

2022-23 Pre-budget Submissions  
C/O **The Hon Michael Sukkar MP**  
Assistant Treasurer, Minister for Housing and Minister for Homelessness,  
Social and Community Housing

28<sup>th</sup> January 2022

Dear Minister Sukkar,

I write on behalf of St Martins Youth Arts Centre in South Yarra, Victoria, in response to the announcement on December 6<sup>th</sup> calling for views regarding priorities for the 2022-23 Federal Budget. We welcome this consultation. The nation is facing significant social and structural issues that will require careful long-term strategic investment. Our peak body Theatre Network Australia has put together a comprehensive list of recommendations in its submission, including a call for investment in Youth Arts via a Young People and Culture Plan. St Martins wholeheartedly support this call.

St Martins is a part of the nation's professional Youth Arts industry. This industry sits at the intersection of Government portfolios including Young Australians, community building, education, mental health and the Arts. Youth Arts companies like ourselves, employ professional artists for our performances and projects, workshop artists for our local, outreach and digital workshops and arts workers in our team and venue to share their skills and experiences with young people. Our company provides opportunities for young people who are choosing arts as a career by offering training, placements, mentorships and actual jobs. With relatively little investment, we can do so much more at this critical time.

An example of how small an investment St Martins requires to be viable is our funding ask from the Australia Council for the Arts in 2020, which was only \$150k per year for four years. In the previous four years, we had been receiving \$120k per year. Due to insufficient funds provided by the Federal Government, the Australia Council was unable to continue funding us, citing our case, along with other iconic youth arts companies that lost their funding, as 'unfunded excellence'. Similarly, when we turned to the RISE fund in 2021, for the same yearly amount for two years, their grant criteria ruled us out for not being able to provide 'bang for buck'. Our feedback was that we were artistically outstanding but concerts and exhibitions came out at \$8 per person whereas we came out as \$148 per person. Sadly, there was no criterion that accounted for what we actually achieve for the \$148 per person, which is a deep and long-term engagement that slowly and very surely contributes to the well-being of young people affecting every aspect of their lives and communities. From young people and parents:

*"Attending St Martins has been a defining factor in the person I have become today."*

*"You have changed my child's life. You literally helped keep her alive, when she was preoccupied by suicidal thoughts."*

*"My child is bullied at school. St Martins has been the only place, apart from home, that they feel fully accepted."*

The outcomes of the Youth Arts industry have a demonstrable impact in areas including health, employment, promotion of diversity, learning and education, community building and resilience. Alongside our award-winning public art works, St Martins has a unique position as a national leader in inclusion practice. Approximately 23% of our young people identify as neurodivergent. We not only employ an inclusion coordinator, but also an inclusion artist alongside the lead artist in every workshop across 14 workshops every week, to action our philosophy of 'invisible' inclusion – a methodology that integrates best practice in such a way that children with specific needs seamlessly blend with the others in our high-quality drama workshops. A parent says:

*"You gave my child the opportunity to enjoy himself in a group setting, which is rare for him, being autistic. At the last session, Maxim said 'Can I go back next year?'"*

Many of Australia's most recognised professional artists have been employed to work with Australian communities via the pathways offered by the Youth Arts industry. Our alumni are artists such as Ben Mendelsohn, Noah Taylor, Julia Zemiro, Gina Riley, Jane Turner, Frank Woodley, Catherine McClements, Barry Kosky and more. There are thousands of other highly talented graduates who are leaders in their artistic disciplines working all around Australia and many who go on to work in partnership and collaboration with young Australians themselves. This industry brings everyday Australians together with inspiring creative leaders to be moved and astonished by art and young people, to be entertained, to share stories, and to celebrate young people's voices in our communities.

Along with our sister youth arts companies around Australia, we can provide tangible examples of the social impact of our work. For example, at the invitation of Worawa Aboriginal Girls College in regional Victoria we created a three year engagement resulting in the acclaimed multimedia theatre performance, *Balit Liwurruk: Strong Girl*. It was a work about the strengths of the girls in traversing two cultures. Testimony to the power of long term sustained relationship building is that the girls won the Green Room Ensemble Acting Award although they were not professional actors but were brought together using the St Martins philosophy of respectful and culturally sensitive artistic collaboration. They were able to tell their stories in a professional manner to captivate and move an adult audience. The work also won the award for Outstanding Direction and garnered four further nominations. Some of the girls' testimonies about their experience included: "The reward is confidence!" and "I can't believe that I was able to look people in the eye and tell the story of my culture." And while the work also received glowing reviews and funder and peer recognition, ultimately the reward is the much larger impact from a long-term perspective, on the mental health and skills development of youth from vastly diverse backgrounds.

