

Performing Arts

FutureNow is the Western Australian Training Council for the creative, leisure and technology industries. The Council is a skills advisory body that represents the voice of industry, advising the State Government on the training and workforce development needs of our industry sectors.

The performing arts incorporate dance, from classical ballet to street style, live music including everything from local rock bands to the West Australian Symphony Orchestra, as well as theatre, opera, puppetry, circus and live entertainment. This is an industry with an immediacy that gives it an unmatched capacity to bring vibrancy and liveability to our cities and regions, drive inbound tourism, support community cohesion, and create connection and meaning for the people of Western Australia. This year more than most, Western Australians need what the performing arts can deliver. Perth Festival's Highway to Hell event, hosted on 1st March 2020, just weeks before quarantine measures were introduced, saw 144,000 people turn out onto the street for a celebration of a uniquely Western Australian character.¹ And after a year like no other, when many in the industry anticipated a pivot to elaborate virtual events, Perth Festival reports robust ticket sales for its 2021, wholly Western Australian program.

Current environment and emerging trends

Workforce characteristics

The Western Australian share of activity in the Music and Theatre Productions sectors is a little lower than population share (10.8%), at 8.2%.² This is consistent with similar industries though also indicates potential capacity to grow market share. Statistical analysis of the performing arts labour market is hindered by factors such as the high rate of self-employed artists, the seasonal nature of the work and audience demand for novelty (meaning that there is a large, ongoing exchange of labour across states and internationally when artists take their work to new audiences). Sector union Media Entertainment Arts Alliance (MEAA) advises that accurate statistics around the percentage of arts workers in insecure work are lacking. The majority of performers in WA are engaged on a contract-by-contract basis, and most are on the books of several agents, obscuring data. The sector has a very high percentage of casual and self-employed workers and a lower-than-average annual income.

Covid-19 impacts

Opportunities for performers to work have been severely diminished throughout 2020 owing to restrictions on gatherings. Earnings from Music and Theatre Productions nationwide are expected to dip over 18% in 2020, compared with the previous year.³ Creative artists, and in particular live audience-based performers, have been profoundly impacted by quarantine measures undertaken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sectors and workers affected include theatre venues, theatre companies, live music venues, bands, booking agents, dance companies, puppetry, circus, street performance, children's entertainers, orchestra, opera, music festivals, and technical live production companies.

The casual and contract-based nature of most performing arts employment, and the fact that many performers supplement their performing arts-related income with casual work in hospitality or retail – both sectors which almost completely shut down during quarantine – left many performers and support staff very financially vulnerable this year. Self-reported losses to May 2020 were over \$22m in WA alone.⁴ With downward pressure on disposable income predicted to curtail ticket sales in the coming year, there is a capacity risk facing the sector, which risks an exodus from the workforce.

Remote performance

The performing arts are by design reliant on ticket sales, audiences and the physical location of the theatre or venue, and as such are one of the sectors most heavily impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. Quarantine measures forced industry to innovate, and many Western Australian venues and artists hosted online performances during the period. Performing arts organisations have had to quickly digitise their offerings, which required specialist digital production skills.

Industry see potential to reach new audiences through evolving technologies such as virtual reality, which allow remote audiences to be more fully immersed in live performances, however these remain in the very early stages of development, and will require changes to the Actors/ Live Performance award to enable. An anticipated global shift towards greater exploration of remote performance following quarantine measures was not as profound as expected, underpinning the truism that human beings need to gather, tell stories, and share cultural experiences. Nevertheless, opportunities for technicians working in the performing arts to extend their skills and knowledge in the areas of virtual and augmented reality technologies and special effects could improve their employability and bolster sector capacity to reach new markets.

Contemporary Music

The state government's 2019, \$3m Contemporary Music Fund⁵ was an acknowledgement of the potential contemporary music offers in terms of economic contribution and in building Western Australia's creative brand. Australia and Western Australia have a significant contemporary music profile globally and this export market is key to growth for the sector. Contemporary Music has a scalable model, in that the same product can be sold an unlimited number of times (unlike for instance a live theatre performance). Royalties-per-play on sites such as Spotify are controversially low, however they allow artists to reach very broad audiences, and in this indirect way boost attendance and viability for live touring performances. This means that live touring is by far the most lucrative income stream for contemporary music artists. Therefore, the ongoing nature of the COVID-19 crisis globally is having a magnified impact on the professional contemporary music sector, who are unable to tour their performances currently, or forward plan to tour in the coming financial year. Attracting local audiences has become much more important in this context.

