BREATHING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

Performing arts challenges and responses to the mental health implications of COVID-19

Helen Rusak, Talisha Goh, Frances Barbe, Renée Newman & Peta Blevins

Canato, C. (2020, Nov 16). Photograph of R. Hill's *A Moving Portrait* performed by WAAPA Dance students at the Geoff Gibbs Theatre in 'Rise: Program A'.

Breathing through the pandemic: Performing arts challenges and responses to the mental health implications of COVID-19

Launched December 13, 2021

Executive Summary

This report presents research into the challenges faced by the performing arts sector in Western Australia (WA) during the sudden lockdowns that occurred because of the COVID-19 pandemic in early-to-mid 2020. The research includes a series of digital stories told by artists who were affected by COVID-19 lockdowns and provides both a historical snapshot as well as digital record of the challenges that were faced by performing artists in WA during the beginning of the pandemic.

The research commenced in late 2020, with four stages of data gathering between January 2021 and July 2021 including surveys, interviews, and case studies. The major finding that emerged from the research was that the disruption to performances during lockdown led performers to re-evaluate their artistic practice, whether through having a break or reassessing their career paths. Some artists reported that their mental health, which may have already been impaired through the stress of working as performing artists, suffered or became exacerbated during COVID-19. The most affected were early career artists, freelancers, and women, many of whom were excluded from government support such as JobKeeper. Some sought mental health support, but some were inhibited from seeking help by the stigma associated with poor mental health or were prevented from seeking support by issues of access or cost.

The immediate impact for performing arts organisations was a complete shock to the system. Workload stress for managers increased with their efforts to maintain operations and assets. Organisations acted as beacons of support for the wider performing arts community, for example through honouring artist and employee contracts as much as possible. In turn, support from audiences, donors, and direct support from government have been instrumental in maintaining morale and purpose for organisations. Due to the delayed impacts of lockdowns, artistic organisations are only now beginning to feel the true burden of COVID-19 and will continue to feel these impacts throughout the medium term.

The emotional and psychological toll from the loss of work and income, changes to workplace practices in response to COVID-19, along with the complicated processes associated with applying for necessary grant income changed individual artistic practice and the way artists were choosing to live their lives. Many in the performing arts industry suffered because of the casualisation or 'gig economy' that had become normalised in the industry. They found themselves without access to the

government safety nets available, nor were there company structures in place to fall back on for many independent artists or small companies. However, the adaptability and resilience evidenced within the performing arts industry during COVID-19 should not be underestimated and are illustrated through the filmed stories of the lived experience of artists who continued "breathing through the pandemic" and who even manage to reflect on potential positive outcomes of the challenging time.

The research found that the performing arts sector was dramatically impacted by COVID-19 and performing artists and arts workers experienced significant changes to their ways of working and loss of income and work opportunities, accompanied by impairment to psychological wellbeing and increased psychological distress. While the sector was affected as a whole, particular attention should be paid to those who may be at greater risk for negative outcomes, including women and gender-diverse individuals, who may be juggling increased demands across multiple domains (e.g., work, domestic responsibilities, employment precarity) and younger performing artists who may be less established in their careers and subsequently experience higher levels of anxiety about the future.

COVID-19 has exacerbated social, economic, and mental health problems long-recognised throughout the performing arts sector before the pandemic. In an industry that was already under the spotlight for stress and mental health (Willis et al. 2019; Williams et al. 2019; Gordon-Nesbitt & Howarth 2020; Arts Wellbeing Collective, 2019). COVID-19 brought with it another test to the resilience of the industry. Increased ongoing investment in financial and mental health support, particularly support that is catered towards the specific demands and challenges of the performing arts sector, will be required going forward to ensure the WA performing arts sector continues to flourish in a post-COVID-19 society.

The recommendations include:

1. Future monetary support, opportunities or incentives for the sector to help attract back those workers who have left the industry.
2. Given the precarity and lack of financial support for many of the participants during COVID-19, access to a low-cost or free mental health service that caters specifically to performing artists would be a highly beneficial.
3. Work on strategy of "glocalism" in medium and long terms, to boost employment for local performing arts, help mental health, and as a future strategy to build on WA's unique cultural offerings.
4. Ongoing support for performing arts organisations for the sector to fully recuperate from the effects of COVID-19, especially in the medium term. It could encompass means such as digital infrastructure, COVID-safe plans, or streamlined quarantine procedures and facilities for interstate or international performing artists.

Contents

List of Acronyms

ACT	Australian Capital Territory
BRS	Brief Resilience Scale
CPA	Creative Partnerships Australia
DASS	Depression Anxiety Stress Scales
DCA	Department of Culture and the Arts (WA)
DLGSC	Department of Local Government, Sports and Cultural Industries (WA)
DJTSI	Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation (WA)
FS	Flourishing Scale
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QLD	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SWLS	Satisfaction With Life Scale
TAS	Tasmania
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VIC	Victoria
WA	Western Australia
WAAPA	Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts
WHO	World Health Organization

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Chief Investigator

Dr. Helen Rusak (Chief Investigator) studied musicology and arts management. She has worked as a music teacher, academic, concerts and festivals manager. She is currently Course Co-Ordinator for Arts Management at WAAPA. She has presented at international conferences and published on cultural policy, music and new media. Helen was responsible for overseeing this research project, data collection, and finalising the report.

Report Team

Dr. Peta Blevins (Research Assistant) is a dance scientist, researcher, and consultant specialising in mental health in the performing arts and psychological skills for performance. Peta is currently a sessional academic at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts and served on the Australian Society for Performing Arts Healthcare National Executive Committee from 2018-2021. Peta was responsible for project coordination, survey design, data collection, analysis, and writing of this report.

Dr. Talisha Goh (Research Assistant) is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Monash University, currently working on the Australian Research Council project Diversifying Music in Australia: Gender Equity in Jazz and Improvisation. Talisha's research focuses on Australian music, the lived experiences of minority artists, and creating equity and sustainability within the performing arts. Talisha was responsible for data collection, analysis, literature review, and writing of this report.

Creative Team

Dr. Renée Newman (Investigator) is an educator, actor, writer, dramaturge, director and producer. She is a lecturer, researcher and research supervisor for WAAPA at ECU. She has published widely on theatre and dance education including 2019 Routledge Companion to Theatre and Politics and the 2019 Routledge publication The Meeting of Aesthetics and Ethics in the Academy: Challenges for Creative Practice Researchers in Higher Education. Renee was responsible for overseeing the artistic research and writing for Phase 4 of the report.

Dr. Frances Barbe (Investigator) is a performance-maker having worked internationally as performer, director, choreographer. She is currently based at WAAPA ECU. She was a member of Tadashi Endo's Butoh Mamu Dance Theatre (Germany), established Fran Barbe Dance Theatre (London) and founded Theatre Training Intiative (London) where she curated two international butoh festivals. Frances was responsible for overseeing the artistic research.

Andrea Gibbs (digital storytelling research assistant) is the director of Barefaced Stories, writer, actor, and ABC radio presenter. Billed as a 'revelation' by *The Australian* newspaper in the lead role of *8 Gigabytes of Hardcore Pornography* by Declan Greene (Griffin Theatre SYD) other performances include *Animal Farm* adapted by Van Badham (Black Swan), *Minneapolis* by Will O'Mahony*, Is This Thing On?* By Zoe Coombs-Marr (Best Performance 2016), *The Mars Project* by Wil O'Mahony (Best Supporting PAWA) and feature *How to Please A Woman* alongside Sally Phillips (2022). Her first full-length play *Barracking for the Umpire* will premiere in March (Black Swan State Theatre Company). Andrea was responsible for undertaking the artistic research and interviewing participants in Phase 4.

Acknowledgment of Country

We would like to acknowledge that this research was conducted on the Country of the Whadjuk Noongar people with the full understanding that Noongar people have been contributing to the cultural landscape for tens of thousands of years. We pay our respect to custodians past, present and emerging, and extend this to all First Nation Australians.

Acknowledgements

Credit

Fionn Mulholland of The Filmmaker was responsible for all principal photography, production, and post-production of the five short films.

Content Warning

The aim of this research was to investigate the disruptions of COVID-19 on the performing arts industry in WA, including the health and wellbeing implications. In turn, there is some content in the report that some readers may find disturbing or even shocking, including comments on suicide and suicidal ideation.

Scope

This project was conducted by researchers at the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA), Edith Cowan University, during 2020-2021, to focus on performing artists, arts workers, arts organisations, and their communities. WAAPA is well positioned to engage with industry through the various advisory committees and industry links it maintains, including through the Arts Management course, coordinated by lead investigator Dr. Helen Rusak, and through the Performing Arts courses that investigators Dr. Frances Barbe and Dr. Renée Newman coordinate and teach into. This research focuses on the disruption to the performing arts industry caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It considers the impact on the arts workers' health and wellbeing both amongst independent arts workers and those working in organisations.

Purpose

The purpose of the research is to inform Government policy and arts industry stakeholders in an environment that has faced major disruption to the delivery of programs and performances, as well as to advance knowledge, by:

i. Examining the challenges confronting the performing arts sector amid the COVID-19 pandemic and how it has responded to those challenges.
ii. Understanding the value of the arts industry in WA and how it plays a role in the development of place and community.
iii. Providing a framework for government policy in response to the needs of the sector to ensure a sustainable arts ecology into the future.

The research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the live performing arts sector in WA responded to COVID-19, resulting in these outcomes:

i. Generation of primary data through surveys and interviews that capture the mental health and wellbeing of individuals within the sector.
ii. Case studies of key arts organisations in WA providing insight into the sector's response to COVID-19.
iii. Filmic representations of the lived experience of artists and arts workers during the COVID-19 pandemic through 'digital storytelling' during the pandemic.
iv. Recommendations for the WA government from the findings of the research.

Methodology

A mixed methods research design was employed, involving both traditional quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis, as well as creative research methods involving:

- Survey questionnaires
- Semi structured individual, paired, and group interviews investigating the mental health and wellbeing of performing artists and arts workers
- In-depth case studies of selected major, small to medium and independent arts organisations
- Secondary data including research into cultural policy, economic and social impacts of COVID-19 upon the arts
- Content analysis including websites, media documents and research relating to the response from the arts community to COVID-19
- Digital stories: filmed interviews of five performing artists

Context

The cultural sector

As in other economically developed countries, cultural and creative sectors in Australia contribute significantly to the economy's exports, employment, and innovation. Wealth creation through creativity does not only occur financially, but through societal benefits derived by growth in social capital (Florida 2005; 2006, 2004, 2000, 2018). More recently, managing creativity has been associated with entrepreneurship and innovation management, providing opportunities for business and social development (Rusak 2016a; Rentschler 2002, 2001; Konrad, Moog, & Rentschler 2018; Fillis & Rentschler 2005; Campbell & Rusak, 2021). However, the number and contributions of creative and cultural workers have been underestimated and under recognised in OECD countries, resulting in the minimisation of the sector's importance within economies internationally (Travkina & Sacco, 2020). In part, this has been due to the non-traditional structure of cultural and creative sectors: in particular, the employment patterns of creative workers, the prominence of self-employment or small businesses and volunteers, and the masking of cultural and creative contributions within other industries.

