

**Kathryn Kelly and Tessa Rixon**

The Dramaturgy of Defunding:

Developing a History of the Defunding of Australian Theatre  
Organisations from 1975 to 2023

**Editors' Note:** *This piece takes the form of a Position Paper, which summaries a nascent approach to studying subsidy and its effects. The dataset on which the study relies is as yet incomplete – a situation that will be familiar to many readers working with cultural data, which the authors summarise below (p. 77). We felt it important to include the preliminary findings of this study in this issue, especially for how they might inform the future development of the AusStage Financial Table, which is introduced in a following article in this edition by Holledge et al. (2023). Once the full dataset referred to here is available via AusStage, direct links will be provided in this article.*

In 1975, thirty years after the United Kingdom and almost twenty years after Canada, the Australian Government legislated to establish a statutory corporation dedicated to the awarding of public funding to professional artists in Australia—the Australia Council for the Arts.<sup>1</sup> Grants were assessed by a panel of artistic peers who came together as an artform Board and used public criteria akin to the founding principle articulated by then-Prime Minister Gough Whitlam: “the pursuit of excellence and the spread of interest and participation” (Whitlam in Radbourne 1993, 145). From the inception of the Australia Council, there were ongoing arts and cultural policy debates about establishing funding decision-making models that allowed for artistic freedom and control while reconciling notions of artistic excellence, reach, and community impact (Meyrick 2014a, 145).

One of the most influential figures in these debates was H.C. ‘Nugget’ Coombs, who, among his many achievements, founded the Australian National University and was Chair of the Australian Reserve Bank. Coombs managed to successfully negotiate with three Prime Ministers to give the Australia Council the gift of Board controlled, peer review funding, but he was wise enough to acknowledge the potential peril of his success:

Frankly, my own view is that the Council should be concerned not to advise about or to make decisions about the content, styles, or significance of the arts, but simply to consider how government policy can best help them. I think it is wise for members of Council to impose on themselves a kind of self-denying ordinance not to interfere in other aspects of the arts, to avoid judgements about them, and above all, to defend the practice and development of the arts as belonging to the private domain. (Coombs in Radbourne 1993, 187)

Despite many institutional and political changes, most recently in 2023 with the re-naming and re-structuring of the Australia Council into Creative Australia, the notion of independent or *arm's length* (Meyrick 2014b) peer reviewed funding has endured for five decades. With the digitisation of the Australia Council Annual Reports by the National Library of Australia's online repository, Trove, there has been an opportunity to collate and analyse the peer funding decisions across this extended span of time of 1975–2023.

### **Data Collection**

This Position Paper is an introduction to a larger data analysis project, which will be completed once the full data set has been entered into the AusStage Australian Live Performance Database in early 2024. Within the digitised Annual Reports of the Australia Council on Trove there is a full record of every grant awarded to an Australian theatre organisation from the 1974/75 until 2008/09 via the Theatre Board.<sup>2</sup> After 2008/09, the Australia Council stopped including a full account of grants given in their Annual Reports, but instead linked to those records via their website. However, due to a website redevelopment in 2014, the links to full list of grants from 2011–2014 are no longer publicly available and records have had to be retrieved through the records of grant disbursement of Creative Australia (formerly Australia Council). From 2014–2023 the Annual Reports available on the current Australia Council website successfully link to the grant record information.<sup>3</sup> It is also important to note that, from 1992, the largest theatre organisations, defined in Australia as *major organisations*, were no longer funded through the artform Boards (known as "Panels" since 2021), but through the establishment of a Major Organisations Unit, whose funding was indexed to inflation.

Since its inception, the nomenclature of Australian arts and cultural funding has been divided into two main categories: an individual seeking funding, or an organisation. A theatre organisation eligible for funding by the Australia Council has historically reflected a range of organisational structures, from loose collectives to formally incorporated associations, but the interest of our project is to examine theatre organisations that were established with a purpose or mandate to address a particular community, or to service a particular need.

## Dramaturgy of Defunding

This project brings a dramaturgical sensibility, for “picking the patterns” (Turner and Behrndt 2007, 8) of peer review decision-making. Dramaturgy has only begun to be robustly theorised during the last decades, despite its long history as a specialist profession in theatre (Kelly 2017). However, as dramaturgical scholars note, the tradition of dramaturgical approaches, which operate fluidly across notions of dramaturgy as a profession, practice, and scholarship remain consistently “interventionist” (Luckhurst 2006, 37; Eckersall 2007, 8), and connected to a political intention. For the founder of the profession of dramaturgy, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) this was refracted through Enlightenment notions of toleration and truth-telling, where theatre was viewed as a vehicle for artistic and cultural intervention (Kelly 2017, 21). Drawing on Lessing’s tradition, we have sought to code the data in ways that illuminate the political and cultural impact of accreted peer review decision-making.

