

# SYDNEY FESTIVAL

## RECONCILIATION ACTION PLAN





#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Sydney Festival would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which the Festival takes place, and pay respect to the 29 clans of the Eora Nation. We acknowledge that this land falls within the boundaries of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council. We would also like to acknowledge our Darug neighbours in Parramatta. We pay respect to Elders both past and present, and all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whichever Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nation they come from.

## INTRODUCTION

Originally launched in 2013, our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) outlines our commitment towards improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by creating and fostering an organisational environment that cherishes respect, creates opportunity and builds cultural awareness.

Sydney Festival recognises that Sydney is a vast, complex and exuberant city of cultural contrasts and social diversity, that Sydney's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and contemporary cultures lie deep within the city's identity and are key to an enlightened and progressive festival.

COVER IMAGE:  
*ALWAYS*  
Sydney Festival 2019



## A MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Sydney Festival Reconciliation Action Plan remains our organisation's commitment to ensure that we keep moving forward on this vital issue for our nation.

We are committed to working towards improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by creating and fostering an organisational environment that cherishes respect, creates opportunity and builds cultural awareness.

We will continue to set ourselves new measurable goals, at the same time as maintaining ongoing successful initiatives as part of the ongoing journey for this organisation and our community.

**CHRISTOPHER TOOHER**  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



## OUR VISION FOR RECONCILIATION

Sydney Festival's vision for reconciliation is to formally and informally engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities and to positively contribute to improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

### WE DO THIS BY COMMITTING TO:

- displaying respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures
- offering employment opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- offering development and presentation opportunities to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts workers
- building cultural awareness and understanding among our staff, stakeholders and audiences of the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories, achievements and cultures.



## OUR BUSINESS

The biggest event in the city's cultural calendar, Sydney Festival is a unique and playful celebration of Sydney in summer. Every January it transforms our city with a kaleidoscopic program of performance, art and big ideas.

Our free and ticketed events cover a multitude of genres and have ranged from burlesque circus to New York rap and from Russian theatre to traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts practice. For four decades the Festival has brought to Sydney outstanding artists like Björk, Brian Wilson, David Byrne, Elvis Costello, Grace Jones, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, Robert Lepage, Sir Ian McKellen, Archie Roach and Peter Sellars alongside some of the world's great companies – The Wooster Group, Complicite, Cheek by Jowl, Royal Shakespeare Company, and the Schaubühne Berlin to name only a few – to share the Festival with the most exciting artists and companies in Australia

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and cultures have always held a special place within the Sydney Festival program. Over the years, the Festival has celebrated and profiled the talents of respected artists, leaders and companies, including Ilbjerri Theatre Company, Black Arm Band, Moogahlin Performing Arts, Marrugeku, The Pigram Brothers, Archie

Roach, Wesley Enoch, Rachael Maza, Geoffrey Gurrumul Yunupingu, Kev Carmody, Rhoda Roberts, Richard Bell, Gerry Bostock, Kelton Pell, Brook Andrew, Frank Yaama, Dan Sultan, Dr Anita Heiss, Professor Larissa Behrendt, Lily Shearer, Mark Howett, Rachel Perkins, Jacob Nash, the Hon. Linda Burney, Jacob Boehme, Nathan Maynard, Uncle Jack Charles, Stephen Page, Bart Willoughby, Gary Foley, Professor Shane Houston, Ernie Dingo, Ursula Yovich, Last Kinection, Emma Donovan, William Barton, Ghenoa Gela, Trevor Jamieson, Roger Knox and many more. Telling Australian First Nations stories is an extension of our dedication to reflecting the stories of our country.

In 2012, with Festival Director Lindy Hume, Sydney Festival heralded a significant shift in its commitment to its programming of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work by presenting Black Capital, a ground-breaking contemporary program of diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander works and ideas, emerging as one of the Festival's most ambitious projects ever – in scale, scope and in its transformative potential and momentum. During the three-year development period leading to the presentation of Black Capital, Sydney Festival launched longer term strategies to encourage productive partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and organisations: to develop new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander audiences; to commission new work; and to discover and present emerging

and established Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and their work.