Workforce enhancement strategies

Major organisations support emerging artists

Funding support for the Black Swan State Theatre Centre, WA Opera, WA Ballet and the WA Symphony Orchestra, is provided at the national level through the National Performing Arts Partnership Framework.⁶ Access to this funding is dependent on a number of criteria around regional delivery, access and inclusion, curriculum support and support for emerging artists. Through meeting these criteria, Western Australia's major performing arts organisations continue to provide crucial access to the arts and importantly, sustainable arts careers. This in turn supports overall sector ecology and the small to medium performing arts sector, where emerging artists will often begin their careers.

Most of WA's performing arts institutions offer programs to support emerging creatives to build their reputations, skills and careers. The Blue Room Theatre supported 48 mentorships, internships or residencies over the course of 2018. These included \$500 mentorship funds for artists to upskill their teams.⁷ WA Opera and Wesfarmers Arts have been providing mentorship opportunities to young graduates for ten years, supporting seven emerging artists in 2019/20.⁸ Through its Composer-in-Residence programs, the WA Youth Jazz Orchestra (WAYJO) annually supports two emerging composers to develop new works for a large jazz ensemble, offering commission fees and artistic mentorship.⁹ Contemporary Dance company Co:3 Australia, offers Co:Y Training, a program for the next generation

of dancers, that replicates the training methodologies of their main company.¹⁰

Shifting skills needs

The sector continues to report a need for an increasingly sophisticated knowledge in the area of income generation. Marketing, outreach, customer relations management, and a comprehensive use of social media are essential tools to reach a targeted market, campaign for funds, and build narrative. Rapid developments in the areas of big data and data analysis are creating new opportunities to target audiences and demonstrate outcomes, bringing with them new skills and knowledge requirements.

Sector upskilling priorities have centred around participant safety in recent years, including a focus on the safety of children in learning environments, the safety of patrons, venue and event workers, and performers, and a response to the Me Too cultural movement. At the national level, Safe Theatres Australia has been established to “drive lasting cultural change to eliminate sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination in the sector.”¹¹ Covid-19 has added to these concerns, driving a need for sector-specific infection control training, and social distancing-related operational upskilling.

The role of vocational education

A recent Australia Council report on contemporary music, *Born Global: Australian Music Exports*,¹² highlights that export income from Australian artists is highly concentrated, with 10% of artists accounting for 97% of total export income. This dynamic can be found across the talent-driven performing arts industries, and can be at odds with national principles for vocational education, which focus on direct employment outcomes. While it may be true that many performing arts students won't find a 'job' with an 'employer' on graduation, they will find work, build their careers, and contribute to the creative ecosystem, and from them will emerge the next Tame Impala, Frances O'Connor, or Tim Minchin.

In this context, it is of note that access to training has an impact on the diversity of voices to be found across the sector, with people from CALD, Aboriginal and lower socio-economic groups being less likely to be able to access training, and contribute their voice to the cultural landscape.

The cost of gaining a higher education arts qualification is set to increase in line with Federal Government proposals announced in June 2020.¹³ This, when mapped against potential earnings in the arts and cultural sectors, may become prohibitive for many prospective students. Industry are concerned this phenomenon will directly impact on sector diversity and thereby Australia's cultural narrative. Vocational training may serve a crucial role in mitigating this effect, with articulation arrangements potentially becoming more popular. Where students can complete a Diploma and/ or Advanced Diploma and then articulate into 2nd or 3rd year of a Bachelor of Arts, costs will be significantly reduced for the student and employability skills will be maximised.

Please get in touch with FutureNow

FutureNow is continually seeking broad input from stakeholders and representatives in the Western Australian Performing Arts sector. If you would be interested in providing your perspective on this snapshot or related workforce matters for your sector, our Creative Industries Industry Manager would love to hear from you:

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References

Note that unreferenced information in this snapshot is based on direct consultation by FutureNow with WA industry.

All references current as at 7.12.2020

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