The overall pool of theatre organisations funded through the Theatre Board (subsequently Theatre Panel) across five decades, excluding potential organisations not yet collected from 2011–2014, is heartbreakingly small, at only 173. To provide some context, the AusStage search by theatre organisation 1975–2022, filtered by their first year of activity, and which includes all professional and amateur live performance, shows records for 5099 active theatre organisations.<sup>4</sup>

Using our knowledge as experienced theatre practitioners, and through cross-checking with AusStage, we categorised fifty-five theatre organisations and five theatre venues without a specific community, equity, or artform *mandate* or *purpose*, leaving a substantial number (113) to address Whitlam’s second principle of arts and cultural funding in Australia, “the spread of interest and participation” (Whitlam in Radbourne 1993, 145).

There are a further five idiomatic categories with one entry. These were genuine anomalies, whose inclusion in other categories would have been inaccurate. This includes RealTime Magazine, the only national magazine for theatre criticism for many decades in Australia; Touring (Performing Lines, the last remnant of the Australian commercial touring company, J.C. Williamson), and a smattering of other outliers, including Training (funding for National Institute of Dramatic Art before 1992); a one-off grant for a Festival; and an amateur company in the first year of Theatre Board funding in 1975.

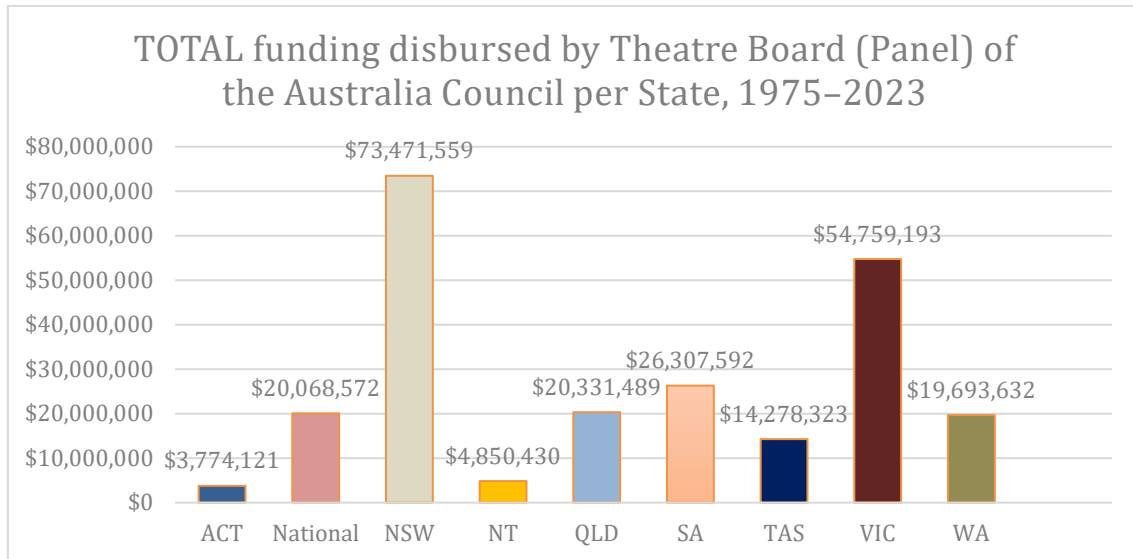
20 purposes or mandates were identified by the researchers, and the companies coded to the relevant purpose. These are listed below, with a frequency count showing the breakdown of the 173 companies into these purposes. The companies are sorted in alphabetical order by Purpose. Some companies are double coded e.g., the Four ‘Women (Female Identifying)’ companies and, therefore, the total of the table above exceeds the actual total of companies.

Purpose (sorted alphabetically)	Frequency Count	Total funding received over history of Australia Council
Advocacy	1	\$844,558
Amateur	1	\$10,000
Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) formerly multi-cultural	3	\$3,461,174
Circus	5	\$7,111,898
Community Arts	8	\$1,965,369
Disability	2	\$7,051,468
Experimental	3	\$1,226,782
Festival	1	\$50,000
First Nations	5	\$8,059,730
New Play Development	6	\$6,285,617
Physical	3	\$2,726,514
Puppet	5	\$11,576,321
Realtime Magazine	1	\$229,240
Regional	17	\$14,176,781
Theatre Company	55	\$104,698,103
Touring Company	1	\$8,855,753
Training	1	\$1,480,000
Venue	5	\$4,315,255
Women (Female Identifying)	4	\$4000
Youth	48	\$52,213,947

**Table 1:** Purposes of the organisations receiving funding from the Theatre Board the Australia Council, as framed by the researchers.