Lieven Bertels was appointed Festival Director in 2012 with his tenure running from 2013 to 2016. As an international visitor Mr Bertels embraced the opportunity provided by Black Capital to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts practice were at the core of his four festivals.

Our Reconciliation Action Plan started in 2013 and has provided us with clear objectives to support our strategy and develop employment opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across all facets of the Festival. The Festival continues to consult with local organisations such as Sydney's Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, the City of Sydney Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Panel and specific project-based reference groups and cultural consultants.

In 2015 Sydney Festival was delighted to appoint to its Board of Directors Professor Larissa Behrendt OA Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology Sydney and Darren Dale Managing Director Blackfella Films.

In the same year Wesley Enoch was appointed Festival Director with his tenure running across five Festival from 2017 to 2021. Hailing from Stradbroke Island (Minjeribah) and a proud Noonuccal Nuugi man Wesley's unprecedented focus on Australian stories, artists and new

work resulted in the most expansive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and cultural program to date across his five Festivals.

In 2020 Olivia Ansell was appointed Festival Director for 2022 to 2024. As the organisation develops strategic plans for this period, an ongoing commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts practice will be a core driver.

Sydney Festival has a full time equivalent of 50–60 staff in any given year. The team curates, plans and presents the annual three-week program of events focused on venues and audiences in Sydney and Parramatta. The organisational structure of the permanent team promotes good communication, effective ownership by staff members over their areas of responsibility, active support among team members and a flexible and questioning environment where open discussion is encouraged.

Sydney Festival's audacious contemporary programming position is at the forefront of arts practice in Australia and up there as one of the most wonderful festivals in the world. Sydney Festival relies on a mix of government funding; corporate, media and production partnerships; as well as philanthropic giving. Accessibility is central to the Sydney Festival ethos, which is reflected in a commitment to free events, geographic reach to Parramatta and Western Sydney audiences, disability access and the Festival's ongoing commitment to reconciliation.

# OUR RECONCILIATION JOURNEY

The Festival is proud of the organisational outcomes from its commitment to the RAP including; a Welcome To Country protocol document endorsed by the MLALC, Cultural Awareness Training for staff, formal acknowledgements at all major events and in leading publications, staff events to celebrated NAIDOC Week, secured funding and placements for two paid Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander internships which resulted in the mapping of clear pathways for employment. Since 2016 the organisation has offered designated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander seasonal employment roles in programming. Additionally we worked with Arts Ready facilitating two fulltime paid internships in administration roles in the organisation.

As well as our organisational outcomes, the Festival continues to celebrate and profile the talents of respected artists, leaders and companies through our program.

## 2013

In July 2013, Sydney Festival launched its first RAP. Sydney Festival's vision for reconciliation is to formally and informally engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and communities and contribute to positive outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This relates to our core business objectives of consolidating our position in the 'arts' space by presenting high calibre unique arts projects and developing organisational capacity by ensuring we have a work environment that attracts the best employees.

The Festival's reconciliation journey is driven

by the RAP and a commitment to leading the practical and effective reconciliation with our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

We continue and remain ever grateful for the ongoing guidance we receive from the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, the City of Sydney Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisor Panel and respected community leaders. Their advice, insight and patience were invaluable during the development and ongoing implementation of our RAP.

Indigenous art and culture have always held a special place within the Sydney Festival program. Over the years, the Festival has celebrated and profiled the talents of respected artists, leaders and companies.

## 2014

2014 we were proud to initiate, co-commission and produce *Black Diggers* in close collaboration with Queensland Theatre Company. Further to this, the Festival was thrilled to present *The Shadow King* with a cast including Tom E. Lewis, Jimi Bani, Jada Alberts, Selwyn Burns, Frances Djulibing, Rarriwuy Hick, Damion Hunter, Kamahi Djordon King, Natasha Wanganeen and Bart Willoughby. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists were also integrated into many other Festival programs including: as part of About an Hour we presented Marrugeku's *Gudirr*

*Gudirr*, a solo dance piece by Dalisa Pigram with visuals by Vernon Ah Kee; City of Sydney's Lawn Library in the Festival Village featured workshops and storytelling by Matt Doyle; and both Domain concerts featured projections of Daniel Boyd's exquisite *History is Made at Night*.

