



SWITCHING OFF THE GHOST LIGHT

A commitment to do better

15 October 2020

Traditionally, when a theatre will be empty for some time ('dark' in theatre vernacular) a single illuminated light is left on the stage. In practical terms this is for safety, but in theatre lore it is to light the space for the ghosts who inevitably haunt every theatre. Our 'ghost light' was lit on March 18, 2020.

These last seven months have been a period of great uncertainty and pain for so many, including in our arts industry, and here at Merrigong we've had to fight hard for the survival of our company, our jobs and to provide opportunities for numerous artists doing it tough. But these months also provided us with a rare opportunity to think about what we might do differently when the time finally came to once again invite audiences into our theatres.

This global crisis has brought into focus underlying societal and sector fault lines. The unexpected pause in the normal rhythms of work and life has delivered a point of clarity that returning to "business as usual" is neither possible nor desirable.

The question burning in our minds at Merrigong over these months has been: How do we do better? So we've been engaging in a process of consultation and discussion, asking our team of board, staff and volunteers, our audience, our artists, our community, to help us answer three questions:

How do we do better for our community?

How do we do better for our artists?

How do we do better for our team?

With events beginning again in our venues, it's time to finally switch off the 'ghost light', and we want to share with you some of the themes and ideas that have emerged through this process, and with them, our commitment as a company, to do better.

MERRIGONG
THEATRE
COMPANY

ILLAWARRA
PERFORMING
ARTS CENTRE

WOLLONGONG
TOWN HALL



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HOW DO WE DO BETTER FOR OUR COMMUNITY, OUR ARTISTS AND OUR TEAM?

1) FIRST NATIONS FIRST:

It is clear that there is no meaningful path to us doing better for our community that doesn't start with doing better for our region's First Nations people. As a company we are on a journey of listening and learning from and consulting with our local First Nations community and leaders in our sector. We are now determined to move this work beyond ideas and discussion, into committed actions – to listen and learn more, and to **work towards the establishment of a distinct, self-determined First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong** ^(a), a program that will **support local First Nations artists, especially young people, in their development, and in the creation and presentation of new locally-made performing arts works** ^(b); **facilitate and support our local First Nations community in greater access to and use of the public infrastructure (venues) and resources with which Merrigong is entrusted** ^(c); and **connect, through programming and cultural exchange, our local First Nations community, as well as our programs and wider community of artists, into the broader context of a national and international network of First Nations arts activity.** ^(d)

2) DIVERSE VOICES, DIVERSE AUDIENCES:

It is undeniable that, while as a company we have made efforts to diversify our programs and audiences, they remain far from reflecting the actual diversity of our local community and of wider Australian society. Systemic racism and other forms of structural prejudice are real, and as a 30 year old cultural institution we have undoubtedly, even if unknowingly, played our part in the continuation of this status quo. We must ensure a more diverse range of lived experiences are voiced through our programs, which in turn will be reflected in the diversity of our audiences. To achieve this we are committing to **build a new model of program consultation that invites diverse voices from the community to have input into programming decisions** ^(a).

3) RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE:

Merrigong operates significant public infrastructure, employs dozens of people, and interacts with thousands of our fellow community members each year, all of which can have significant impacts on our natural and social environment. As a not-for-profit company focused on the performing arts we don't always have the specific expertise needed to ensure that we are operating in the most sustainable, responsible way, but we do know that expertise is available locally. In the coming months and years we will **seek out leaders and experts in our community, working with them as well as the owner of our buildings (and major funding partner), Wollongong City Council, to find ways of operating more responsibly, limiting the negative impacts of our operations on our natural and social environment** ^(a).

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4) ARTIST-CENTRED:

The COVID crisis has revealed a structural weakness in our industry, insomuch as a sector that espouses that artists are central to all we do, has largely been unable to protect its greatest asset because artists are for the most part on the outside of our permanent employment and decision-making structures. Merrigong, for all its efforts to support and develop artists has also failed in this regard. We commit to **make artists more central to the structure and processes of our company, ensuring more artists are engaged at all levels of the company's decision-making, including our board** ^(a); to **explore models of employment for artists that provide greater security, moving beyond only project-based engagement, and especially away from gig-economy models which can force unacceptable levels of risk on to artists** ^(b); and to **better support the development, wellbeing and cultural safety of artists, particularly through facilitating their connection to artist and industry networks which our company has access to** ^(c).