Dramaturgical theorists Cathy Turner and Synne K Behrndt suggest that “dramaturgy is having the ability to identify and conceptualise similarities and differences . . . to articulate what is distinctive” (2007, 8). The dramaturgical coding of these theatre organisations allows us to understand not just the trajectory of individual theatre organisations but, in addition, both the *types* of theatre organisations that were successfully funded across those five decades, and also which theatre organisations achieved funding success, but were then subsequently *defunded*.

Our interest in the *dramaturgy of defunding* arises directly from our positionality as non-First Nations academics, born on unceded Yugara and Turrbal lands, living in Meanjin/Brisbane. We are both practitioners/scholars, as dramaturg and scenographer alike, with our own experiences of successful and unsuccessful funding applications, operating from our distinctive sub-tropical location and within a post-baby boomer/gen-X/millennial generation. This loose assemblage of biographical fact might seem insignificant, but as our project to assemble a transparent public record of the funding and defunding of theatre organisations attempts to demonstrate, where you live, what generation you belong to, and most significantly, your identity may make a profound difference to your experience of Australian theatre.



**Figure 1:** Theatre Board Funding to theatre organisations by state or territory of Australia

As noted by co-author Kelly:

The project of Australian performance, born in the heady days of the nationalist New Wave, has, despite the profound changes in this decade [2000–2010], not become fairer or more diverse . . . Many . . . institutions that lost funding in the structural reform process during this decade . . . [were] . . . founded to address issues of access and diversity—including regional youth theatres, the “community cultural development” sector (which lost an Australian Council Board), all but two of the Indigenous State theatre companies, and the dedicated agency for female playwrights, Playworks. (2013, 89–90)

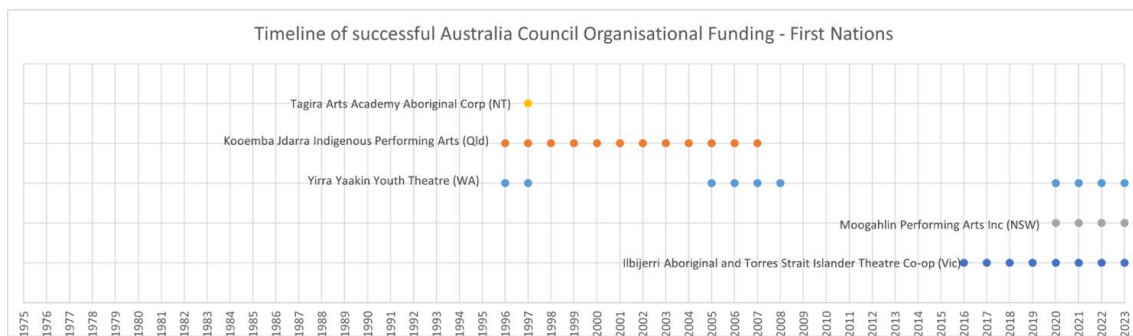
Once we have a full data set, our aim is to test a proposition that has arisen from our lived experience as practitioner/scholars: does the dramaturgy of defunding in Australian theatre, as represented by those decades of seemingly individual peer review decision-making, accumulate to a pattern of disremembering (Tompkins 2006, 23), where the rising agendas of previous decades are carelessly erased, often to the lasting damage of the overall arts and cultural ecology? In this way, could the art of the subsidy in the Australian theatrical sector reflect a dramaturgy of Australian colonial dispossession and exclusion?

### **Disremembering in Australian Theatre and Performance**

Postcolonial *disremembering* in Australian theatre was explored by theatre scholar Joanne Tompkins in her 2006 monograph, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre*. Drawing from leading Australian historians and anthropologists like William (W.E.H.) Stanner (1991), Bain Attwood (2005), and Henry

Reynolds (2000), Tompkins argued that Australian history and cultural memory is characterised by pervasive, structural patterns of inattention and *disremembering*. They proposed that the illegitimacy that arose from the dispossession and erasure of First Nations and Aboriginal Australian’s legal and cultural rights resulted in intense anxieties that could only be assuaged through what Stanner described in his pivotal 1968 Boyer lecture as “a national cult of forgetting” (1991). The historiography that Tompkins was engaging with in 2006 was largely written by non-First Nations Australians, many of them male. Nearly two decades later, for First Nations scholars like Chelsea Watego, a Munanjahli and South Sea Islander woman raised on Yuggera country, there is scepticism about historiography that doesn’t amplify First Nations voices: “We simply don’t need more texts that teach whitefullas about us on their terms” (2021, 6).