## 2015

2015 we presented works by contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists across artforms and contexts: Vicki Van Hout's *Long Grass* as part of About an Hour, Malthouse Theatre's *Blak Cabaret* at the Festival Village, Anita Heiss and William Barton performing with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra at the annual free Symphony in The Domain, plus Radical Son and Stiff Gins performing at Parramatta Opening Party.

## 2016

2016 sold out shows across several venues characterised this year's performance works by artists from different nations across Australia – the intimacy of backyard storytelling with Uncle Wes Marne in *Fire Bucket*, the directorial feature film debut of Stephen Page's *Spear*, the physical joy and documentary story of *Djuki Mala*, the urgency of climate change explored in Marrugeku's *Cut the Sky*, the soulful songs of Kev Carmody, and the fusion of Tiwi song, dance and jazz music in *Tiwi + Jazz*.

## 2017

2017 *Bayala* was a centrepiece of the Festival, which also included Let's Speak Sydney language classes, the installation *Patyegarang's Notebooks* by Charles Madden and Lille Madden with Jonathan Jones and a morning ceremony song by Nardi Simpson and Jacinta Tobin sung by a choir on 26 January. Two works from Indigenous theatre company ILBIJERRI – *Blood on the Dance Floor* and *Which Way Home* – were crowd favourites as was the world premiere of *The Season* by Nathan Maynard. Senior artist Vernon Ah Kee's largest ever solo exhibition *Not an Animal or a Plant* showed at the National Art School whilst other performing artists engaged with the Yellamundie National First Peoples Playwriting Festival. As a special highlight to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, *1967: Music in the Key of Yes* was a sell-out success.

## 2018

2018 we continued our commitment to Indigenous programming through our Blak Out program. *My Name is Jimi* and *My Urrwai* saw the expansion of our partnership with Belvoir and the storytelling of artists from the Torres Strait. *Bayala*, our Indigenous language project, saw another sold-out series of classes and the moving Baraya song project saw close to 300 local choir singers perform a song on 26 January that



acknowledged our history and colonial starting points. *Tribunal* brought the Indigenous and asylum seeker experience under the same roof and *Bambula*, with Paul Grabowsky and The Wilfred Brothers, fused Indigenous language and culture with jazz.

#### 2019

2019 Sydney Festival's *Blak Out* program returned with a diverse celebration of First Nations voices across theatre, dance, music and visual art. Dancer and Wiradjuri man Joel Bray invited audiences to an intimate encounter with his life story in *Biladurang*, performed partly in the nude and entirely in a hotel suite. The Sydney Opera House played host to *Spinifex Gum*, a musical collaboration between Marliya (a choir of young Indigenous women singing in English and Yindjibarndi) and The Cat Empire musicians Felix Riebl and Ollie McGill, with musical guests Briggs, Emma Donovan and Peter Garrett. *Legs On The Wall* showcased *Man With The Iron Neck*, an affecting work written by screen icon Ursula Yovich and co-directed by Josh Bond and Gavin Robins. The *Bayala* program returned for the third time, teaching Sydneysiders how to speak their local language; *Blak Box – Four Winds* at Blacktown Showgrounds gave voice to stories from Elders and young members of Blacktown's Indigenous community; and *ALWAYS* and *The Vigil* were hallmark presentations at Barangaroo Reserve.

Sydney Festival 2019 acknowledged First

Nations custodianship of this land with three events and installations at Barangaroo Reserve. The *ALWAYS* sculpture – a huge outdoor installation of the declaration 'Always' by local Bangarra artist in residence Jacob Nash – stood to remind visitors that this land always was and always will be Aboriginal land. In sight of the *ALWAYS* sculpture, an overnight vigil was held from dusk on 25 January until dawn on 26 January. This was a chance for all Australians to come together by campfire, hear stories of Country from Elders, reflect on the meaning of the day before the First Fleet arrived, and understand the impact that colonisation has had upon Australia. On the morning of 26 January from 8.30am, the *Was and Will Be* concert featured members of the Marliya choir from *Spinifex Gum*, storytelling by Elders from local community and a performance by Troy Brady.