Public good and intrinsic values have been the arguments to support public funding of the arts,[1] but as Throsby (2010; 2018) argues, rendering funding dependent upon whether the arts provide

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[1] Whilst published over two decades ago, the findings of DiMaggio and Pettit (1999) and Costantoura (2001) support the assertion that most people agree the arts are vital to communities. The RAND corporation (McCarthy et al. 2001) argued for the intrinsic benefits of the arts. McCarthy maintains that audiences that experienced intrinsic benefits from performances become enriched, self- actualised and motivated to return, thereby building demand for the arts, an argument that has significant consequences for public policy on the arts. Research into the social value of the arts emerged in late 20th-century discourses in arts policy research (Belfiore &Bennett 2007b, 2007a, 2010; McCarthy et al. 2001; Miles 2007; Radbourne, Glow, & Johanson 2010). Research in the 1980s into measuring the economic (Bianchini, 1993; Florida, 2000, 2006; Hughes, 1989; Myerscough, 1988)

economic benefits, improved health or alleviated unemployment ignores the Arts' intrinsic value to society. For the past decades, Australia has been developing cultural indicators to identify the links between intrinsic and instrumental cultural values.[2] In WA, research was instigated by the former Department of Culture and the Arts (DCA) on public value created by government investment in culture, by measuring artistic quality, artistic engagement and innovation (Chappell & Knell, 2012). The model was updated in August 2014 to focus upon Holden's (2006; 2009) three areas of value: intrinsic, instrumental and institutional. DCA focused upon measuring intrinsic value for the first stage of the research, developing metrics to measure quality and reach. Culture Counts™, a digital application and web portal, was developed to collect and measure standardised metrics from audiences, organisations, peers and funders. Culture Counts™ was rolled out in WA in 2016.

Research and data are critical tools to provide in-depth insight into industry to inform government investment decisions. The field of big data tracks audience behaviour, with smart device and internet connectivity canvasing audience experience. However, the gathering of big data does have its critics and Phiddan et al. (2017) argue these data collection tools cannot replace critical judgement.

Within the social domain, there are three main measurable benefits identified by the current WA Department of Local Government, Sport, and Cultural Industries (DLGSC): health, education, and social capital (D-Huning et al., 2019). The frameworks developed by Australian and international governments and funding bodies have helped legitimise the contributions of the creative industries within governance systems that cannot fully account for it.[3]

The Australia Council, in association with Patternmakers and WolfBrown, is currently (at the time of publication) gathering data on changes in behaviours and sentiments of arts audiences in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, to support decision-making and forward planning across the sector with the release of the first stage of results being made available on May 18, 2020 (Patternmakers, 2020).

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and instrumental value of the arts emerged (Belfiore & Bennett 2007b, 2007a, 2010; Moore 1995). See also The UK symposium *Valuing Culture* in 2003 and the work by Demos (Holden, 2004, 2009).

[2] The 2014 *Vital Signs* report resulted from the 2007 Cultural Ministers Council agreement to support the development of a "suite of high level cultural indicators and to report periodically on the strength of the arts and cultural sector and its contribution to economic and social well being" (Council, 2014). The report takes *Cultural Indicators for New Zealand* (Culture, 2009) as its reference point. *Vital Signs'* framework proposes the following indicators: economic development, cultural value, engagement and social impact. The aim of this framework is to identify the personal and public benefits of the arts and outline the balance of intrinsic and instrumental value that the cultural sector delivers.

[3] Brown and Novak's *Addressing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance* (2007) looks at similar criteria. This report sits between Holden (2006) and Chappell and Knell (2012) and pre-dates the Culture Counts™ framework. Rusak's *Measuring the values of Cultural Activity in Regional Western Australia* (Rusak, 2016b) employs Brown and Novak's extant and tested data collecting methodology contributing to collaborative research on issues of importance of cultural activity to regional and rural communities with potential for high social, economic, environmental, and cultural impact.

Cultural and Creative sectors: An elusive economy

Cultural and creative workers have remained elusive within official employment measures, as many workers have atypical employment patterns such as intermittent contracts that are not accounted for within official employment statistics. Gig workers and freelancers have variable work patterns, and may hold several simultaneous contracts at a time, followed by periods of unemployment. Due to the precarious, and often underpaid, nature of cultural work, those aiming for more stability often need to take a job in an unrelated field. These occupations may become the primary source of income for cultural workers and, although necessary, may not alone constitute a sufficient economic resource. Throsby and Petetskaya's (2017) survey of professional workers in artistic occupations found those artists spent on average 38% of their working time (including paid work, voluntary work and study) on their principal artistic occupation. Fourteen percent of their time was spent on paid work that was unrelated to their art, and this was as high as 28% for artists who were just starting out. On average, they worked eight hours per week in a paid occupation that was not related to the arts (Throsby & Petetskaya, 2017). However, as official employment figures usually only account for the primary occupation, secondary and unstable occupations such as cultural and creative jobs are more difficult to quantify and capture in statistical analyses. This has led to an underestimation in numbers of creative and cultural workers within the community.

The nature and structure of cultural organisations and businesses also differ from patterns found in other industries. Contrasting with traditional hierarchical structures, in which many individuals contribute to a larger organisation, many cultural and creative workers operate as sole traders, such as a solo performer or artist, or contribute to a small or micro business, such as a performance ensemble. A sector-wide survey in 2017 classified 45% of Australian arts and cultural organisations as "micro-organisations", with an annual turnover of less than $50,000 (Creative Partnerships Australia, 2018). A further 25% were classified as small, 17% were medium, and only 11% large or extra large. These organisations are often primarily motivated by social and artistic goals, with economic benefit being a secondary consideration, but a necessary practicality.

Finally, the cultural industries, and in particular the Arts sectors, are highly reliant on unpaid or voluntary work, a characteristic not seen within other sectors. When converted into monetary value, voluntary efforts were calculated to constitute 30% of private contributions to arts organisations, and 18% within performing arts organisations specifically (Creative Partnerships Australia, 2018). This indicates that employment statistics alone are often unsuitable for cultural and creative industries, as these organisations and workers are motivated, supported, and driven by non-economic factors.

The creative industries include the entertainment genres, digital economies, gaming, marketing, design and architecture, contributing considerable value to the state of WA in the form of employment, tourism, hospitality and creative exports. Dockery et al. (2021), reporting on the art and cultural sectors in the WA economy, find that WA's creative industries generate gross economic value of between $5.8 billion and $7.3 billion. Rentschler and Lee (2020) argue that the full economic

contribution of cultural and creative industries is not captured where these sectors provide services to other industries; for example, arts festivals attract visitors, boosting local tourism industries and the hospitality sector. Thus, while cultural and creative workers and businesses operate differently to other industries, the sector makes a notable contribution to the economy and services in other sectors.

In 2018-19, the creative arts were conservatively estimated to contribute $14.7 billion to the Australian gross domestic product, comprising 0.8% of the total GDP (Browne, 2020). Smithies and Bailey (2019) estimate the value add at the time of their study was $3.3 billion, out of $52.2 billion nationally, and comprising 2.6% of exports from WA. Almost 10,000 creative businesses directly employed over 38,000 people, comprising 2.5% of state employment. Travkina and Sacco (2020) refer to this "cultural ecosystem", where non-creative industries benefit from the innovation and services provided by cultural and creative workers and businesses, and in turn, cultural and creative sectors benefit from economic and commercial aspects of non-cultural industries. Smithies and Bailey (2019) report that an additional 23,000 people contributed cultural and creative services to other sectors in this way in WA during 2018-19. Although economic measures do not encompass the breadth of values offered by artistic contributions, cultural and creative goods and services make sound economic contributions, and further the outcomes of the industries in which they are embedded.

Innovation

Research undertaken by the Australia Council for the Arts (2020) and the Department of Communications and the Arts & Bureau of Communications and Arts Research (2019) finds that the creativity that encapsulates the arts has been identified as an important driver of future society, work, and economies. Artistic activities and creative skills encompass the production of an original, non-uniform, or novel output or solution, and fosters key employability skills necessary as society progresses into the fourth (digital) industrial revolution. Although technological developments are predicted to drive many existing occupations and sectors into obsolescence, creative tasks are more resistant to automation as they are less repetitive, replicable, and routine than other professions. Further, industries with high levels of innovation and high economic growth tend to have higher proportions of workers with creative qualifications, and the demand for a creatively skilled workforce is predicted to increase. Australians have recognised this trend and identified artistic skills as relevant to the digital revolution; consequently, 26% of respondents in the 2019 National Arts Participation Survey listed innovative and boundary-pushing art as a top investment priority (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020). The role of creative input within products and output of non-creative industries, and the export of creative goods and services, are also forecast to be highly relevant to the future economy. As technological developments transform the nature of work, creative skills are recognised for their current and future importance to workforces and innovation.

Cultural Engagement

More recognisable, but less directly measurable than other sectors in the creative industries, are the contributions that artistic and creative communities bring to culture and society. The arts and culture have been identified as key drivers of community connection and intercultural dialogue, reaching a large range of audiences that include marginalised groups in the community. The National Arts Participation Survey (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020) found that 98% of its 8,928 participants engaged in the arts and that the arts were valued by a wide range of audiences, including youth, regional and remote First Nations people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and individuals with intellectual disabilities. These groups also had higher participation in rates in the arts, which were identified as valuable forms of self-expression, socialisation, and entertainment.

The Western Australian Arts and Culture Monitor Survey (Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, 2020) found that arts participation was estimated at 74% in 2020, with the main participatory motivators being content, interest and entertainment. Western Australians surveyed in this study believed that: the Government should invest in the arts and culture to make it accessible (84%); it is important for children to have access to arts education (94%); the arts and culture played a valuable role in their lives (55%); they valued the role of arts and culture in the community (76%); the arts benefit the broader community (65%); the arts and culture are valuable to the sense of community (65%); arts and culture a contribute to creating a sense of state identity (70%); the arts make them feel good (81%); and they have ease of access to participating in arts and cultural activities (63%).

Health and wellbeing of communities

Participation in the arts and culture has long been recognised as a health resource that can benefit public wellbeing. Numerous epidemiological studies and reviews have correlated cultural and leisure participation with better health outcomes (including lower mortality rates), even when controlling for other lifestyle or demographic factors (Bygren, Konlaan, & Johansson, 1996; Cuypers et al., 2012; Davies, Knuiman, & Rosenberg, 2015; Konlaan, Bygren, & Johansson, 2000; Tymoszuk, Perkins, Spiro, Williamon, & Fancourt, 2020; Wang, Mak, & Fancourt, 2020). Higher cultural participation, such as attendance in cinemas, concerts, museums, and art galleries, has been correlated with higher life expectancy and lower mortality risk; further, this effect persists over an individual's lifetime (Bygren et al., 1996; Konlaan et al., 2000). More recent data has substantiated these claims, finding that sustained and frequent arts engagement has also been associated with higher wellbeing measures over time (Tymoszuk et al., 2020). Negative associations between arts engagement and symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as positive associations between arts, mental wellbeing, and life satisfaction have been found in various studies, even when controlling for confounding variables (Cuypers et al., 2012; Nenonen, Kaikkonen, Murto, & Luoma, 2014; Wang et al., 2020). These studies are notable for their large sample sizes of over 31,000, 11,000, and 23,000 individuals in Norway, Finland, and the UK respectively. In the Australian context, high levels of arts engagement (classified as more than 100 hours per year) has been correlated with higher subjective mental wellbeing in WA,

suggesting that a population approach to encouraging arts engagement may be useful (Davies et al., 2015). Population-based studies have given a strong indication of the broad benefits of arts and cultural participation to communities worldwide, across a sustained period of time.