Indeed, even a provisional analysis of the theatre organisations dedicated to First Nations theatre supports Watego’s scepticism—with only five First National theatre organisations funded in total—and long stretches (1975–1994) and (2009–2011) with no First Nations theatre organisations funded.



**Figure 2:** Theatre Board funding to First Nations Theatre Organisations (Timeline)

While the long absence of funding prior to 1996 may reflect the activities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Board or ATSIA Board (subsequently Panel) it is the patterning of the *dramaturgy of defunding* that makes the case for a once a decade, generational pattern of *disremembering*. The theatre organisation with the longest timeline of funding is theatre company Yirra Yaakin, on Noongar country in Boorloo/Perth, which in its thirty-year history has received funding three times—in 1996–1997, 2004–2008, and 2020–2023. Yirra Yaakin achieved funding in the flowering of Aboriginal theatre in the 1990s (Casey 2004), lost funding for seven years, then regained it briefly for four years. But by 2009, a little over a decade after that pivotal moment in the 1990s there is a stretch of three years where there are no First Nations companies funded at all. Building on Meyrick’s argument (2005, 26), Kelly notes:

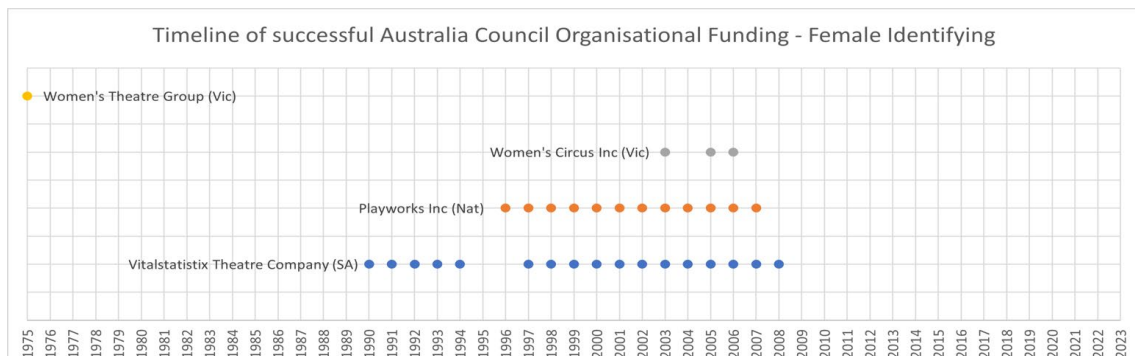
The reasons for the decline of those individual organisations are complex and deserve a case-by-case analysis. However, when you compare each of their agendas and mark the rapidity of the decline of key institutions . . . a larger pattern is discerned. It is a dramaturgy of Australian performance, a history-in-motion that continues to perpetuate a generational *tabula rasa*. Each new generation forgets and disregards the

prior generation’s preoccupations, instead taking on a self-conscious obsession with the new. (2013, 89–90)

This pattern of generational disremembering is replicated for theatre organisations that we have coded as having a mandate or purpose to widen participation for women (female identifying), multi-cultural theatre (culturally and linguistically diverse), for community theatre, and for artists with a disability—these are small numbers of organisations, with brief surges of funding, followed by years, sometimes decades, without funding. Figure 3 and Figure 4 offer the preliminary timelines for a further two categories of theatre organisations that demonstrate what we would propose could be viewed as dramaturgy of defunding based on generational disremembering.



**Figure 3:** Theatre Board funding Multi-Cultural Theatre or Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Theatre Organisations Timeline



**Figure 4:** Theatre Board funding to Women (Female Identifying) Theatre Organisations Timeline

The process of forgetting is not a passionate act of repression, rather it is a (dis)remembering, a choosing *not to remember* where theatre organisations with mandates to address issues of structural inequity or those that are perceived to fall out of the orbit of *excellence* in some way, have been historically more vulnerable to defunding. As Chris Hay and Stephen Carleton also noted in their comprehensive history of Australian playwrighting since 2007: “Australia is a settler nation shaped by silences, by renderings-invisible, by imported imaginings of artistic excellence” (2022, 11).