#### 2020

In 2020, First Nations voices and storytelling were the highlight of the program, with many of the Festival's biggest critical and commercial successes included theatre performances *BLACK TIES* from ILBIJERRI Theatre Company and Te Re-hia Theatre, Opera Australia's musical revival *Bran Nue Dae*, Nardi Simpson's *Black Drop Effect*, *Black Cockatoo* directed by Wesley Enoch AM, Jane Harrison's *The Visitors*, powerful Gurrumul Yunupingu tribute *Burgul* and Archie Roach's career-spanning concert *Tell*

*Me Why*. First Nations Canadian musician Jeremy Dutcher revived the music of his ancestors with a standing ovation performance at City Recital Hall and sold-out Salon Series show at the Harry and Penelope Seidler House, while didgeridoo maestro and composer William Barton packed the Sydney Town Hall Vestibule alongside 'Dreamtime Opera Diva' Auntie Delmae Barton and top violinist Veronique Serret. The Festival also showcased a wealth of First Nations visual art, from world-first career surveys and new work debuts by Fiona Foley, Vernon Ah Kee and Taloi Havini to *Three Views*' subversion of colonial coastal defence bunkers, Reko Rennie's monumental tribute to Indigenous sovereignty *REMEMBER ME* and Daniel Boyd's stunning, 360-degree video projections *VIDEO WORKS* at Carriageworks, Indonesian artist Jumaadi's exhibition and shadow play performance, and Pacific-spanning contemporary and traditional art exhibition *Wansolwara*. On the 250th anniversary of Cook's landing, sovereignty and new concepts of nationalism were top of the agenda, with Sydney Festival leading the cultural conversation through *Procession*, *The Vigil* and *Proclamation*. To complement these works, the Festival also programmed *Beyond 2020: My Australian Dream* (presented in partnership with UTS), a panel discussion and oration by Professor Tom Calma AO, a screening of the Adam Goodes documentary *My Australian Dream*, and a series of storytelling and language events at the State Library of NSW. *The*

*Future is Floating* and three UTS Big Thinking Forums examining new, inclusive ways to conceptualise Australian national identity, First Nations leadership in arts and culture, and what defines a project as First Nations, further allowed these concepts to be explored.

The 2020 Festival also saw the creation of a powerful addition to the national discussion around 26 January – *the Procession*, a cleansing ceremony, song and dance led by Aboriginal Elders through the streets of Sydney. A positive walking experience of reflection, *Procession* brought together hundreds from Indigenous Australian and Torres Strait Islander communities to celebrate culture in the main street of Sydney, as well as thousands of general public, who accompanied *Procession* on its way to Barangaroo Reserve for *The Vigil*. In 2020 *The Vigil* cemented its place as an annual 25 January tradition – an overnight opportunity to gather together in reflection on the eve of Australia Day and consider all of the narratives that make up our national identity, from Australia's Indigenous heritage to its colonial institutions and contemporary multicultural migration. Thousands came together at Barangaroo Reserve from dusk right through until dawn, enjoying dance, poetry and live music performances from artists such as Dan Sultan and guests, and experiencing the resilience, beauty and joy of First Nations cultures.

