

FutureNow.

Performing Arts

FutureNow is an independent body that provides industry informed advice to influence skills development strategies across the Creative, Leisure and Technologies sectors. Our work assists Western Australia to be prepared with the new order skills required by the evolving economy and our changing society.

The performing arts bring vibrancy and liveability to our cities and regions, support community cohesion, and create connection and meaning for the people of Western Australia. While immediate fiscal and reputational impacts of border closures, travel restrictions and capacity limits were felt by the sector, there has grown among Western Australians a renewed appreciation of the communal experiences the performing arts provide. Ticket sales have been very strong, with Western Australian audiences enthusiastic about exploring homegrown talent. Artists and art organisations have developed new skills and greater capacity to adapt to rapid change, draw in broader audiences, engage with them digitally, and work collaboratively with their peers to achieve outcomes despite adversity.

The Perth Festival hosted an unprecedented 96% local artists in 2021, up from 77% in 2020 and 53% in 2019. Despite sudden program changes necessitated by a last-minute quarantine announcement in early February,¹ the Festival went on to attract 473,616 visitors- more than in 2020, even with nearly 150,000 people attending the Highway to Hell event in that year. The success of the 2021 program is testament to the appetite Western Australians have to see local stories, and support homegrown talent.

Current environment and emerging trends

Covid-19 impacts

The live performing arts industries have been vulnerable to impacts from travel restrictions and capacity limits put in place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.² Sudden closures and venue capacity limits made business unsustainable for some. In addition to direct restrictions imposed on industry, this unintended consequence saw a contraction in live performance activities in 2021.^{3 4 5}

Despite these challenges, much performing arts activity continued, with industry reporting a positive response from audiences across the artforms. Operationally funded organisations such as the WA Ballet, and WA Symphony Orchestra were able to retain their workforce and continue to create works. WA's relative isolation and limited exposure to the virus meant that planned performances were mostly able to go ahead.

For Western Australian performing artists and performing arts companies, ongoing uncertainty related to forthcoming border openings are potentially as challenging as the alternative. While border closures limit the capacity of booking agents to bring talent to WA, and for local talent to access performance opportunities nationally and internationally, border openings stand to see the reintroduction of social distancing measures that may close venues or limit their capacity to sell tickets. This makes forward planning and business management challenging.

Revenue volatility

The performing arts are ranked as an industry with high revenue volatility, meaning that revenue can fluctuate considerably owing to program changes, changes in government policy, or external factors such as the above, Covid-19 related restrictions on activity.⁶ This is evident in the box office takings of the Perth Festival in 2021, which at \$3m, is only half of the previous year despite increased attendance. Revenue volatility has accelerated in line with uncertainty driven by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Restart Investment to Sustain and Expand (RISE) Fund

The RISE fund is a national funding initiative designed to support events, arts, and entertainment sector organisations to present events and rebuild investor confidence in the industries following restrictions and closures. The competitive fund is providing \$200 million over 2020-22, and is available to organisations that can demonstrate that the funding will underpin an increase in performance and event activity.⁷

Insecure work

The uncertainty and volatility present in the current market is undermining the sustainability of some performing arts careers. Performance work is often characterised by short-term contracts or unpaid self-promotion gig work for many, and as such, performing artists were already vulnerable workers. Coupled with the additional burden of increased higher education charges as a result of the Federal Job-Ready Graduates Package,⁸ industry is concerned that performing arts careers may become increasingly inaccessible to disadvantaged cohorts.

However, Job Outlook and National Skills Commission data projects a modest growth in demand for actors, dancers and other entertainers to 2025, and WA Academy of Performing Arts report no drop in enrolments associated with the current environment.⁹

Live technical production industry instability

The live technical production industry, as a service industry to the venues, events, and performing arts industries, has continued to suffer uncertainty and unpredictable, last-minute cancellations in 2021.

An almost total cessation of activity in the sector through the middle of 2020 saw a number of events organisers and associated businesses such as live production companies and furniture hire companies, close their doors. Several ceased trading permanently.

This downturn drove a worker exodus from the industry, especially as the cyclical nature of industry activity meant that most workers were employed on a contract basis and often not eligible for JobKeeper. Industry sentiment is that many of these workers have been absorbed by the resources and construction industries, and that these workers are beginning to adjust to higher wages and better job security in those sectors.

Further consolidation is predicted in 2022, which may serve to provide a smaller, but more stable service industry for performing arts companies.

Contemporary music

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 and again, a warm response from local audiences, with strong ticket sales, is boosting industry's perception of WA's recognition and appreciation of local talent.

Workforce development strategies

Major organisations support emerging artists

Funding support for Murrageku Inc, 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.¹⁰ 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 47 emerging artists through mentorships, internships, and residencies in 2020.¹¹ WA Opera and Wesfarmers Arts have been providing mentorship opportunities to young graduates for ten years, supporting seven emerging artists in 2019/20.¹² 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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ Some of these programs have been suspended or reduced owing to Covid-19 uncertainty or reduced income, however this impact is likely to be temporary.¹⁵

Sector capacity building

Peak body for the arts, The Chamber of Arts and Culture WA, has established an 18-month project, Cultural Connections, which seeks to take a strategic approach to capacity building through gap analysis and alignment of programs and services currently being planned and delivered by organisations across the sector.¹⁶ The project intends to improve sustainability, resilience, responsiveness, and diversity of arts organisations including theatres, dance companies, and peak bodies such as WA Music. Areas of industry upskilling need centre on high order skills including improving organisational governance, developing new audiences, creating public value, and building successful partnerships. Fiscally constrained operating environments faced by organisations across the arts landscape mean that the sector stands to gain from collaboration and coordination of professional development offerings.

Shifting skills needs

The sector continues to report a need for 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 the safety of women. 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.”¹⁷ Covid-19 has added to these concerns, driving a need for sector-specific social distancing-related operational upskilling.

Dance teaching traineeships

FutureNow is working with the WA classical ballet and dance sectors to explore the possibility of establishing a traineeship in dance teaching. Teaching dance is a common career choice for professional dancers who may be retiring through injury, or for students who will not be pursuing a professional dance career. The sector are seeking to improve professionalisation of the industry, and view the formalisation of training through a traineeship as underpinning that cause.

New performing arts honours program

The WA Academy of Performing Arts will debut a new honours degree in performing arts in 2022.¹⁸ ¹⁹ Offering streams in Dance and Performance Making, the course provides students with “an opportunity to focus in depth on a particular research topic of their choice while also receiving further research training at fourth year Honours level.” The course is the first of its kind in WA and an opportunity for students in the performing arts field to pursue academic research at a higher level than previously available in the state.

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:

Ann-Marie Ryan | Industry Development Manager - Creative and Cultural Industries | Information Communications Technology

0459 982 357 | amryan@futurenow.org.au

References

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

All references current as at 25.1.2022

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