St Martins, alongside The Youth Arts industry, interacts with young people in a collaborative and respectful manner. We listen and approach them as experts in their own experiences and as artistically literate and capable. The Youth Arts industry specialises in giving young Australians a personal voice and offers platforms and opportunities for being agents of change in the world via interaction with each other, with professional artists and audiences. Our work brokers relationships within communities and starts conversations that connect young people with each other and with the adults in their lives. In addition to forging arts careers and creating future arts audiences, research conducted in Australia and across the world demonstrates the significant beneficial impact this approach has on educational outcomes, on community building, and the improvement in mental health and resilience.

Prior to the arrival of COVID 19 in 2020, Australia was already facing a mental health crisis amongst young people. The past two years have exacerbated this issue. The 2021 Annual Mission Australia Youth Survey, which gathered responses from over 20,000 young Australians, again saw Mental Health at the top of concerns for young people aged between 15 and 19. The top three personal issues identified by young people were:

1. Coping with stress
2. Mental health
3. School and study problems

This was also one of the findings of the *Australia Talks* survey that received feedback from over 60,000 Australians. According to data from the Australia Talks National Survey, 1 in 5 young people say they're struggling with their mental health. Across almost every mental-health-related question in the 2021 survey, young people came off worse.

This decline reflects a range of factors including isolation and increase in time spent on screens, a loss of employment opportunities due to COVID in a casualised workforce, increasing costs of education and pressures associated with achievement at school and university. The Mission Australia survey found 77% of young people spend more than 5 hours on screens per day and 67.4% engaged in less than 7 hours of exercise per week.

There is a need to invest in initiatives that get young people interacting and reconnecting with each other and the wider community face to face. Young people need to be recognised within Australian society, with opportunities to share their own stories, listen to others, and build relationships across generations.

An investment in Australia's youth arts industry should be included amongst the initiatives to address the nation's deteriorating mental health.

The evidence for the beneficial impacts of participation in Youth Arts is unequivocal. There is an extensive body of research both within Australia and internationally that demonstrates that engaging in the performing arts delivers:

- An increase in wellbeing including resilience and the ability to overcome challenges;
- An improvement in self-esteem and sense of self-worth;
- A greater connection to community and enhanced sense of belonging;
- An improvement across all areas of curriculum learning;
- The development in creative thinking, problem solving and working collaboratively; and
- An increased willingness to participate in community activities such as volunteering and voting.

There is a clear opportunity to leverage the arts, and in particular young people and the community's engagement in the arts, as a component of Australia's post COVID-19 recovery.

*"It is now widely documented in the United States of America, Canada and Europe, including the United Kingdom, that those young people whose learning is embedded in the Arts achieve better grades and overall test scores, are less likely to leave school early, rarely report boredom and have a more positive self-concept than those that are deprived of arts experiences. In addition, interestingly, they are more likely to become involved in community service."*

*Professor Robyn Ewing – Australian Education Review*

At St Martins, our young people testify that they have 'changed and grown' in ways that they could not have imagined prior to their participation and that their confidence and self reliance has made them 'unrecognisable in the best sense of the word.'

Data research specialists Patternmakers conducted a [study](#) of over 1,200 people in 2017 to investigate whether or not participating in the performing arts had any impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians, and if so, was it positive or negative? The results found:

- 91% said it had a positive impact on their wellbeing
- 89% identified a positive impact on their self-confidence

- 85% were more likely to empathise with another person's perspective
- 78% identified a positive impact on their self-awareness
- 75% felt more connected to other people in their life
- 73% saw an improvement on the ability to "tell their story"
- 52% said it helped reduce their general level of anxiety

*"Confidence is the starting point for a lot of things. It builds resilience; the ability to get back up after something hasn't gone right at home."*  
*Evaluation participant – Patternmakers impact evaluation*

An investment in Australia's Youth Arts industry doesn't only benefit young Australians. These companies also employ professional artists who have borne the brunt of COVID restrictions.

We would request the 2022-23 Budget look to make an investment specifically toward two priority areas:

1. Companies and artists that specialise in engaging young Australians in performing arts experiences as audiences and participants; and
2. Incentives for the Health, Education, Youth Justice and not-for-profit sectors to partner with Arts companies to deliver programs that benefit young Australians.

In terms of national funding, the Youth Arts industry can make a small amount of money go a long way. These are fiscally lean organisations with minimal overheads whose principal expenses are wages paid to contracted and permanent staff.

An investment of \$15 million per year for five years as stated in the TNA pre-budget submission would make a significant impact on the lives of over 4 million school-age Australians and those in the first years of work.

The money could be distributed on behalf of the Government through an independent industry body such as the Australia Council for the Arts, along lines clearly set out which focus on the issues raised in this submission.

Young Australians deserve every consideration at this time.

I would welcome the opportunity to discuss the Youth Arts industry, St Martins and our cultural and community impact further.

Kind regards,



Nadja Kostich  
She/her  
Co-CEO and Artistic Director  
St Martins Youth Arts Centre  
[nadja@netspace.net.au](mailto:nadja@netspace.net.au)  
0417 398 588