Qualitative studies measuring individual perceived wellbeing and arts engagement have supported the statistics reported in demographic studies. Research by the WA Arts and Health Consortium presented case studies of artistic schema implemented in WA healthcare settings, encouraging further support from policy makers and community to extend these resources to the community (Gibson & Goedhart, 2016). Outside of the clinical setting, a survey of Western Australians who engaged with the arts identified themes relating to mental, social, and physical health outcomes, as well as health determinants such as economic outcomes and knowledge. Outcomes relating to mental, physical, and social health were predominantly positive, with unintended negative outcomes including overwhelming emotions or tiredness because of arts engagement (Davies, et al., 2014). Themes associated with the most positive outcomes were the impact of the arts socially such as reducing feelings of isolation; upon knowledge such as learning something; and upon identity such as giving purpose or meaning to oneself (Davies et al., 2014). Respondents tended to identify arts engagement benefits in terms of the individual, rather than the community, which the authors extend to the premise that arts engagement may be high amongst individuals but receives low funding overall in the community. However, Australians widely recognise the importance of the arts to their lives, with 56% recognising that the arts positively impact their sense of wellbeing and happiness, and help them to deal with symptoms of anxiety, stress, and depression (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020).

The value of arts and cultural industries to the wellbeing of communities has been well-established in scientific literature. Both individual and community health benefits are recognised within the literature, supporting the argument for arts and culture as a public health resource. The importance of the arts to health and wellbeing is recognised by the World Health Organization, which encourages policy makers to acknowledge and support arts interventions for health, and to focus upon making these interventions accessible to disadvantaged individuals in the population (Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Governments in Europe, the UK, and Australia have recognised these benefits, implementing strategies such as the Arts on Prescription programme, which 'prescribes' arts participation to at-risk parties, and the National Arts and Health framework (Australia), which was endorsed by all Australian states in 2014. Considering pandemic lockdowns, the importance of arts and entertainment to the mental health of the population has become increasingly important across populations worldwide, as individuals turn to arts and crafts, music, and online content to escape isolation, boredom and bleak news cycles (Cabedo-Mas et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2020). The scientific literature has supported these claims, suggesting cultural participation as a health intervention (Clift, 2012; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). Artistic and cultural engagement and participation are vital to the mental and physical health and wellbeing of communities, particularly when faced with uncertainty and stress brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the show could not go on: An introduction to Breathing through the Pandemic

Starting with a series of WA State Government and Federal Government mandated lockdowns in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a series of severe disruptions to the Australian cultural and creative industries. Further, the on-going effects of COVID-19, such as economic downturns, changes in consumption patterns, and new health and social distancing requirements, continue to shape the ways in which audiences engage with creativity and culture. WA artists have been more fortunate than their eastern states counterparts as the restrictions on venues were less extreme following the initial lockdown in March 2020. Although restrictions following the $2m^2$ rule reducing audience capacity were in place for much of 2020, artists were able to engage with audiences in their local communities and through regional touring much more than their counterparts in Victoria or New South Wales in 2020 and 2021. This research into performing arts workers and organisations during the COVID-19 pandemic focuses upon the response by the performing arts community to the disruption caused and the effects upon the arts workers' health and wellbeing, with specific focus on WA.

COVID-19: A National Show Stopper

In Australia, the first case of novel coronavirus was found on the January 25, 2020 in a traveller from Wuhan who flew to into Melbourne. Community restrictions were put into place in March 2020, after the World Health Organization officially declared the COVID-19 crisis as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). The timeline in Appendix 1 summarises major responses following the coronavirus pandemic and events relevant to the Australian performing arts sector until May 2021, when data collection finished for this report.

The proportion of coronavirus cases in Australia has been lower than other OECD countries and at State and Federal levels of Government. Part of this response has been State governments enforcing numerous lockdown procedures to control community spread of COVID-19. As of the date of writing (June-October, 2021), the spread of the Delta variant of COVID-19 has resulted in continuous prolonged restrictions in numerous states around the country. The effects of lockdowns, and the threat of a worsening situation on economies, communities, and the wellbeing of individuals, are still very much felt by all Australians.

Mental health and Wellbeing in light of COVID-19

Several large-scale studies have confirmed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of the general population. Dawel and colleagues (2020) conducted an online survey in March 2020 to assess the impact of COVID-19 on community mental health among a representative sample of the Australian population (N = 1296). Using standardised measurement scales, 20.3% of the sample measured above the clinical cut-off for depression, compared to 5.1% of a comparable population; 16.4% met requirements for anxiety, compared to an estimated prior prevalence of 5.6-

6.7% (Dawel et al., 2020).[4] A large-scale survey of 13, 829 Australians in the first month of national Phase 2 restrictions (including 1,177 residents of WA) also reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms in 27.6% of respondents, and moderate to severe anxiety symptoms in 21.0% (Fisher et al., 2020). Mild symptoms of depression and anxiety were found in a further 26.5% and 24.5% of the sample respectively. These effects also put pressure upon existing mental health resources; for example, the mental health helpline Lifeline reported a 20% increase in calls in the last week of April 2020 (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). With the sudden pressures, new levels of unpredictability, and new health risks introduced to individuals in 2020, it is not surprising that symptoms of depression and anxiety have been a focus of population health studies arising from COVID-19.

Although the effects of COVID-19 on wellbeing have been felt throughout the whole population, certain vulnerable populations have experienced a disproportionate effect on their employment, mental health and wellbeing (McGorry, 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2020). In the initial stages of COVID-19, 2.7 million Australians were estimated to have been affected by job losses or reduced hours (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). Amongst these, the nation's youngest and oldest workers (aged 18-24 years and over 65) were most negatively affected by income cuts and job losses in April 2020 (Biddle et al., 2020; Nahum & Stanford, 2020). Concurrently, women and workers from non-English speaking backgrounds had the largest decline in hours worked (Biddle et al., 2020; Nahum & Stanford, 2020). This loss of livelihood, as well as accompanying financial stress and situational uncertainty, has adversely impacted upon the mental health and wellbeing of those affected by wage cuts, reductions in hours, and job losses. Higher depression and anxiety symptoms and levels of psychological distress were reported in those who lost their jobs or were in financial distress at the beginning of COVID-19, with figures up to 39.97% amongst those who lost their jobs (Biddle et al., 2020; Dawel et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2020, supplement 24). Other risk factors for poorer mental health included being a woman, a younger Australian, or an individual with a current mental health diagnosis (Dawel et al., 2020; Fisher et al., 2020). These statistics are supported with reports of increased incidences of domestic violence, alcohol consumption, and reports of racial violence (O'Sullivan et al., 2020). Such studies lend evidence to the observations that the most socially and economically vulnerable groups are also those who have been most affected by negative outcomes of COVID-19, such as job losses and poorer mental health (McGorry, 2020).

The mental health effects arising because of COVID-19 are expected to have a long-term effect upon populations around the globe, which the United Nations has predicted to become a "major mental health crisis" if action is not taken to reduce mental health consequences (UN, 2020, p. 2). The sustained effects of uncertainty, stress, fear, and isolation have been felt by citizens worldwide. Additionally, the COVID-19 virus itself is known to cause neurological consequences, and the effects of lockdown isolation and associated social impacts are anticipated to affect the cognitive health and

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[4] As Australia has no relevant figures of depression and anxiety prevalence immediately preceding the pandemic, figures from comparable populations were used. This sample was also controlled for distress caused by the Australian bushfires in the months prior to the various lockdowns occurring from March to April in 2020 and subsequent second and third waves of lockdowns.

development of older and younger individuals (UN, 2020). The multi-faceted impacts of COVID-19 on almost all aspects of life, and subsequently upon mental health, have led to the speculation that in Australia, "mental health effects will be deeper and more sustained than in other disasters", as "[COVID-19] is not a single shock, but a vast, expanding disaster with no end in sight, producing chronic stress, disruption, and multiple losses" (McGorry, 2020, p. 454). From February-October, 2020, for example, the estimated Australian death toll due to suicide was more than twice the number of deaths attributed to COVID-19 (2000 suicides compared to 886 COVID deaths; McGorry, 2020, p. 454). Statistics such as these have led the United Nations to highlight mental health and wellbeing as a top priority in healthcare (UN, 2020). Although the long-term mental health impacts of the pandemic are yet to be seen, the sustained uncertainty and stress are expected to affect populations in the medium and long term. Given a continued preventative response to COVID-19, the mental health and wellbeing of the population should thus be amongst the top healthcare priorities in Australia.

The Performing Arts Sector

Mental health of sector pre-pandemic

COVID-19 has exacerbated social, economic, and mental health problems long-recognised throughout the performing arts sector before the pandemic. Prior to COVID-19, performing arts workers had been identified as a population with higher rates of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse than the general population (Kegelaers et al., 2021; Maxwell et al., 2015; Robb et al., 2018; Van den Eynde et al., 2016; Van Rens & Heritage, 2021). Issues such as alcohol abuse were reported to be much higher in performing artists than the general population; for example, a 2013 survey of actors found 11.6% of men and 6.7% of women presented as "high risk" or "likely dependent" in their alcohol consumption (Maxwell et al., 2015, pp. 105-107). Additionally, drug abuse was found in 78.4% of a sample of actors (Maxwell et al., 2015).[5] Actors have acknowledged this culture surrounding alcohol and drug use, which could be used as a means to network or bond with colleagues but had the potential to adversely impact upon health and work performance (Robb et al., 2018). However, such a culture is by no means isolated to acting, as other surveys of performing arts workers suggest that mental illness and substance abuse rates have tended to be higher amongst all performers and creators in Australia, due in part to the high amount of competition, perceived risk, and culture of the industry (Van den Eynde et al., 2016).

These factors may lead performers to hide their perceived weaknesses, leading to further isolation and augmentation of mental illnesses. Criticism and bullying have been reported to affect the mental health of entertainment support workers, and hard physical labour, coupled with unpredictable schedules and long shifts, disrupt the wellbeing of technical operators (Van den Eynde et al., 2016). Overall, 38% of surveyed entertainment industry workers reported having a mental health diagnosis, with depression and anxiety being most common. These workers also have more drastic symptoms,

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[5] Drug abuse in this context is understood as the use of illegal drugs, or legal drugs beyond prescribed use (Maxwell et al., 2015, pp. 107-108)

with 44% reporting moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety (compared to 3.7% of the general population) and 15.2% reporting moderate to severe symptoms of depression (compared to 3% of the general population; (Van den Eynde et al., 2016, pp. 79-83). Recent work supports the notion that performing arts workers' specific occupational and cultural factors lead to an increase in symptoms of mental illness and substance abuse. This has led authors of the most comprehensive Australian entertainment and wellbeing survey to conclude that "the [Australian] entertainment and cultural industry is in severe distress, and in urgent need of early prevention and intervention programs to reduce the impacts of those with health and wellbeing problems, and to prevent new occurrences," (Van den Eynde et al., 2016, p. 1), long before the devastation brought on by COVID-19.

The Big Picture: COVID-19's impact on the Performing Arts sector

Internationally, cultural and creative sectors, including the performing arts, have been greatly impacted by pandemic lockdowns and public health measures such as social distancing and reduced venue capacity. The OECD has identified the cultural and creative sectors to be "among the most affected by the current [COVID-19] crisis, with jobs as risk ranging from 0.8 to 5.5% of [total] employment across OECD regions" (Travkina & Sacco, 2020, p. 2). It is estimated that, at the time of writing (October, 2021), the Australian music industry has decreased by 39%, or $700 million (Scully, 2021). While some sectors have flourished during international lockdowns (such as online streaming services), many more sub-sectors of cultural and creative industries have been negatively impacted and shut down, such as venue-based sectors (Simmons, 2020; Strong & Cannizzo, 2020; Travkina & Sacco, 2020). Cultural and creative industries are diverse, necessitating tailored support to remain operational. For example, unemployment benefits, income support, and job retention measures may not be suitable for cultural and creative workers, as they are more likely to engage in freelance, intermittent, and precarious work. Additionally, purely economic responses do not account for the loss of intangible assets that are vital to the sector, such as networks or highly specific skillsets. To address this, some governments, not-for-profit, and philanthropic organisations have offered alternative support measures, such as increasing ease of access for support, developing commissions targeted towards cultural and creative workers, and providing other capacity-building development in the sector (such as skills training and research). Cultural and creative sectors disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 may find it more difficult to access government support and may find that they need support beyond economic terms.

