
'We've worked damn hard': Barriers remain for Indigenous performances

By Linda Morris
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Indigenous arts leaders are warning their hard-won visibility on the national stage is under threat from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Indigenous artists felt the "ground shifting" with audiences growing and major theatre companies and festivals hungry for their works, before the March shutdown of the arts sector.



Indigenous arts leaders warn hard-won visibility is under threat from the pandemic.

Many now fear those gains will be lost as financial constraints caused by the pandemic lead to more conservative programming, according to qualitative research conducted by the Australia Council for the Arts released on Monday.

Lydia Miller, the council's executive director of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts, said the research included interviews with 45 Indigenous artists, including choreographers, directors, dancers and scriptwriters.

They reported growing audiences for unique and contemporary stories offering cultural insight and deeper understanding, with performances in schools thriving and festivals ideal for premiering and showcasing works.

But many said they still faced barriers in bringing their work to the main stage with Indigenous plays and dance perceived to be 'risky' to program, while audience interest was underestimated.

Among major companies, their works were often pitted against other First Nations artists rather than compared with non-Indigenous commissioned work.

While there was greater artistic licence among smaller companies, seasons were shorter in which to capture a national voice.

Narrow perceptions of what constitutes First Nations theatre and dance needed to be challenged and tested, Miller said, even more so with the pandemic closing theatres and performance spaces.

"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," Miller said.

"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."

The report, *Creating Art Part 1: The makers view of pathways for First Nations' theatre and dance*, is the third in a series of research pieces commissioned by the Australia Council. The research showed there was a need to break down stereotypes about what constitutes First Nations art, which often was thought of as 'serious'.

A 2015 report found decision-makers could be tokenistic when considering First Nations works, picking their 'one Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work for the season'.

Co-founder of Moogahlin Performing Arts, Lily Shearer, shares Miller's concerns.



Moogahlin Performing Arts.

"We were just going to start touring to Melbourne, Brisbane, then Sydney, we were just starting to get traction when COVID hit," Shearer said. "There goes our first-ever national tour work."

"We've worked damn hard to get recognition and support and so many people are coming to see our works and we're breaking down all these barriers and building all these beautiful bridges so we don't want to lose the work we've done."

Shearer would like to see at least one dedicated black theatre company funded in every state and territory, and funding set aside to create work for what she believes will be an extended period of lockdown.

"It's about setting the platforms for our own self-determination for our own stories to be told in our own way," Ms Shearer said. "We've often seen works on stage by non-Aboriginal companies and Aboriginal writers that have just gone haywire."

Create NSW recently announced Mooghalin the recipient of multi-year funding. "It's so good, such a weight off our shoulders," Shearer said.