5) TRANSPARENCY IS STRENGTH:

This unprecedented period has revealed not only inequities in access to resources within our society, but also to information. The hoarding of information is a method of guarding and exercising power, and the arts sector, far from being immune to such practices, is rife with it. It has never been more important for an organisation such as Merrigong, created for the cultural empowerment of our community, and entrusted with significant levels of public funds and infrastructure to **model a greater level of transparency in the hope that other organisations and agencies in our industry might follow our lead** ^(a). Specifically, we are committing to **continue the practice begun during the COVID shutdown, of regularly sharing with all permanent staff detailed financial reports and projections** ^(b) previously only shared with the board, and to **explore ways of better sharing with artists and producers our processes with regard to the programming decisions made about their work**. ^(c)

6) A HEALTHIER MIX OF WORK, PERSONAL AND FAMILY LIFE:

Like workers in so many industries, our team of staff at Merrigong have endured a period of great uncertainty, and had to discover together new ways of working, connecting and furthering our company's aims without normal access to our venues or offices. In doing this we have learnt a great deal about ourselves and how we work. We do not wish to return fully to our old way of working, but instead **continue to develop tools and processes that allow for greater flexibility in the way we work** ^(a), to **allow staff where practical to continue to regularly work remotely** ^(b), to **explore the establishment of a frequent 4-day working week at Merrigong (with a 100/80/100 approach – 100% pay for 80% hours worked, provided 100% productivity is maintained)** ^(c), and give a greater focus to assisting the general wellbeing and health of our staff ^(d).

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The challenge for Merrigong's team is to now meet these commitments through the development and delivery of clear lines of action, integrating these into the company's existing Strategic and Business Plans, which articulate our Mission, Values and current Strategic Goals.

A SUMMARY OF MERRIGONG'S 'GHOST LIGHT' COMMITMENTS

1) FIRST NATIONS FIRST:

- a. work towards the establishment of a distinct, self-determined First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong
- b. support local First Nations artists, especially young people, in their development, and in the creation and presentation of new locally-made performing arts works
- c. facilitate and support our local First Nations community in greater access to and use of the public infrastructure (venues) and resources with which Merrigong is entrusted
- d. connect, through programming and cultural exchange, our local First Nations community, as well as our programs and wider community of artists, into the broader context of a national and international network of First Nations arts activity.

2) DIVERSE VOICES, DIVERSE AUDIENCES:

- a. build a new model of program consultation that invites diverse voices from the community to have input into programming decisions.

3) RESPONSIBLE AND SUSTAINABLE:

- a. seek out leaders and experts in our community, working with them as well as the owner of our buildings (and major funding partner), Wollongong City Council, to find ways of operating more responsibly, limiting the negative impacts of our operations on our natural and social environment.



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4) ARTIST-CENTRED:

- a. make artists more central to the structure and processes of our company, ensuring more artists are engaged at all levels of the company's decision-making, including our board
- b. explore models of employment for artists that provide greater security, moving beyond only project-based engagement, and especially away from gig-economy models which can force unacceptable levels of risk on to artists
- c. better support the development, wellbeing and cultural safety of artists, particularly through facilitating their connection to artist and industry networks which our company has access to.

5) TRANSPARENCY IS STRENGTH:

- a. model a greater level of transparency in the hope that other organisations and agencies in our industry might follow our lead
- b. continue the practice begun during the COVID shutdown, of regularly sharing with all permanent staff detailed financial reports and projections
- c. explore ways of better sharing with artists and producers our processes with regard to the programming decisions made about their work.

6) A HEALTHIER MIX OF WORK, PERSONAL AND FAMILY LIFE:

- a. continue to develop tools and processes that allow for greater flexibility in the way we work
- b. allow staff where practical to continue to regularly work remotely
- c. explore the establishment of a frequent 4-day working week at Merrigong (with a 100/80/100 approach – 100% pay for 80% hours worked, provided 100% productivity is maintained)
- d. give a greater focus to assisting the general wellbeing and health of our staff.