The OECD has predicted that the "medium-term" will be the most difficult to deal with for organisations and economies within the cultural and creative sectors. In the short term, governments and private investors have provided financial support for small businesses and employees, such as grants, subsidies, loans, compensation for income loss, flexibility towards repayments, and private investment. As the flow of emergency funding inevitably declines, cultural and creative sectors will be forced to operate on a smaller margin than at pre-pandemic levels, with less income predicted to flow in the medium term. This prediction is due to several measures, such as the increased hesitancy of the public to attend cultural and creative events (due to health or economic concerns), reduced venue

capacities (due to social distancing), and a decrease in tourism (such as international tourism, due to government restrictions). Cultural and creative organisations will be required to operate with less support, and decreased income streams. For live events such as festivals and public performances, disruptions to planned and future events will impact other local supply chains, such as equipment hire, catering businesses, and local businesses that benefit from cultural tourists, potentially resulting in an overall economic and social downturn.

Support at home

In Australia, pandemic lockdowns have led to both the loss of employment within and around the performing arts sector, and an associated decline in mental health and wellbeing of those participating in it. Entertainment venues, pubs, and clubs were amongst the first businesses ordered to close in Phase 1 restrictions, and the last to open as restrictions were gradually lifted. Arts and Recreation businesses were therefore the hardest hit, with only 47% operating in the last week of March 2020 (followed by Information Media and Telecommunications with 65%; Browne, 2020). The lockdowns described in the timeline (Appendix 1) effectively show the dates when the entire sector went on pause, as venues were forced to close immediately and performing arts workers were put on indefinite pause (Fairley, 2020). During the first lockdown in March 2020, self-reported job losses in the performing arts sector totalled 240,000 job opportunities nationally, affecting 470,000 workers (Browne, 2020; I Lost My Gig Australia, 2020). In WA, this comprised more than 450 events (900,000 attendances), interrupting $48 million of the state's economy, with 23% of the Arts and Recreation workforce losing their means of work (Chamber of Arts and Culture WA, 2020a). Between April 1, 2020 and June 30, 2020 there was a loss of 75% of casual performance jobs, with partnerships, companies and not-for-profit and freelance and contract positions falling by 78% (Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, 2021).

Compounding the losses of employment during lockdown, the intermittent and precarious nature of working in the performing arts has made it difficult for many performing arts workers to access the government support offered to mitigate job losses due to pandemic lockdowns. For example, the requirements for the $1,500/fortnight JobKeeper support offered by the Australian Government from April 2020 until March 2021 required evidence of regular employment, a mode less typically found within the performing arts sector. Additionally, the scheme did not allow short-term casual employees to apply, or individuals with more than one income source to apply from those multiple income sources (ATO, 2020; Gilfillan, 2020). Although aimed at sustaining employees during a time of crisis, the scheme only accounted for traditional employment arrangements by requiring full-time, part-time employment, or long-term casual employment.[6] This effectively excluded many performing arts workers who derive income from multiple, casual, streams of work (as discussed above; see Caust, 2020). One notable exception to this trend was for some performing artists operating as sole traders, who were included under JobKeeper criteria (Pennington & Eltham, 2021, p. 36). Selection criteria for

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[6] Casual employees who were employed for more than one year were eligible for JobKeeper.

JobSeeker, an alternative subsidy intended for those searching for work, was expanded for six months, but paid much less, at $550/fortnight (Gilfillan, 2020). An additional $550/fortnight Coronavirus Supplement was later offered for JobSeeker from late April, 2020, but reduced in September to $250/fortnight. Payments for JobKeeper were also reduced from September 2020 until the program's termination in March 2021. As a result, while 55% of WA artistic companies and 45% of not-for-profit arts organisations received JobKeeper, only 19% of freelancers and 38% of sole traders received government support. Of these, 67% of sole traders and 65% of freelancers were forced to use personal savings and 20% of sole traders borrowed from family and friends to compensate the loss of income (Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, 2021). Although the economy in WA has been on a path to recovery since May 2020, new jobs covering the year's initial layoffs have tended towards insecure part-time or casual positions, reinforcing instability and the casualisation of the workforce (Nahum & Stanford, 2020). Around the country, the support measures and changes to the labour market have impacted the most unstable and lowest-paid workers, increasing the divide between the nation's most and least secure workers. Despite the well-intended efforts to cushion economic losses affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the JobKeeper scheme failed to account for many precarious, freelance, contract-based, and short-term casual employees working in the performing arts sector. Such impacts have led economists from Australia Institute to conclude that "the worst impacts were felt by those who could least afford them" (Nahum & Stanford, 2020, p. 24).

Although JobSeeker and JobKeeper schemes did not specifically account for losses in the creative and cultural industries, a number of measures by Federal and State governments were targeted at the sector, including the performing arts. WA allocated $20 million to artists and arts organisations, with an additional $7 million to the sector (Pennington & Eltham, 2021, p. 30). Other states, such as South Australia and Queensland, pledged similar amounts. Having larger populations, New South Wales and Victoria pledged $50 million and over $30 million respectively to their sectors throughout 2020. A Creative Economy Taskforce, comprised of leading performing arts figures, was established in August 2020 to inform recovery of the sector, as well as a Roadmap for Reactivating Live Performances Venues and Events released in late 2020 (Department of Infrastructure, 2021). Additional measures to support the sector have been issued in 2021, such as the addition of funds to the COVID-19 Arts and Sustainability Fund (totalling $50 million), Support Act (totalling $40 million), RISE (totalling $200 million), and funds targeted towards specific sectors such as the Playing Australia Regional Recovery Investment ($5 million) for performing artists touring in regional and remote Australia (Department of Infrastructure, 2021).

While the State and Federal schemes have been helpful throughout the sector, the response to the 2021-22 Federal Budget has been described as "patchy and insufficient" to reboot Australia's cultural and creative arts sector in the long term (Pennington & Eltham, 2021, p. 40). The perceived inadequacy of targeted support measures for the creative and cultural industries is anticipated to have

longer-term consequences, including economic losses, impacts upon health and wellbeing of communities, and the creation of a shortage of skills that will be vital for workforces in the future.

Mental Health of Performing Arts Workers

Given that performing arts workers, already suffering increased rates of mental health issues pre-COVID-19, have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, and less likely to be able to access adequate funding and support, it is no surprise that the mental health and wellbeing of individuals working in the sector has been seriously affected. This has been a focus of media reporting, which has documented the feelings of panic and loss due to COVID-19, and the sudden cancellations of festivals, concerts, and events when lockdowns started in March and April 2020 (Boland, 2020; Brunt & Nelligan, 2020; Caust, 2020; Fairley, 2020). Later in 2020, the media focussed upon how this economic devastation caused stress and deterioration in mental health across the sector (Donoughue & Jefferson, 2020; Flore, et al., 2020). The loss of work, economic uncertainty, and poorer mental health outcomes throughout the sector are inextricably tied, as "occupational identity and the ability to earn an income are fundamental to individuality, sense of purpose, and autonomy in adults; their loss is a profound one, leading to demoralisation and depression" (Fisher et al., 2020, p. 468). A lack of appropriate subsidies and support for performing arts workers furthered artists' sense of being "overlooked" by the government, while those who were able to apply for JobKeeper support were hit by its discontinuation in March 2021 (Scully, 2021). As COVID cases spread and lockdowns were re-introduced throughout the country in 2020 and 2021, performing artists and audiences voiced their fatigue, anger, and disappointment at repeated cancellations, continued uncertainty, and the losses of work, business, and careers (Donoughue & Shneier, 2021; Elsworthy, 2021). The continuous uncertainty, lack of appropriate support for performing arts workers, and doubt about the sector's future throughout COVID-19 has taken a toll on the mental health of the whole sector. This "mental health crisis" is characterised by an "increase in workers taking their own lives" because of the stressors put upon them (Marozzi, 2021). Action upon the mental health of performing arts workers is thus urgent and well-recognised throughout the media, as the future of the sector hangs in the balance during COVID-19.

Although there is little current research specific to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of performing arts workers in Australia, interviews with performing artists, administrators, and event organisers have shown mixed reactions to extended lockdowns: from perceiving an opportunity for creativity and resilience, to feelings of hopelessness and disappointment (Flore et al., 2020; Watts, 2020). Preliminary research in WA indicates that 63% of independent artists experienced mental health issues during COVID-19 (Chamber of Arts and Culture Western Australia, 2021). In the UK, a survey and interviews with performing arts workers indicate that those experiencing financial hardship had lower wellbeing and higher depression (Spiro et al., 2021). The survey found that other demographic risk factors included younger age (and, presumably, lower job security), being a woman or non-binary (and thus taking on more responsibility for household labour) or having lower self-rated health. Lifestyle factors also had an impact upon wellbeing, with lower

physical activity, lower social engagement, and living alone being factors that negatively impacted upon individuals. Further, participants who engaged in the research within the first two weeks of lockdown had higher wellbeing measures than those who had been in lockdown for more than two weeks, suggesting that the amount of time spent in lockdown could decrease individual mental health and wellbeing of performing artists.

In Australia, Victorian research indicates that four-fifths of surveyed musicians anticipated that their involvement in music would change following COVID-19, with one-third of these individuals framing this involvement in a positive light (Strong & Cannizzo, 2020, pp. 53-55). A larger proportion of individuals (two-thirds), however, did not see a viable future for themselves in the post-COVID music industry, with many having already left. Further, while some individuals reported an improvement in mental health during lockdown, a proportion of them suffered pre-existing mental and physical injuries for which lockdown was an opportunity to rest their minds and bodies, indicative of the mental and physical strain they were under before COVID-19 forced them to stop work. Many noted poorer mental health outcomes in themselves and their peers, leading to decreased motivation and productivity, and highlighting the need for industry-wide change in improving mental health.[7] Financial precarity and the lack of government support were also factors prompting musicians to leave or reduce their participation in the industry, as they had to find jobs elsewhere to survive. Enduring the longest lockdown period in the world, Victorian performing artists embody the pronounced impact of lockdowns on performing arts workers, exacerbating pre-existing systemic problems inherent in the industry. Early research from WA, Victoria and the UK highlight that the need for specialised mental health support for performing artists is amongst the top needs for performing artists following periods of lockdown.

The performing and creative arts took on a different significance during COVID-19 lockdowns, with individuals seeking entertainment and hoping to escape from a confronting and dire world situation. However, the effects of these lockdowns are still greatly felt by performing arts workers as Australian society adjusts to living with COVID-19. This hardship is ongoing, with some of Australia's top performers and most successful artists being forced to retrain into other industries to make ends meet (Miller, 2021). Performing artists continue to feel overlooked as society transitions to a post-COVID state (Artshub, 2021; Scully, 2021). To support the resilience of the sector, bodies such as UNESCO have recognised that the mental health, wellbeing, and resilience of people working in the sector around the world is essential in economies, communities, and societies seeking to recover from the effects of COVID-19 (UNESCO, 2021).

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[7] Tightened criteria also excluded many businesses from claiming JobKeeper after September 2020, as they had to demonstrate turnover loss compared to the previous year. Further, the rate paid to employees working more than 20 hours per week dropped from the initial $1500, to $1200 (September 2020), and $1000 in January 2021. For those on less than 20 hours/week, rates dropped from $1500, to $750 (September 2020), and $650 in January 2020.