Figures 2, 3, and 4 also demonstrate the limitations of our generational knowledge of the 1970s and 1980s—for example we had not understood the contributions of theatre organisations dedicated to puppetry with five companies all up, an equivalent number to First Nations theatre organisations across the five decades of funding. Three of the original five organisations managed to retain their funding until 2016 when political decisions external to the Australia Council resulted in dramatic budget reductions that

led to sixty-five organisations being defunded by their respective artform Boards (Eltham 2016, 1).

Indeed, as soon as we examined the data not in terms of numbers of organisations and gaps in funding, but in relation to overall amounts of funding impacted by rising inflation, it confirmed what has been noted by so many other Australian arts and cultural policy scholars like Julian Meyrick. The impact of the decision in 1992 to separate the major organisations (2014a, 135) and to index their funding, as Meyrick notes, effectively defunds them by reducing the smaller organisations to a much more precarious form of ongoing funding.

This is clearly illustrated by looking at the preliminary data in relation to youth theatre companies who went from a peak of twenty-eight in 1997 to four in 2023, with three of those in the one city (Adelaide).

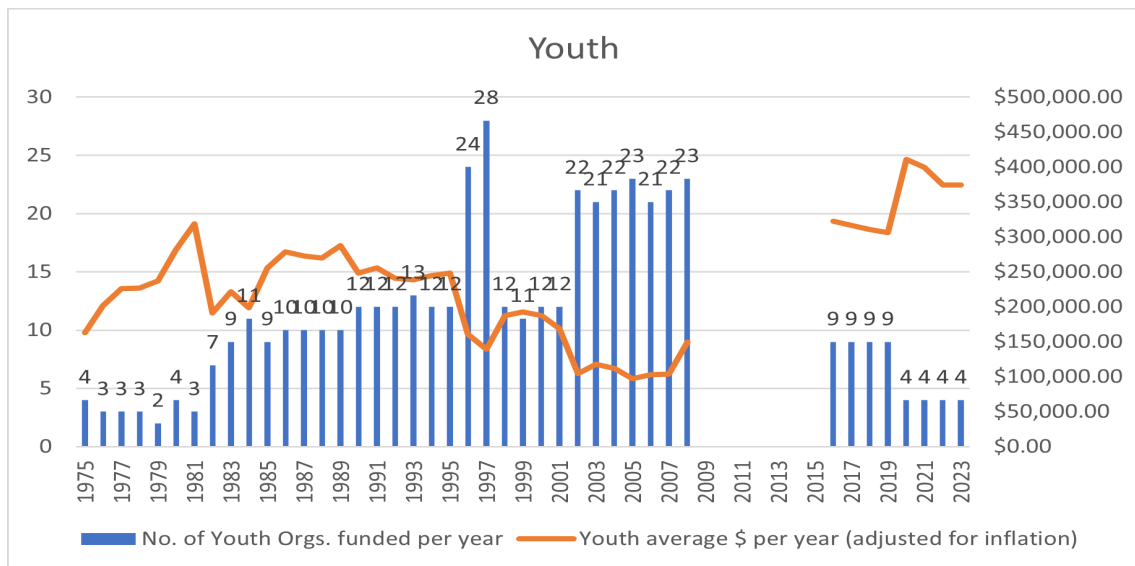


Figure 5: Theatre Board funding to Youth Theatre Organisations

Inflation has hollowed out any hope of reach and impact as resources were concentrated into smaller and smaller numbers of organisations. The same pattern is replicated in the category of small-to-medium theatre companies, who go from a 2007 peak of eighteen, to two in 2023; and seven regional companies in 2007 becomes one by 2023. It is important to note, that like Yirra Yaakin, federal government defunding does not necessarily mean the end of these theatre organisations. Many federally defunded youth theatre and regional theatre companies have continued, with a mix of state and local funding—usually through the tenacity of the individual artists in leadership roles. But, as it turns out, the corrosive impact of inflation and lack of investment in the unmet need of theatre organisations is the most indisputable and significant pattern in the dramaturgy of defunding.