#### 2021

In 2021 Sydney Festival's *Blak Out* program returned with a well-rounded selection of theatre, music, dance and art by First Nations writers, performers and artists. First Nations storytelling was at the forefront of the Australian Made 2021 program, with highlights including Bangarra Dance Theatre's dance performance *Spirit: A Retrospective 2021* at The Headland outdoor pop-up stage and *Sunshine Super Girl* which transformed Sydney Town Hall into a tennis court for the remarkable story of Evonne Goolagong. Two decades after thousands of Australians walked across the Bridge in the name of reconciliation, *Burrawa* – a local Aboriginal word that means "above" or "upwards" – delivered fresh perspectives on the history of our Harbour City with Indigenous Storytellers leading this inaugural BridgeClimb Sydney tour. The Festival showcased a wealth of First Nations visual art with a line-up that included Carol McGregor, Judy Watson, Archie Moore, Megan Cope, Alick Tipoti and a stunning showcase of work by 30 contemporary First Nations artists at the Maritime Museum, *Defying Empire: The 3rd National Indigenous Art Triennial*. First Nations musicians took over much-loved local venues in the Festival's *Allowed & Local* series, with sets from Ngailre, Christine Anu, Thandi Phoenix and Kobie Dee getting audiences grooving in their seats. While over at the Seymour Centre, didgeridoo virtuoso William Barton

and powerhouse violinist Véronique Serret mesmerised and transfixed audiences with *Heartland*, blending traditional songlines and modern storytelling in a new musical collaboration featuring Auntie Delmae Barton's poetry. Following last year's 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook's voyage to Australia, *To Cook Cook or Not* (presented in partnership with Biennale of Sydney) challenged prevailing historical narratives with Festival Director Wesley Enoch, comedian Dane Simpson, singer-songwriter Ngailre and TV Presenter Matty Webb. The 2021 Festival saw *The Vigil* return for a third year, cementing this tradition of cleansing, reflection and performance on the eve of Australia Day.

While we continue to implement aspects of the RAP to improve organisational culture, we must not lose sight of our core purpose and the area in which we can contribute the most to reconciliation; as a meeting place of ideas and stories. Through commissioning, presentation and conflation of ideas, the Festival has its greatest opportunity to instigate change. Sometimes this takes the form of a provocation and others times artist help us shine a light on hidden truths. Embedding cultural respect, strengthening relationships and developing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people within our organisation will fundamentally improve the way in which we go about being a better meeting place.



# RELATIONSHIPS

Sydney Festival is one of Sydney's most important global meeting places. We want all citizens to participate in, have access to, and feel genuine ownership of, their Sydney Festival. Long-range strategic and respectful partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians are essential to the festival's relevance in contemporary Australia, its aim to increase participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content and audiences, and its ability to leave a lasting cultural legacy on which to build for future generations.

## FOCUS AREA

Develop deeper, sustainable and more meaningful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, artists and communities.

ACTION	RESPONSIBILITY	TIMELINE	MEASURABLE TARGET
Actions items for the period 2022 to 2024 currently under strategic review as the Festival evolves its strategic plans for its next iteration.			

# RESPECT

It is important Sydney Festival respects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, their cultures, lands and histories to maintain its profile as a cultural leader locally, nationally and internationally. By acknowledging the enormous contributions Australia's first peoples have made to this country and by fostering a sustainable and progressive platform for future Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories, engagement and employment, Sydney Festival will be able to accurately reflect its time and place in contemporary society.

## FOCUS AREA

Publicly demonstrate the Festival's recognition and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and cultural practice and create and promote Sydney Festival as a culturally safe working environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

ACTION	RESPONSIBILITY	TIMELINE	MEASURABLE TARGET
Actions items for the period 2022 to 2024 currently under strategic review as the Festival evolves its strategic plans for its next iteration.			



# OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals, organisations and communities are important to the program and staff development of Sydney Festival if it is to maintain its profile as a progressive, inclusive and socially responsible arts organisation. The growth of a valuable network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts and corporate professionals will bring new perspectives and awareness of creative and business opportunities and workplace satisfaction.

## FOCUS AREA

Identify and provide employment and relationship opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across all Festival departments and develop career pathways for emerging artists and arts workers..

ACTION	RESPONSIBILITY	TIMELINE	MEASURABLE TARGET
Actions items for the period 2022 to 2024 currently under strategic review as the Festival evolves its strategic plans for its next iteration.			

# TRACKING AND PROGRESS

ACTION	RESPONSIBILITY	TIMELINE	MEASURABLE TARGET
Actions items for the period 2022 to 2024 currently under strategic review as the Festival evolves its strategic plans for its next iteration.			

Salon Series  
Sydney Festival 2020



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