Research Design and Methodology

This section will discuss the research design and methodologies used across the project. A mixed methodology was employed, involving both traditional quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analysis, as well as creative research methods. The project involved four interrelated phases. Phase 1 involved a national online survey of Australian performing artists and arts workers, while Phase 2 consisted of semi-structured interviews with WA performing artists and arts workers. Phase 3 involved case studies of four WA performing arts organisations. Phase 4 involved the production of five short documentary films with WA performing artists. The study was approved by the Edith Cowan University Human Research Ethics Committee in December, 2020 (Project number 2020-01804-RUSAK).

Phase 1: Online survey

The survey was designed by the research team and included questions to collect relevant demographic information and questions related to perceptions of psychological wellbeing and mental health, as well as help-seeking behaviours. The survey also included the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales 21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) to measure participant self-reports of psychological distress (i.e., depression, anxiety, and stress) and three measures of psychological wellbeing: the Satisfaction With Life scale (SWL; Diener, et al., 1985), which provides a measure of global wellbeing; the Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010), which provides a self-report of social-psychological functioning; and the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008), which measures an individual's ability to 'bounce back' from stress.

Recruitment of participants commenced in January 2021 and Australian performing artists and arts workers over the age of 18 years were invited to take part in the survey via social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn). Industry contacts of the research team were contacted by direct email and asked to complete and/or distribute the survey to their networks. Industry contacts were also sent social media links to assist with widespread national distribution. The survey was hosted online via Qualtrics and was open for 23 weeks between January and June 2021, with continual promotion on social media and via email throughout this period. We received a total of 431 responses, of which 290 surveys were fully completed and were included in the analysis. At the completion of the survey, participants who were based in WA were invited to provide their contact details if they were interested in taking part in a group interview for the project (Phase 2).

Phase 2: Interviews

From the 165 survey participants from WA, 80 participants provided contact details and were invited to take part in interviews via email. In total, 25 participants agreed to take part in individual, paired, or small-group interviews. From initial recruitment, 28 people signed up to participate and one person subsequently withdrew prior to the sessions due to scheduling conflicts. Three people did not attend their nominated session; however, one of these people rescheduled and completed their interview

later. Five people declined their invitation to participate in an interview; the remainder did not respond to the email. Interviews were offered both online and in person, with a total of eight in-person and three online sessions scheduled across two weeks in March 2021. Participants for each interview ranged from one person to five people. Interviews lasted between 34 minutes to two hours and 21 minutes and recordings were transcribed by the researchers. Transcripts were deidentified and returned to participants for review and editing, before coding (using NVivo) and analyses were conducted.

Phase 3: Case Studies

Four performing arts organisations were chosen to be examined for a series of case studies examining the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performing arts sector in WA. A list of all known not-for-profit performing arts organisations, festivals, and companies in the state was compiled. This list of potential case studies was narrowed down through group discussions to balance a variety of artistic mediums, organisational sizes, activity in remote regions, cultural backgrounds, and nature or scope of the body. As the researchers are highly involved with the performing arts industry in WA, the leaders of the chosen performing arts bodies were members of the researchers' professional networks. Contact details of the organisational leaders were thus known to the researchers, who inquired about participation via email. Of five performing arts bodies approached, four agreed to participate in the research.

Table 1. Performing arts bodies consulted for case studies

Participant number	Body Type	Main sources of funding	Main artform	Region
1	CircuitWest Industry service organisation	Government, Lotterywest	All	Statewide (based in Perth)
2	Perth Festival Arts Festival	University, Lotterywest	All	Urban (Perth)
3	Yirra Yaakin Aboriginal performing arts company	Government, Lotterywest, private donations	Theatre	Statewide (based in Perth)
4	Awesome Arts Performing arts organisation for children	Government, Private donations	All	Statewide (based in Perth)

Interviews were conducted via the Zoom platform from May to June, 2021. At the time of the interviews, WA was transitioning from a lockdown that occurred in the Perth and Peel regions from April 24-27, 2021. Given the enhanced restrictions and risk to researchers' and participants' safety, face-to-face interviews were not practicable within the timeframes scheduled, and online interviews were chosen as the most practical and safe measure to collect the data. Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Recordings were transcribed by a researcher and sent back to participants to

edit or modify if they wished to do so. The edited transcriptions were then coded using NVivo software. The data were then analysed, leading to the development of four major themes.

Phase 4: Digital Stories

The digital stories were a way to capture the data slightly differently, using a format relevant to and reflective of the performing arts sector — storytelling — that could uniquely and effectively voice the lived experience of the COVID-19 pandemic for arts workers. To achieve the aim of the research, thinking creatively about what form the research output might be and what reach the output might have become a significant concern. This led us to borrowing from phenomenology, or "research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it" (Neubauer et.al., 2019, p. 91). We wanted to represent the performing arts through the eyes of the artists in a medium that was creative, familiar and indicative of performance, and settled on the creation of short documentary films.

Storytelling expert and actor Andrea Gibbs joined the research to recruit and conduct interviews with five WA artists involved in the Performing Arts. Perth based filmmaker Fionn Mulholland was recruited to film interviews and edit the material into short three to five minute films. From March to June, 2021, the researchers approached artistic contacts for their interest in participation. In June, this list was reduced from 12 to five participants. Andrea Gibbs conducted in-person or phone pre-interviews to plant a seed in how a story might emerge, allowing the participants to prepare for their interview. From June to July, Andrea and Fionn conducted film interviews ranging from 45 minutes to one hour in length with each participant. The locations were of the participants' choosing and included a rehearsal studio at the State Theatre Centre of Western Australia, a home studio and a dressing room.

The participants were:

Zoe Atkinson – Theatre Designer

Mace Francis – Musician and Music Festival Director

Natalie Allen – Contemporary dancer and choreographer

Joshua Pether – Performance Artist and Pharmacist

Bonnie Davies – Performer, arts manager, producer and Creative Director of an events-based company, The Gelo Company

The questions were open-ended and unstructured and varied from participant to participant. Andrea Gibbs adapted the following questions, depending on the direction of the interview and based on their experience as a storytelling expert.

Between July and October, the films were edited from the original lengths of 45 minutes to one hour, to produce three to five minute short films.

Findings

Phase 1: Survey

In order to capture the mental health impact of COVID-19, the online survey covered topics such as demographic information to provide participant profile information, and mental health status and support, including psychometric measures of psychological wellbeing and distress. Survey data were screened for errors and analysed using SPSS 27.0. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) were calculated for all variables. All psychometric measures demonstrated acceptable reliability. The DASS demonstrated adequate reliability for both the total scale (Cronbach's a = .94) and the Depression (Cronbach's a = .92), Anxiety (Cronbach's a = .82), and Stress (Cronbach's a = .88) subscales. The Satisfaction With Life scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's a = .87), as did the Flourishing scale (Cronbach's a = .87) and the Brief Resilience Scale (Cronbach's a = .84). Non-parametric statistical analyses were conducted due to the presence of outliers and the violation of assumptions of normality in the data, and alpha level corrections were applied to minimise type 1 error. Open-ended questions were thematically coded and analysed. Most participants accessed the online survey through the direct link (97%), with the remainder accessing the survey through social media.

Participant Profile

The most common age range for participants was 25-34 years, with participants being evenly distributed across the other age ranges up to 54 years and a smaller proportion represented in the 55-64 years and 65+ categories. Most participants (67.2%) identified as women, with 29.3% identifying as men and 3.5% identifying as gender diverse (i.e., non-binary or transgender). A breakdown of participant gender by age range is presented in Figure 1.
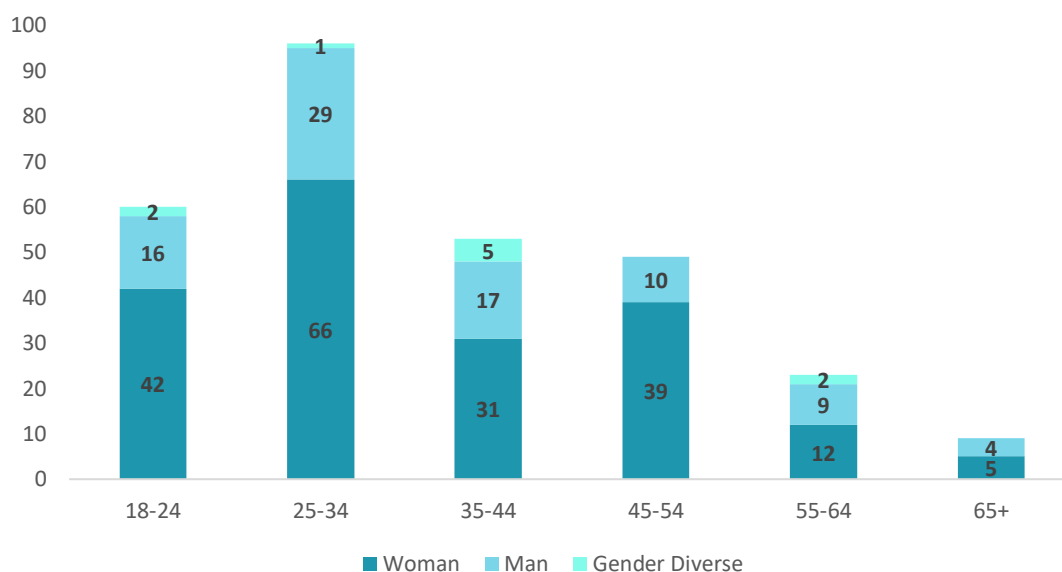
Figure 1. Participant age and gender distribution (n=290)

Of the 287 participants who answered the question on where they were born, the majority were born in Australia (81.4%), with the next most common locations being the UK (7.9%) and New Zealand (2.4%). These were followed by South East Asia (1.7%), Northern America (1.4%), Southern and East Africa (1%), North East Asia, the Middle East, South America and Western Europe (totalling 0.7%), and the Caribbean (0.3%). From the respondents who answered the question relating to the culture/nationality, they predominantly identified with (n=275), most identified as Australian (72.1%), mixed-race Australian (7.2%), or Caucasian (5.9%).

