists overseas.

Many participants feel as if major companies and festivals only want to buy work that is fully developed and audience-ready rather than supporting the development of new work:

“*[There are a couple of majors who have] got one foot in and one foot out which is very frustrating and **they want to see it before they put it on**. Well, it's a big work and then there's always some other really interesting works that are competing with that as well - other really great projects that are out there.*”  
(Theatre, NSW)

### **Questions for further research:**

How much First Nations work is available and mainstage ready?

How much First Nations work is not securing funding for development, but would if more funding were available?



Ursula Yovich and string quartet in *Dubboo, life of a songman*, Bangarra Dance Company, 2018.  
Credit: Jhuny-Boy Borja.

Almost a quarter of presenters surveyed for *Showcasing Creativity* said that there are not enough available works that are mainstage ready. Presenters interviewed said there is not a sufficient or affordable supply of work with a strong enough brand to overcome concerns about serious themes.

Presenters stated that the type or theme of First Nations content is critical to developing audiences, and one in five of those surveyed said the available First Nations works are not suited to their audience's preferences or their organisation's brand:

*'There is never a great deal of Indigenous content that's available to us to present. And we have to bear in mind who our audience is ... it's not something we can find each and every year, simply because it's not available every year.'*

According to BlakDance, limited career pathways are compounded by undeveloped distribution channels, with emerging choreographers and producers needing to self-fund development of work:

*'...the barriers to the creation and growth of Australian First Nations dance relate to **limited career pathways, access to skills development and resources**. This is compounded by **undeveloped distribution channels and limited audience development**. Dance graduates have insufficient culturally relevant employment pathways. **Emerging choreographers and producers have limited employment opportunities and are faced with the costs of making contemporary dance.**'<sup>36</sup>*

## Programming decisions

- **First Nations control and agency over decisions to mount a work are essential.**
- **Presenting is seen as the weak link. Strong partnerships and more First Nations decision-makers are key to increasing diverse First Nations programming.**

A concern expressed consistently among producers was the lack of First Nations representation among presenters making decisions about programming. By contrast, a substantial positive impact was noted where First Nations presenters did play a role in decision-making.

Many First Nations producers spoke about industry presenters, producers and performing arts companies' narrow understandings of the scope, diversity and potential of First Nations' performance:

**“The work they are looking for is palatable and that’s not what we are. We make challenging work, thought provoking ... We produce the work ourselves, we create the pathways ... that’s just the reality of it. There are avenues like Arts on Tour and Touring Australia and we go through them and do it ourselves. Because there are communities that want to see our work.”**

(Theatre, NSW)

*Building Audiences* identified that the diversity of First Nations art provides a strong platform for developing audiences – and that audiences for First Nations art are attracted to human stories, contemporary experiences, unique experiences, personal connection, and opportunities for cultural insight and deeper understanding.

Both audiences and presenters can see serious themes as a barrier, saying they want ‘entertainment.’ These are not mutually exclusive things – many of the most successful First Nations shows present serious themes in new and engaging ways.

Developing effective marketing capacity is essential for achieving cut through with funders, presenters and audiences. Communicating what makes a work new and unique is a key marketing challenge, and bringing fun and humour is a marketing strategy.

The role of the Blak Lines initiative was raised in the context of programming decisions. Blak Lines was a national performing arts touring initiative that was developed and implemented between 2012 and 2017. Its aim was to provide a strategic approach to creating the infrastructure, networks and material resources required to build the touring activity of performing arts productions created and performed by First Nations artists.

It was funded by the Australia Council and managed by Performing Lines, a national producing hub that also works with independent artists to promote mobility of work nationally and internationally.

The main components of Blak Lines were:

- A consortium of presenters from around Australia that worked together to establish a national touring circuit for First Nations work, along with protocols for decision-making and strategies for achieving a sustainable platform for touring contemporary First Nations works.
- A Community Cultural Connections Group that provided cultural advice and supported connections between consortium members and First Nations artists and communities.

