



## **Establishing a First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong Theatre Company**

### **Why a First Nations Performing Arts Program?**

It is clear there is no meaningful path to Merrigong doing better for our community that does not start with doing better for our region's First Nations people. It is undeniable that, while as a company we have made efforts over the years to diversify our programs and audiences, they remain far from reflecting the actual diversity of our local community. 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. As a company we have been 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, accompanied by a program of ongoing cultural learning as a company. The leadership of our Company – managers and board – are resolved that there is no more important work for us to focus on at this time than the establishment of a distinct, self-determined First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong.

### **Why Merrigong?**

Merrigong Theatre Company has over many years been an active presenter of a range of First Nations theatre and dance works within its established programs. The company has also had ongoing relationships with a range of people within our local First Nations community, working on and supporting various projects. In 2018 the company's management decided to undertake a review of the way the company was working with First Nations Artists and Community. Acknowledging that the company required an arts industry-specific expertise that was not available locally, the organisation engaged renowned First Nations arts leader Jacob Boehme to undertake a review of all programs, policies, procedures and working practices, consulting with a range of internal and external stakeholders.

### **Improving our Cultural Safety**

Jacob undertook a review of the company's key documents including Strategic and Business Plans, and HR Policies and Procedures. He made a range of recommendations to ensure these documents better addressed the Cultural Safety and other needs of First Nations people who work with and for the company. These have all now been implemented.

Within the Merrigong team there were very different levels of understanding and knowledge of First Nations culture, local community, cultural awareness, and safety etc. and the team have done significant work in terms of learning including:

- Full day Decolonisation Workshop.
- Completion of SBS online inclusion program First Nations module Sep 2020.
- Full day local 'on-country' cultural awareness training.

The company recognises that this process of listening and learning needs to be ongoing and built-in to its processes of staff induction, training, and professional development.

Jacob Boehme met with and interviewed a range of people in Wollongong including many Merrigong staff and board members, and key local First Nations artists and community representatives. This was to understand how the company's efforts had been perceived by the community, and what local First Nations artists / community would like to see from Merrigong in terms of engagement, support, programs etc.

In 2021 a range of First Nations elders, community leaders, artists and educators were invited to consult with Merrigong's CEO and other senior managers to provide feedback and input into some proposed initial actions towards the establishment of a distinct, self-determined, First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong. A series of one-on-one and group consultations resulted from this invitation. In all, more than 32 people have engaged in active consultation on the way forward for this program, and through this work a vision has emerged. Invitations for engagement and feedback continue to stay open and take place.

### **What is the vision for the program?**

The vision is to establish a distinct, self-determined First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong. While the detailed aims of this program will require further clarification and guidance through ongoing community consultation, and will be driven by First Nations staff, it is envisaged that they would include the following aims:

- To support local First Nations artists, especially young people, in the development of their artistic practice, and in the creation and presentation of new locally made performing arts works.
- To 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.
- To 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.

### **Next steps:**

#### 1) Establish a First Nations Reference Group at Merrigong:

The group's primary role will be to consult with and advise Merrigong's Board, management, and First Nations staff on how best to support the aims of the First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong, and on matters relating to the cultural safety, learning and development of First Nations people through Merrigong's programs and operations.

#### 2) Establish the following two new permanent part-time First Nations staff positions at Merrigong:

**Senior Producer-First Nations Program** - this will be the senior manager at Merrigong driving the aims of the program as stated above, as part of the wider Artistic Development and Program teams, contributing to the shaping of exciting innovative programs for Merrigong's diverse audiences.

**First Nations Communications and Engagement Co-ordinator** - this position will report to the Senior Producer - First Nations Program and support the successful implementation of the program implementing the communications and engagement activities necessary to ensure the success of this program.

For further information please contact Simon Hinton, CEO/Artistic Director by email: [shinton@merrigong.com.au](mailto:shinton@merrigong.com.au) or by phone: (02) 4224 5901

**MERRIGONG  
THEATRE  
COMPANY**

**ILLAWARRA  
PERFORMING  
ARTS CENTRE**

**WOLLONGONG  
TOWN HALL**

## **Expression of Interest – First Nations Reference Group**

Merrigong Theatre Company is a not-for-profit company that operates Wollongong's premier performing arts venue, Illawarra Performing Arts Centre (IPAC) and the city's key civic and community venue, Wollongong Town Hall. Merrigong is also a vibrant theatre company in its own right – producing, presenting, and touring exciting contemporary theatre and supporting the development of a wide range of theatre makers.

Merrigong Theatre Company is committed to establishing a distinct self-determined First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong and is seeking Expressions of Interest (EOI) from members of the Illawarra First Nations communities to become a part of our inaugural First Nations Reference Group.

The role of the Reference Group will be to provide advice and support to the Merrigong Theatre Company board, management, and First Nations staff in relation to the First Nations communities of the Illawarra, New South Wales, and Australia.

It is proposed that this Reference Group will develop its own charter but broadly it is envisaged that:

- The group will consist of up to 10 local First Nations elders, artists, and community representatives, with a range of skills, experience and ages sought.
- The Reference Group will be appointed by the Merrigong board, with the board seeking advice regarding the group's initial membership from Merrigong management and key community contacts.
- The members of the Reference Group will be remunerated for their attendance at meetings at an agreed level.
- The Reference Group's charter, which will be drawn up by the group, will clearly define its relationship with the Merrigong board and company management; however, it is proposed that a First Nations member of the Merrigong Board would also serve on the Reference Group.
- The group's primary role will be to consult with and advise Merrigong's Board, management, and First Nations staff on how best to support the aims of the First Nations Performing Arts Program at Merrigong and to advise on matters relating to the cultural safety, learning and development of First Nations people through Merrigong's programs and operations.

Merrigong Theatre Company is seeking individuals with a broad skill set including, but not limited to:

- Strong connection with, and understanding of, First Nations organisations and communities in the Illawarra.
- A working knowledge of/or interest in First Nations artistic practice and First Nations arts organisations in Australia.
- An interest in the performing arts.
- Strong understanding of First Nations cultural protocols.
- Experience at board, senior management level or with leadership experience in community organisations.

Applications should include a cover letter and CV that address the desired areas of expertise and experience.

Applications and enquiries should be directed to: CEO, Simon Hinton at: [shinton@merrigong.com.au](mailto:shinton@merrigong.com.au) or: Illawarra Performing Arts Centre, PO Box 786, Wollongong NSW 2520.