Two hundred and eighty-eight participants provided location details for where they live in Australia (see Figure 2), with most participants currently residing in WA (56.9%). Most participants lived in metropolitan areas (85.5%), with fewer in rural/regional areas (13.5%) and only one participant in a remote area (0.3%).
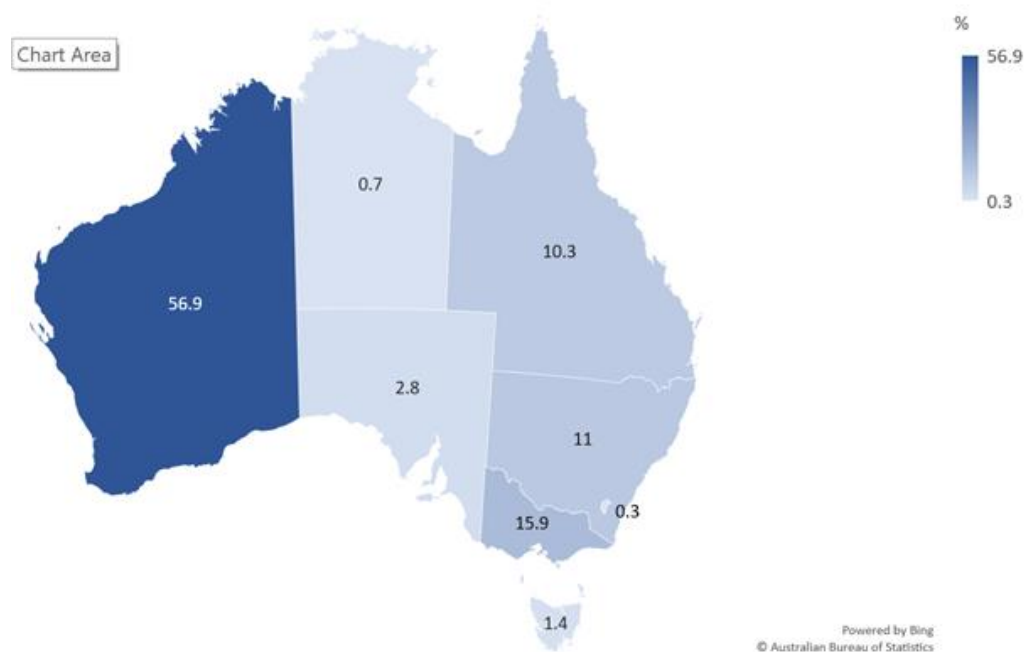
Figure 2. Geographical location of participants in Australia (%)

Performing Arts Genres

Participants were asked to identify the performing arts genre they worked in and were able to select multiple responses, and an additional open text box was provided for self-identification of performing arts genres that were not included in the predetermined list. Participants selected between one to 10 performing arts genres, with just over half of the participants working in more than one performing arts genre. See Figure 3.
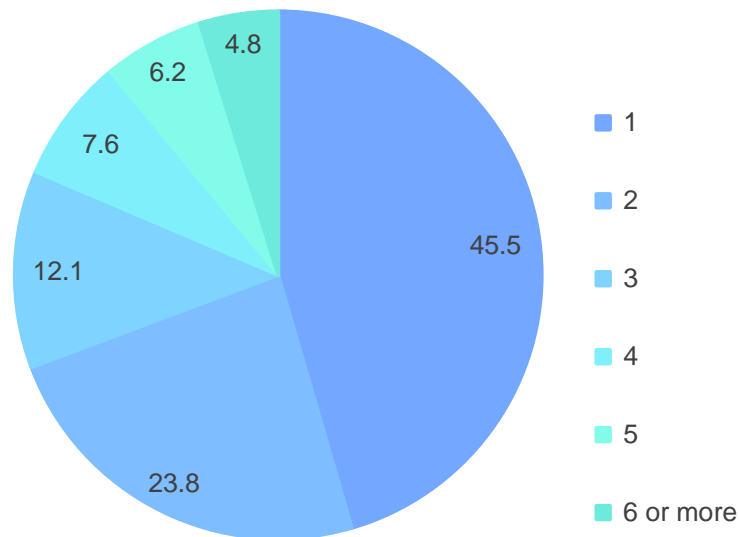
Figure 3. Number of performing arts genres worked in (%)

Figure 4 illustrates the various performing arts genres that participants worked in, with the most common responses being arts worker (including stage management, production, lighting, sound, and road crew; 42.4%), music (34.8%), acting (32.4%), dance (27.6%), and music theatre (23.4%).
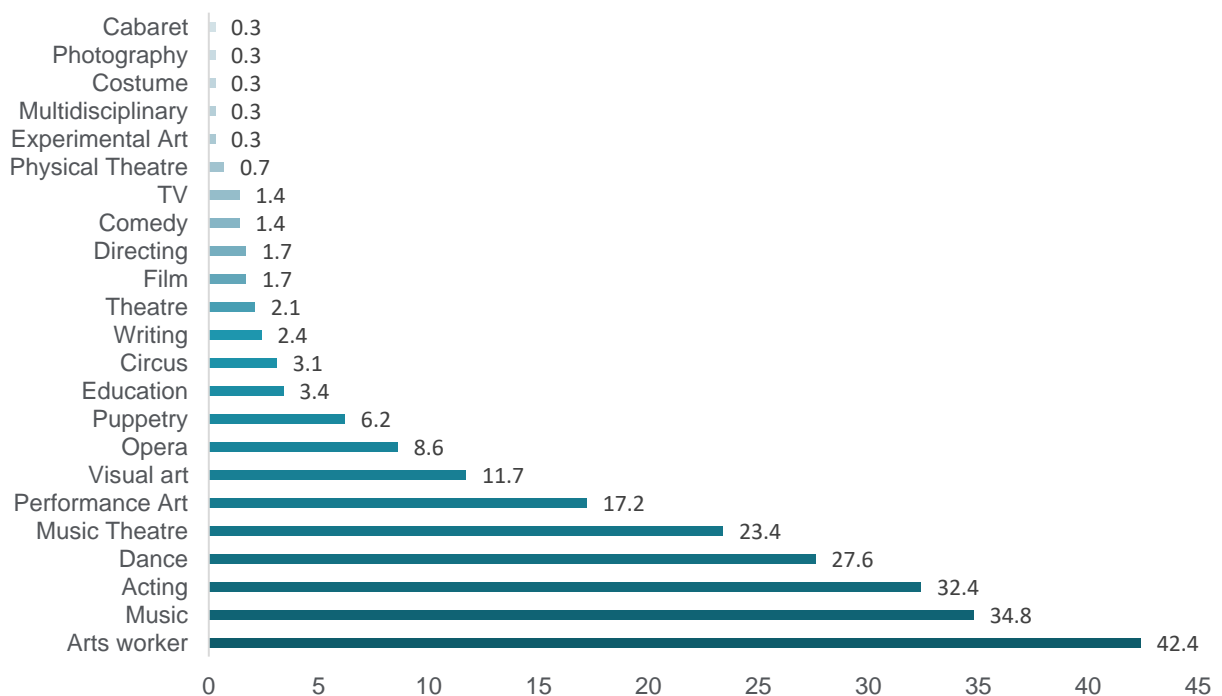
Figure 4. Performing arts genres participants worked in (% of cases)

Employment

Participants were asked about their current employment status for work performed within the performing arts as well as other employment they may engage in outside of the performing arts sector. Participants were able to select as many options as were applicable to them for this question. Most participants had freelance, independent or contract employment within the performing arts sector (53.1%), followed by full-time employment (25.5%), casual employment (17.2%), and part-time employment (9.7%), while 15.2% of participants were unemployed (see Figure 5).
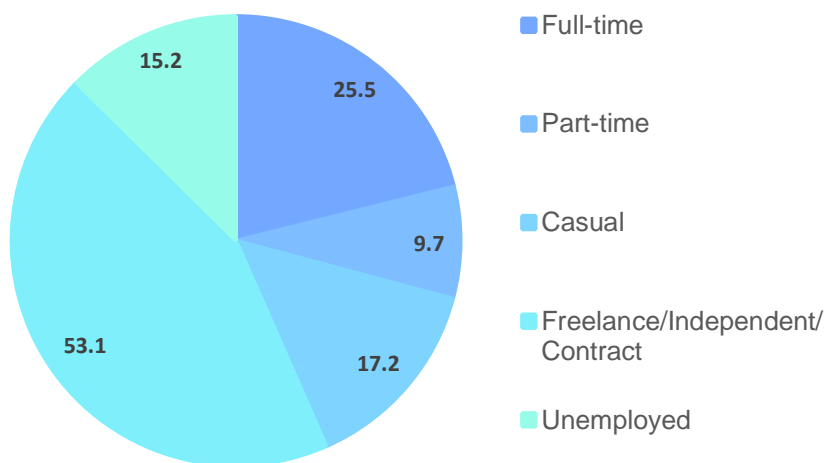
Figure 5. Employment status within performing arts sector (% of cases)

Almost 60% of participants engaged in work outside of the performing arts sector, with most participants reporting employment on a casual (21.7%), freelance/independent/contract (16.9%), or part-time (10.7%) basis (see Figure 6)
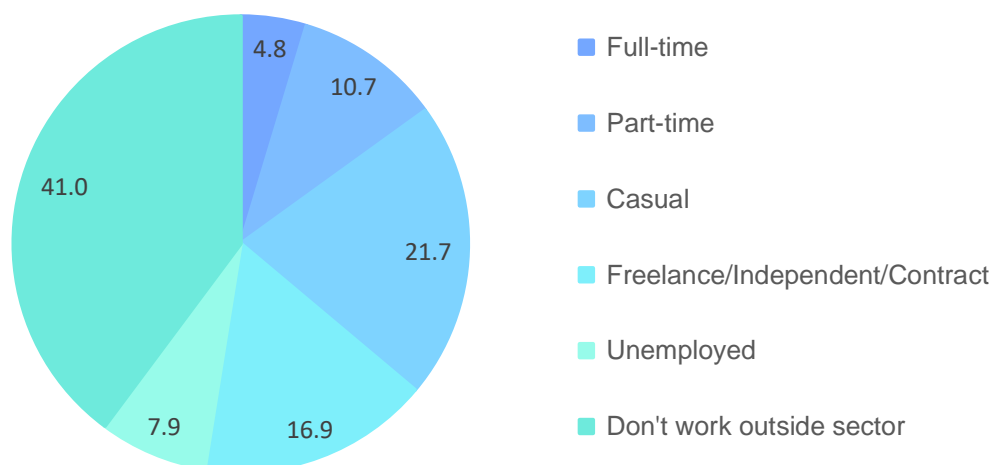
Figure 6. Participants engaged in employment outside of performing arts sector (% of cases)

Almost all participants reported experiencing a change to their working situation during COVID-19 (92.1%). Those participants who had experienced a change to their working situation were asked to provide an open-ended response describing the changes experienced. These responses were grouped thematically for analysis. The initial inductive phase of coding produced 38 descriptive codes that were grouped together into higher-order themes. The higher-order themes were then categorised to three general dimensions: Loss of work and income; Change to ways of working; and Personal impact (see Appendix 2).

Loss of work and income

Performing artists and arts workers described loss of work due to cancellation of tours, gigs, and contracts, which often happened overnight and without warning. Representative quotes reflecting these experiences include:

> *"[I] had a few contract jobs lined up that immediately fell through due to the lockdown"*

> *"I was on a touring show that got postponed a year and left me out of work"*

> *"All international and national touring gigs and opportunities disrupted or cancelled"*

> *"I lost 27 gigs in 3 days in March 2020"*

> *"There were no jobs for technicians, because there were no gigs to work on"*

> *"The gig economy which I frequently source work in collapsed due to COVID restrictions on the industry"*

> *"No shows/auditions"*

Several participants mentioned reduction of workload to 4 days per week, with an accompanying loss of income, and some were instructed to take annual leave accrued. Participants also experienced termination of contracts without payouts or access to government support programs (i.e., JobKeeper) due to the nature of their employment. A number of participants noted that they had to close their businesses due to COVID-19:

> *"All of my arts-related contracts were terminated with no payout. My hospitality work was also terminated due to impacts of COVID – as a result I had to rely on JobSeeker entitlements, as I was not eligible for JobKeeper as a freelance artist"*

"Had to close my studio"

Change to ways of working

A major change for participants was the rapid transition to online work and having to work from home. All work that was previously delivered face-to-face (i.e., teaching, healthcare, performances, etc) had to quickly pivot to an online delivery model and often resulted in decreased hours or loss of work and income. Representative quotes include:

"Physiotherapist for performing artists. Company cut hours and went on to JobKeeper. Worked more for myself but fewer clients or clients were on Telehealth"

"My private music lessons and uni classes all moved to an online platform"

"I had to work from home, with additional workload as the company I worked for had to pivot in-person delivery to online"

"Cancellation of three months of gigs, and no more bookings for several months after that. Teaching work was also severely impacted, with half of my hours being slashed, and the rest moving online"

"Couldn't go to schools for performances and had to work from home/office. General restructure of work responsibilities"

"All teaching work moved online, and all public performances were cancelled"

Participants noted that their employment during COVID-19 was subject to restructure and restrictions. This included workplace restructures and restrictions to audience capacity and numbers of participants allowed in workshops or classes. Some participants experienced a change in employment status, either moving from permanent roles to freelance work, or taking up permanent or casual roles in other industries to supplement lost income from performing arts work. Occasionally the move to working in industries outside of the performing arts resulted in an increase in income.

