

Poor and unhealthy: Australia's artists in social free-fall

Kaye Tucker
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The recently published *Falling Through the Gaps: Our artists' health and welfare*, by Dr Mark Williams, starkly exposes the worsening social conditions facing the overwhelming majority of performing artists and technical support workers in Australian theatre, radio, television and film. The small book is one of Currency House's Platform Papers quarterly essays.

Williams, a Melbourne solicitor specialising in copyright law and a frequent stage performer, draws together data gathered from surveys, digital records and archives, as well as interviews with those employed in an industry historically characterised by irregular hours, short-term work and low pay.

Notwithstanding popular misconceptions of fame and wealth associated with the performing arts, the overwhelming majority of the 48,000 professionals in the industry are poorer, have worse mental and physical health and a significantly shorter lifespan than the rest of the working population. Traditional and highly limited support networks—the family, charity, and the welfare state—fail to stop many falling into poverty and despair.

The whole concept of “financial reward” in the arts, Williams writes, is generally seen differently than in other industries. The prevailing expectation is that artists will put up with poor income in the performing arts in order to realise their creative potential. This usually means, he says, they are in “terrible danger of falling through the gaps between emotional satisfaction and material security in their career path.” These gaps, he argues, are “structural” and must be fixed.

Williams references a 2016 research project by Entertainment Assist in association with the Victoria University College of Arts, which surveyed 2,904 actors, musicians, composers and radio, television and film technicians. The survey revealed that mental ill-health, suicidal ideation and suicide amongst performing artists and support workers were nearly nine times that of the general population. The average life expectancy of those employed in the industry was about 74.8 years, or ten years less than

that of the rest of the Australian population.

The survey also revealed that 44 percent of industry workers have moderate to severe anxiety, ten times higher than the general population. Irregular working hours, constant touring and intense competition placed extraordinary pressure on performing artists and others in the industry. Broken sleep, disconnected social support and compensatory reliance on drugs and alcohol to the point of substance abuse; perfectionism and personal competition; and constantly being before the gaze of producers, casting directors, fellow artists, the public and the critics, all have a debilitating and long-term health impact.

Falling Through the Gaps notes that falling incomes and an increase in mental ill health for actors and crew became more pronounced following the global financial crisis of 2007–08. Figures cited in the essay show a substantial decline in income from PAYG (pay as you go) wages between 2010 and 2017, and a greater increase in freelance work for directors, choreographers and dancers. Short-term employment became the norm in the industry.

The book reveals that 59.9 percent of industry workers admit that they could not raise \$2,000 from support networks in an emergency, and that 56.1 percent felt they could not get help, or only sometimes receive financial assistance, from friends, family, neighbours and colleagues when in need.

Housing is a particularly acute issue. While performers are almost always on the road they still have to pay rent or a mortgage, if they have one. Williams explains that those in the industry had to be “mobile, nimble, without much bag or baggage” and life lived out of a “wheelie suitcase,” which leads to a situation where many had “nowhere to call home.”

In the 1970s and 1980s, performers would appear regularly for work in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane or Adelaide. *Falling Through the Gaps* notes that by the end of the 1990s many performers were soloists or duos—almost never more than quartets—and were often touring their own shows, not just to the larger Australian state capitals but to every festival town in between, then across Asia—to Singapore and

Kuala Lumpur, Osaka and Seoul, New Zealand and Nandi—and on Pacific cruise boats.

Theatre productions with big choruses and casts are now rare, with greater use of recorded music, and staging kept to a minimum with computer-generated effects, cheaper sets and costumes. Payments for performers are generally not much more than the minimum wage, plus a per diem for the cast and crew. The same is true of opera, dance, music and spoken-word theatre and even film, television and live music.

Falling Through the Gaps also reveals the plight of older performers, who find themselves facing an economic and social abyss as they head towards retirement.

The age of professional artists in Australia increased significantly in the last decade. In 2006 about 32 percent of those in the industry were aged 55 years or over. By 2016 this had increased to 41 percent, although acting is predominantly regarded as a young person's profession. Simply put, ageing is not respected or viable in an industry that involves working irregular hours, touring and the sacrifice of family life. These factors often lead to a separation from "normal" society.

According to Media Super, the main superannuation and pension fund for performance artists and support technicians, the average amount of super held by those in the industry, aged between 45 and 84, is just \$58,000. Of more than 78,000 members of Media Super, 62 percent said they did not have enough super for a comfortable retirement.

The Association of Superannuation Funds of Australia currently estimates that, for a comfortable retirement, single people need retirement savings of \$545,000 and couples a combined retirement savings of \$640,000.

State-based Actors Benevolent Funds, which were established in the immediate post-World War II period, offer some performing artists financial grants, short term loans and accommodation assistance for those facing immediate hardship, but this emergency help is limited.

Unemployment and disability benefits are theoretically available to performers and crews, but cost-cutting and onerous conditions, imposed by consecutive Coalition and Labor governments, mean there is little social welfare for those in the performing arts. Australia's below poverty level unemployment benefits, moreover, are difficult to access for performing artists, because Centrelink insists that those receiving unemployment welfare should be "encouraged" to "re-train."

Australia's PAYG tax system also fails to serve the artist well, as actors get paid in bursts and then go for long periods without any income. They often need to supplement their income by working in other industries, which can play havoc with tax threshold scales. Artists' income is often reduced

significantly while they wait for annual tax returns to establish their actual income.

While Williams' book reveals something of the social plight facing performing arts workers, his "practical steps" to resolve these problems consist of a series of polite appeals to the government and the entertainment and superannuation industry chiefs.

These include calling on the superannuation industry to help provide "charitable support," on commercial superannuation funds to adopt "elements of social responsibility," the introduction of ticket levies, funding for entertainment companies so they are more aware of health and mental health issues, housing and access to emergency accommodation for working and non-working individuals, and collaboration between the industry unions, entertainment producers and state-funded arts companies for "whole-of-life support."

Williams' essay and his "practical steps" divert attention from those who are politically responsible for the deteriorating living standards of performance artists and support workers. He suggests that this section of the workforce, their employers, Australian governments and the entertainment industry unions have common interests. Neither the fact that the industry is owned and operated according to the dictates of the capitalist market and the profit system, nor the terrible impact of systematic government cuts to arts funding, are mentioned anywhere in *Falling Through the Gaps*.

Over the last ten years, successive Australian governments, Liberal-National and Labor alike, have slashed more than \$300 million from arts funding, resulting in thousands of jobs being eliminated from the sector. The Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, which covers performance industry workers, has done nothing to oppose this cost-cutting and increased exploitation. Instead, it has collaborated with entertainment and cultural industry chiefs—private and state-funded alike—to impose these measures.

The first step in any struggle to overcome the worsening social conditions facing the majority of performing artists is to recognise that what is required is a unified struggle by all sections of the working class and a socialist political strategy that challenges the capitalist profit system itself.



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