Artists noted the opportunities Blak Lines provided, while also reflecting on the lack of First Nations voices and perspectives at the decision-making level:

“*The Blak Lines touring network pulled together collaboratively to look at how First Nations’ performing arts might tour if there was **a network of presenters all willing to buy in to make a cost-effective way of touring more Indigenous work.** Part of it was to look at how the network might build audience demand for work, and how they might share things like marketing and other resources.*

*But **the issue the sector has with that is that it is a presenter-driven model.** So what would happen is that Performing Lines would put out a call for work to be a part of their consortium, **presenters would sit in a room and look at the applications, with no context and usually no relationship to anyone applying apart from a couple of bigger names.**”*

(Dance and theatre, Qld)

There is also a perspective that some of the closed, though supportive, networks that had been established across First Nations performers and performance groups were often unknown to the presenters, even when they had substantial track records within the sector and were creating meaningful art that was connected to First Nations communities:

“***All these independents didn’t get a look-in because they were unknown to this presenting sector who didn’t have relationships to our communities.** So how is that a fair process for selection to be part of the only Indigenous touring consortium currently?*

*I understand their issue around needing ... a return on their investment – they need to be able to see that they can sell tickets – so they think that if [a major company] is going to be the one, they feel that they can get a return on that investment.*

***So, the Blak Lines touring consortium was good in many ways, but it definitely wasn’t the only solution and it definitely needed revising and a review.**”*

(Dance and theatre, Qld)

Many of the respondents talked about the importance of First Nations control and agency over decisions to mount a work, with presenting seen as the weak link, and the need for strong partnerships as a part of the key to success:

“We’ve had a lot of conversations about **who we partner with...** we’ve had to admonish ourselves for choosing bad partnerships, where now we are trying not to do work based purely on the profile or the money it will bring us, but actually on the quality of **the partnership and the process** and the intentions that our partners bring to their work, and why they want to be partnering with us in the first place. **I think that idea of the partner is the project.**”

(Theatre, NSW)



# Individual determination

- First Nations dance and theatre makers are creating their own opportunities, pathways and structures.
- They are committed to continuing conversations and overcoming barriers for the benefit of future generations.

It is clear that a lot of First Nations art is being made largely through the dedication and energy of First Nations artists themselves. This self-reliant ‘self-help’ approach is evident across all career stages.

‘**We make our own opportunities.**’

(Dance, NT)

‘**The training opportunities are just so limited that *if people are coming through, it’s through their own passion* and just one or two people getting through.**’

(Theatre, NSW)

‘**I’m well established and over the years I’ve made a name for myself for the work that I do. Nobody’s given me that. *I’ve had to work hard to get to where I am to be able to do what I do with very little support.***’

(Dance, regional NSW)

‘**We produce the work ourselves, we create the pathways ... that’s just the reality of it.**’

(Theatre, NSW)

It is also demonstrated by groups of First Nations artists creating their own new structures and spaces for the development of work:

‘**We created a group of us coming together as friends and collaborators, all young, all emerging choreographers.** Some of us had never choreographed before and we came together as a way to find opportunities because we are all based in Sydney so we were up against so many incredible, established choreographers and we had no chance getting funding up against these guys. ***But if we team up, we could create our own space, working on shows together.*** We are trying to find a flat structure. ***It’s time consuming but important.***’

(Dance, NSW)

And while First Nations artists continue to face barriers and difficult conversations, they are driven to continue these conversations for the benefit of future generations:

‘**There are lots of conversations that need to happen and I am OK to have them because maybe when the younger people come through they won’t have to deal with this stuff.** I can’t get tired of these conversations because I can’t be.’

(Dance and theatre, regional QLD)

riyawina warruwa kanaplila (Devil Devil Dance), pakana kanaplila dancers (Tasmania), GASP LIGHT NYE 2017. Glenorchy Art and Sculpture Park, Tasmania. Credit: Danielle Hanifin.

# Questions for further research

- *Creating Art Part 1* has identified a diverse output from First Nations performing artists, made in a range of ways, with a range of partners, for a range of audiences and markets, and supported in a range of ways. How much of each type of work is made?
- How much work is presented with First Nations creative control?
- How much First Nations work is commissioned by festivals?
- What is the ongoing life of shows?
- How long is the life of a work before it gets picked up?
- How much has the level of First Nations programming increased since 2015 (when mapped for *Showcasing Creativity*)?
- How many First Nations works are remounted?
- How many works are not programmed due to casting shortages?
- How many First Nations works go unproduced?
- How many works are shown in communities or predominantly to a First Nations community audience?
- How much First Nations performing arts work is exported overseas?
- What types of work are achieving international success?
- How many First Nations works tour regionally or nationally?
- How much work is created specifically for schools audiences?
- How much work is presented to schools audiences?
- How much work is created for a tourist or corporate audience?
- How much work is presented to tourist or corporate audiences?
- How many First Nations works are pitched or showcased at markets and how many get picked up?
- How much First Nations work is available and mainstage ready?
- How much First Nations work is not securing funding for development, but would if more funding were available?





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