"Mostly stopped all work forcing me to take work in other industries"

"Lost a lot of music work, esp. playing for musicals at high schools (my best paying gigs), lost all my work at the theatre I usher/sound tech at. Got a part-time warehouse job packing for Hello Fresh – ended up making the most money I've ever made in a year"

In contrast, other participants experienced an increase in workload within the performing arts, but this did not always translate to additional income.

> "Increased workload but no extra pay available"

> "I could not travel for film acting opportunities. However, my voice over and editing work from my home studio actually increased"

Participants also noted that increased workload was often not accompanied by additional resources and support, and some participants observed an increase in competitiveness between artists/arts workers.

> "More work, more responsibility, less resources"

> "Team members becoming very cutthroat for work"

Personal impact

Participants noted the personal impact of COVID-19 on changes to their work situation in relation to psychological, training, and travel factors. Psychological factors included feeling exhausted, overwhelmed and lonely:

> "Acting work didn't happen, other work (as part time arts worker) became intense and all-consuming and exhausting"

> "Exhaustion. Feeling overwhelmed with other family and work responsibilities"

Training factors included the expectation to retrain and further develop current skill sets to maintain work, while also having to shift to online training formats or sometimes stopping training altogether:

> "Expectation to retrain/up-skill to maintain work"

> "[I was] not dancing at all during the first weeks. Then online classes"

Travel restrictions played a major part in participants' changes to their work situation. Several participants were forced to relocate from overseas or interstate as work opportunities evaporated.

> "I was forced to move back to Australia from France, where I was under contract as a dancer. I wasn't able to dance, or work in the performing arts for about four months"

*"I was meant to perform in 3 musicals in LA, which all got cancelled due to
COVID-19. I had to fly back to Australia and find a new job to sustain myself"*

*"I lost music students and gigs; as a result I had to move home from Melbourne
back to Perth"*

Mental Health

The next section of the survey asked a series of questions relating to mental health and help-seeking
behaviours. Participants were asked to rate their current mental health status compared to pre-
COVID-19 (see Figure 7), with more than half of the participants reporting a worsening of mental
health during COVID-19.
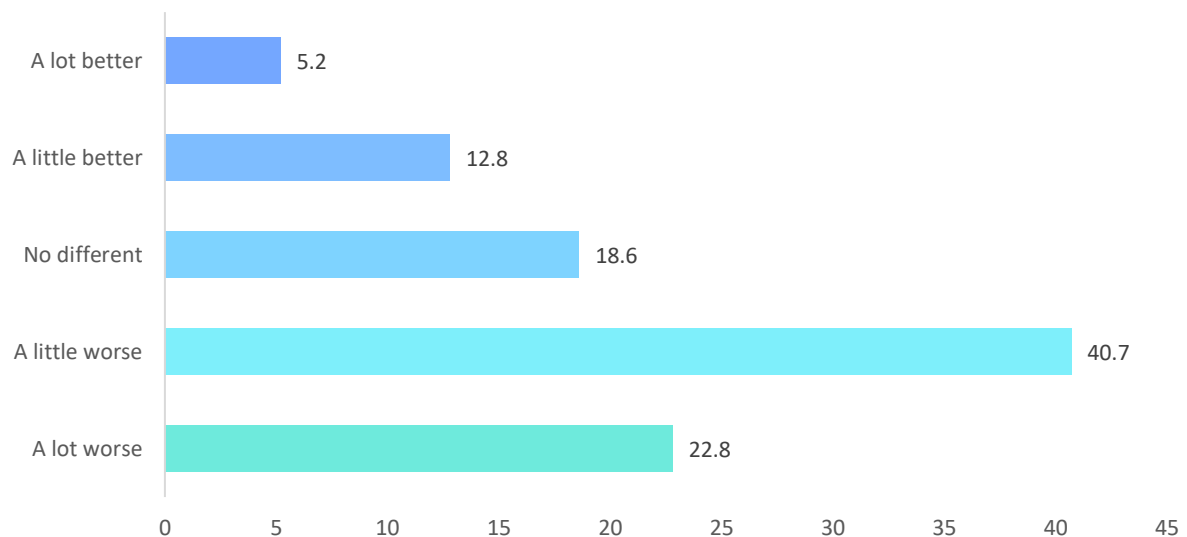
Figure 7. Participant rating of current mental health status compared to pre-COVID-19 (%)

Participants were also asked if they had previously sought help for mental health issues and if they
had sought help during COVID-19. If they answered affirmative to either of these questions, they were
asked to indicate which forms of support they had used. Almost two thirds of the participants had
previously sought help for mental health issues (65.2%), while close to half of the participants had
sought help during COVID-19 (47.9%). The most frequent source of support used by the participants
both pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19 was psychologists, followed closely by GPs (see Figure 8).
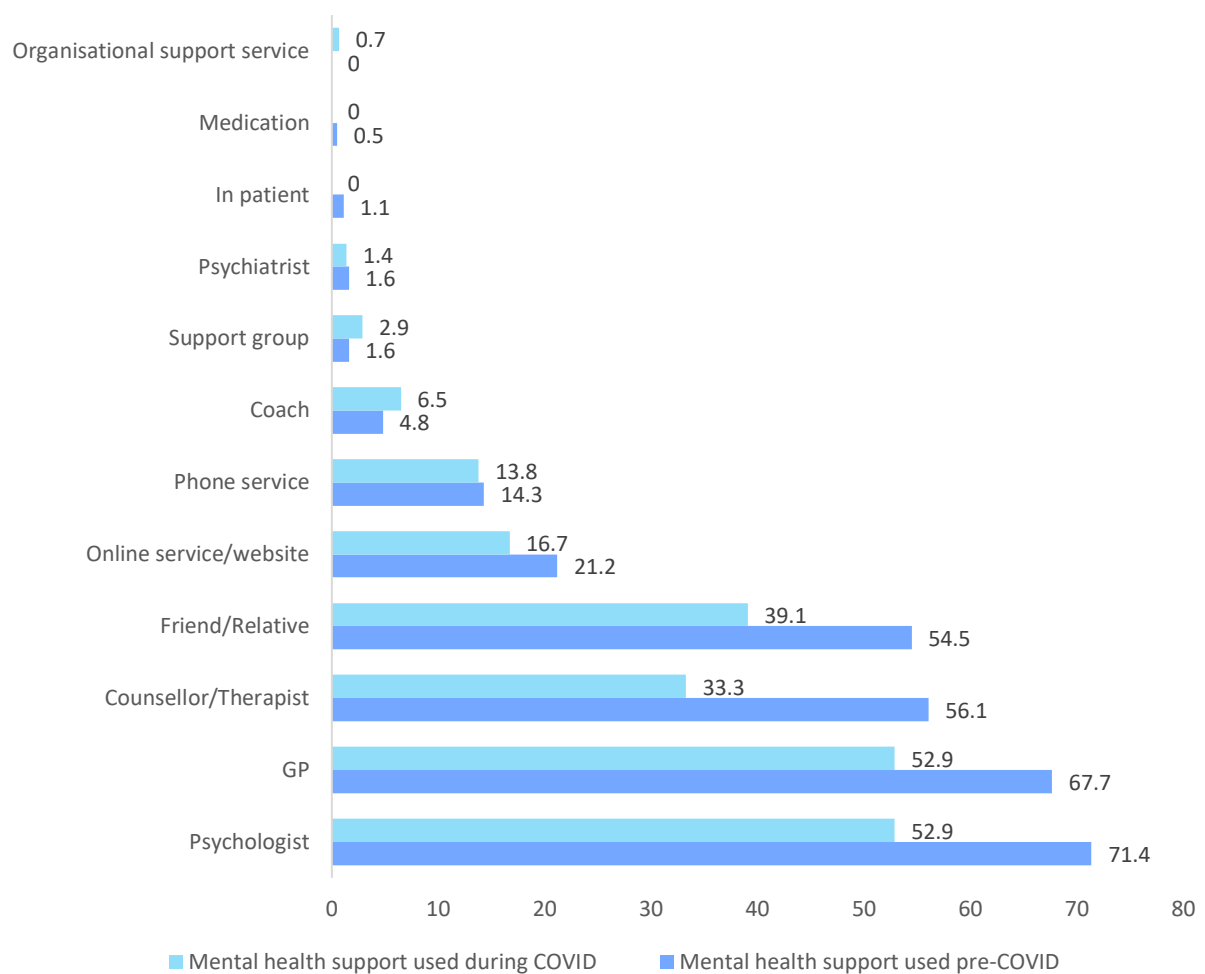
Figure 8. Types of mental health support services used pre-COVID-19 and during COVID-19

The final question in this section asked participants if there was anything that had prevented them from seeking help for mental health issues during COVID-19. From the open-text response box for this question, participant responses were coded into similar groups of barriers to seeking help, resulting in 18 codes for factors that prevented seeking help for mental health issues (see Figure 9). Of the 239 respondents who answered this question, 41% reported that there was nothing that prevented them from seeking help for mental health issues during COVID-19 or that the question was not applicable. From the remaining respondents, several issues were raised related to barriers to seeking help, the most prominent being financial barriers, which were an issue for 17.2% of respondents. Other logistical issues that prevented participants from seeking help included access issues (8.4%; i.e., issues related to COVID-19 safety concerns and COVID-19 related restrictions, which made accessing help difficult; access to help and accessibility issues; living abroad; and barriers to GP mental health plans); time factors and personal commitments that made accessing and attending mental health services difficult (6.3%); the availability of services and long wait times to see

mental health professionals (5.9%); uncertainty about being able to source appropriate help for their specific needs (2.1%); and not wanting to engage with telehealth services (2.9%).

Participants also identified more personal factors that prevented them from seeking help. Some participants noted that mental health issues such as feeling depressed, anxious, exhausted, and overwhelmed were barriers to seeking help (3.8%), while others indicated that they didn't think their concerns were 'bad enough' to seek help (4.2%). Participants noted that there was stigma around seeking help for mental health issues (2.9%) and several respondents referred to personal barriers such as feelings of shame, fear, perfectionism, and pride that prevented them from seeking help (4.2%). Furthermore, some participants expressed doubt that mental health support would be helpful for them (1.3%) and that previous bad experiences presented a barrier to seeking help (0.8%).