## Conclusion

Our project is not attempting to argue for the end of peer funding, even if it means that Australian theatre might stay “caught in the hell of a Nietzschean eternal return” (Meyrick 2014a, 139), but rather, to seek to look backwards in order to move forwards. To propose that even within the fulcrum of peer funding, other considerations informed by our conscious knowledge of the persistent disremembering of the past, might sit alongside notions of excellence and merit. The Creative Australia staff who collate the endless spreadsheets and listen patiently to the long phone calls from confused and distraught theatre artists are best placed to know the best ways to implement these changes in detail. But we offer three preliminary recommendations, that arise from our nuanced understanding of the theatre sector as longstanding participants, but also confirmed by the preliminary data we have collected and begun to analyse as part of this project:

1. *Returning to providing a full account of all grant funding decisions in the Annual Report of Creative Australia*, including the amount, a description of the project, the place, purposes and the organisations involved to ensure transparency and historical legacy.
2. *Looking to embed accurate historical information and contextualisation within peer review processes*, to sit with notions of excellence, value and impact. This might not need to be an official *criterion*, but discursive information or frameworks supplied as part of the dialogue of peer review, or as more and more peer review occurs in isolation with individual peer reviewers, as part of the *package* supplied for the preparation for peer review decision-making. So that even as peer reviewers are choosing their *winners and losers*, they are able to do so with a consciousness of the past.
3. *Seeking to honour and acknowledge what has been lost* with consideration of one-off or discretionary funding programs that focus on revival of repertory and the reimagining of lost artists and organisations.

These recommendations do not advocate for a redrawn map where there are new winners and new losers, but rather to unknit the colonial paradigm of *disremembering* to understand that the past isn't *another country* but the one we live in now.

## Notes

1. The Australian Council for the Arts would morph into The Australia Council for the Arts, then Australia Council for the Arts, and now Creative Australia. We have used the name most associated with the period.
2. There is a minor error in the digitisation of the Annual Report of 1998, which is missing pages (pp.151–75 inclusive), including the Theatre Board list of grants and some information related to the Visual Arts Board, but these documents were also available using the Wayback Machine and are accurately reported in the data set.

3. The data set includes 51 annual grant totals and focuses exclusively on operational or 'on-going' funding for organisations (not individuals) funded by the Theatre Board. Initially, as the notion of more than one year of funding had not emerged within the Australia Council, this is articulated in the Annual Reports as 'General Grants', which then become 'Triennial Grants' and eventually 'Four Year Operational Funding.' It is also important to note that there may have been arts and cultural organisations that created theatre but who had an interdisciplinary focus that may have seen them achieve funding through the Dance, Community Arts, Inter-disciplinary, or Multi-Media Boards in their various incarnations. From 1992, the data excludes theatre organisations that were sent up to the Major Arts Board, and other large organisations like NIDA who moved into other streams of funding outside of the Australia Council. In the years where organisations received multiple lots of funding, these amounts were totalled e.g., in 74/75, Independent Theatre (NSW) received \$26,000 and \$10,000 in funding, totally \$36,000.

4. This snapshot was taken during the *Performing Data in Australasia: Exploring Data Analysis through Visualisation* symposium at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, 5–7 July 2023.

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KATHRYN KELLY is a dramaturg and theatre historian, and she is currently a Senior Lecturer at QUT in the Acting and Drama area in the Faculty of Creative Industries, Education and Justice (CIEJ). Her research interests include dramaturgy and socially engaged, feminist and transcultural performance practices. Her publications include a history of Australian dramaturgy 2000–2010 in *Catching Australian Theatre in the 2000s (Australian Playwrights Series, Brill)* as well as articles in *Theatre, Dance Performance Training, International Journal of Media and Performance, and Australasian Drama Studies*. She received a Fellowship with the National Library of Australia in 2021, as well as an Indigenous Associate Fellowship (AFHEA) in 2021. Her current research projects include an international collaboration around climate crisis, *The SAND Project*, and *Rovers Community Engagement* which is a project to explore community engagement and allyship for First Nations audiences. She is company dramaturg with *Belloo Creative*.

TESSA RIXON is a practitioner/researcher in digital scenography, intermedial performance & Australian performance design. Tessa's work promotes new modes of integrating established and emergent technologies into live performance; exploring the potentiality of authenticity within digital scenography; and showcasing Australian performance design practice and histories. As Senior Lecturer in Scenography at Queensland University of Technology, her research into digital scenographies, ecoscenographic practice and pedagogy, and Australian design has been published in leading publications including the *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, and *Theatre and Performance Design*. In 2021, she guest-edited the first special edition in over a decade to highlight Australian scenography (*Scene Journal (Intellect)*). Tessa is currently the National Committee Representative for Australia for the International Theatre Engineering and Architecture Conference, 2023, and Chair of the Research Commission for the International Organisation of Scenographers, Theatre Architects and Technicians.

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