Finally, some participants did not feel that they needed help with mental health issues (7.5%), and several participants indicated that they were managing challenges themselves (2.5%) or were accessing other forms of support (2.1%). One participant noted that they did not think of seeking help for mental health issues (0.4%).
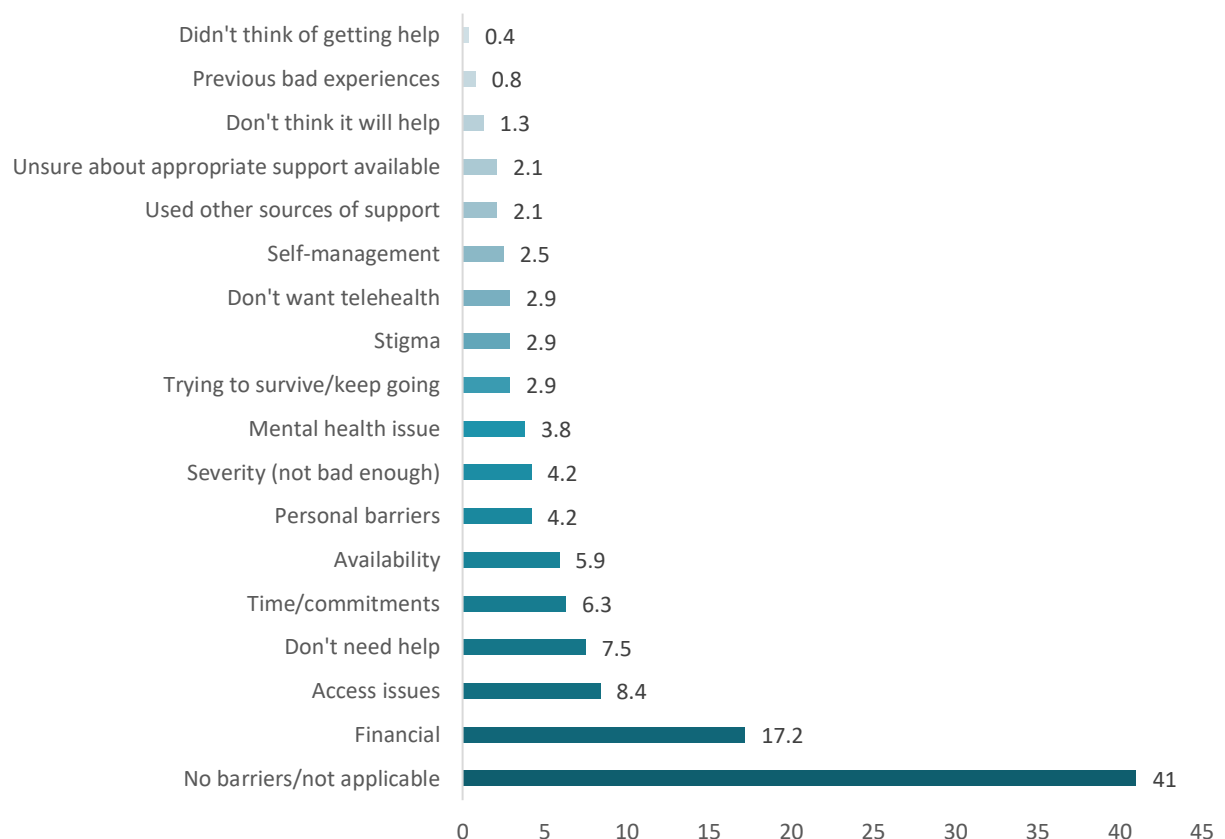
Figure 9. Factors preventing respondents from seeking help for mental health issues (n = 239)

Psychological distress and wellbeing

The short form Depression Anxiety Stress Scales 21 (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) was used to measure indicators of psychological distress. Consisting of three 14 item self-report scales measuring depression, anxiety, and stress, the DASS-21 asks participants to rate their experience of each state over the previous week on a 4-point scale. Severity levels for scores on the DASS-21 were calculated for each of the subscales (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress). Table 2 presents the score distributions for severity levels on the three subscales of the DASS-21. Only 37.6% of participants fell in the normal range on the Depression subscale, compared with 45.9% for the Anxiety subscale, and 48.6% for the Stress subscale. On the Depression subscale, 49.0% of the population demonstrated moderate to extremely severe depression (with 25.2% meeting criteria for severe or extremely severe depression). For the Anxiety subscale, 42.0% of the population demonstrated moderate to extremely severe anxiety (with 20.3% meeting the criteria for severe to extremely severe anxiety). Finally, on the Stress subscale 36.6% of participants demonstrated moderate to extremely severe anxiety (with 20.0% meeting the criteria for severe to extremely severe stress).

Table 2. DASS-21 scores across severity levels

DASS-21 Subscale	Severity Level Scores (n, %)				
	Normal	Mild	Moderate	Severe	Extremely Severe
Depression Subscale	109 (37.6)	39 (13.4)	69 (23.8)	28 (9.7)	45 (15.5)
Anxiety Subscale	133 (45.9)	35 (12.1)	63 (21.7)	29 (10.0)	30 (10.3)
Stress Subscale	141 (48.6)	43 (14.8)	48 (16.6)	42 (14.5)	16 (5.5)

Comparisons were made between the present study findings and previous research using the DASS-21 with actors (Maxwell et al, 2015) and with the general community (Crawford et al, 2011), and are presented in Figure 10. Maxwell and colleagues' (2015) findings indicated that actors had elevated scores on the DASS compared to the general community scores. Somewhat concerningly, scores on all three subscales were elevated in our study compared to both previous studies.
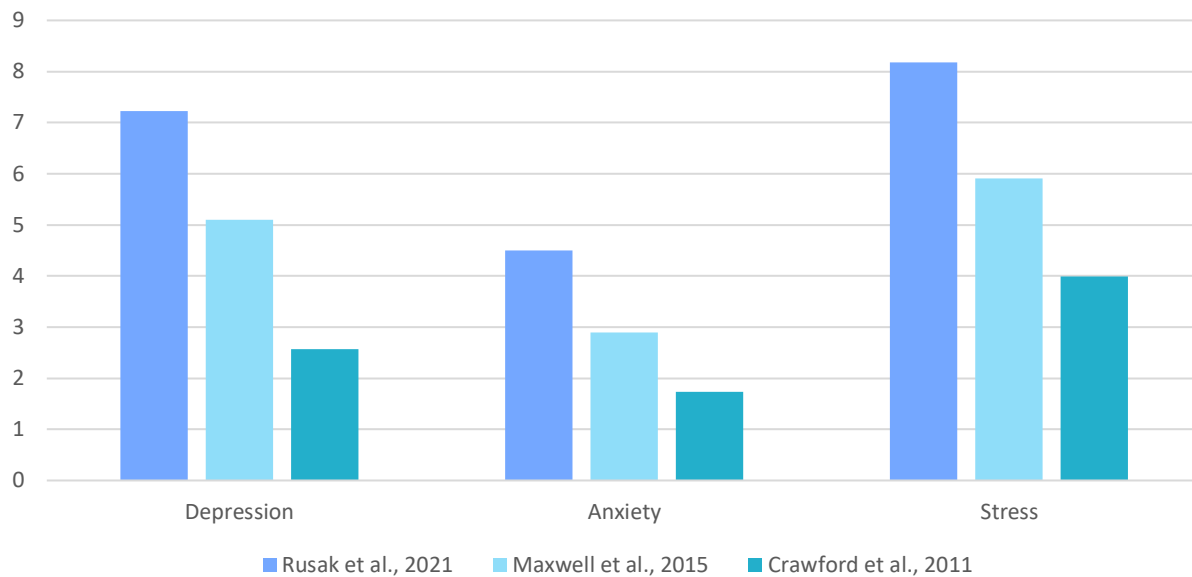
Figure 10. Comparison of DASS-21 Subscale Scores with previous research

Three short questionnaires – The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWL; Diener et al., 1985), Flourishing Scale (FS; Diener et al., 2010), and Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith et al., 2008) – were used to measure indicators of psychological wellbeing. Mean and median scores for these measures, along with the DASS-21, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean and median scores for measures of psychological distress and wellbeing

Scale	M	SD	Median
DASS-21 Total[a]	39.79	24.55	36.0
DASS-21 Depression Subscale[a]	14.46	10.85	12.0
DASS-21 Anxiety Subscale[a]	8.99	7.78	8.0
DASS-21 Stress Subscale[a]	16.35	9.58	16.0
Satisfaction With Life Scale[b]	18.38	6.81	18.0
Flourishing Scale[c]	20.88	7.63	19.0
Brief Resilience Scale[d]	3.15	.75	3.17

Note: DASS-21 = Depression Anxiety Stress 21-item scale. [a]. n = 290; [b]. n = 287; [c]. n = 286; [d]. n = 282

Median DASS-21 Anxiety Subscale scores were statistically significantly different between groups, ($\chi^2(5) = 15.693$, $p = .008$) with post hoc analyses revealing statistically significant differences in median scores between the 18-24 age group (*Mdn* = 9.0) and the 55-64 age group (*Mdn* = 4.0) (*p* =

.023) and the 55-64 age group (*Mdn* = 4.0) and the 65+ age group (*Mdn* = 16.0) (*p* = .027). The findings indicate the 55-64 years age group reported significantly lower ratings on the DASS-21 Anxiety Subscale than the youngest (18-24 years) and oldest (64+ years) age groups. No significant differences were found for the total DASS-21 scores or the subscales for gender or geographical location.

The SWL Scale provides on overall index of life satisfaction, ranging from 5 to 35. Participants are asked to rate their response to 5 items on a 1-7 Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Diener (2006) outlined categories and score ranges indicative of one's level of satisfaction (see Table 4) with higher ratings indicating greater life satisfaction. The mean for participants in the present study was 18.38 as seen in table 3, which is slightly lower than previous research (Maxwell et al, 2015) and equates to the upper end of the slightly dissatisfied category range.

Table 4. Participant Satisfaction With Life ratings categorised by level of life satisfaction

Level of satisfaction	n	%
Extremely satisfied (31-35)	12	4.1
Satisfied (26-30)	41	14.1
Slightly satisfied (21-25)	52	17.9
Neutral (20)	14	4.8
Slightly dissatisfied (15-19)	76	26.2
Dissatisfied (10-14)	69	23.8
Extremely dissatisfied (5-9)	23	7.9
Total	**287**	**100**

No differences were found for age range or geographical location for the SWL scale. However, a significant difference was found for gender (χ^2(2) = 13.227, *p* = .001). Post hoc analyses revealed statistically significant differences in median scores for women (*Mdn* = 17.0) and men (*Mdn* = 20.0), indicating that women reported lower levels of life satisfaction than men within our sample.

The Flourishing Scale provides an indication of overall psychological wellbeing (Diener et al., 2010) and scores can range from 8 (strong disagreement with all items) to 56 (strong agreement with all items). Participants rate responses to 8 items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, with higher scores indicating more positive self-reports of important areas of functioning and psychological wellbeing. In our sample, the mean score was 20.88 (see table

3), which is lower than the mean score of 44.97 reported by Diener and colleagues (2010). Significant differences were found for gender ($\chi^2(2) = 13.507$, $p = .001$), with post hoc analyses indicating statistically significant differences in median scores for women ($Mdn = 18.0$) and men ($Mdn = 23.0$). No differences were found for age range or geographical location.

The Brief Resilience Scale provides a measure of one's resilience, in other words, the ability to 'bounce back' from stress. Participants rate responses to 6 items on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. The mean score in our study (3.15) was comparable to though slightly lower than mean scores reported in previous research (Smith et al.,2008). No significant differences were found for age range, gender, or geographical location for BRS scores.

Phase 1: Survey Summary

Taken as a whole, the survey data presents a comprehensive picture of the impact of COVID-19 on the Australian Performing Arts sector. Many participants worked across multiple performing arts genres and in multiple job roles within and outside of the performing arts. The findings indicate that almost all the participants experienced changes to their work situation during COVID-19 that affected their income, ways of working, and psychological wellbeing. While almost half of the participants accessed mental health support during COVID-19, several barriers to seeking help and support were identified, including financial constraints, the lack of availability of mental health support, stigma associated with getting help for mental health issues, and uncertainty about being able to access appropriate mental health support.

The survey findings indicate that, overall, participants were experiencing greater levels of psychological distress than had been reported in previous research and were also showing indications of impairment to psychological wellbeing. Of particular concern is the finding that half of our participants met criteria for moderate, severe, or extremely severe levels of depression on the DASS-21. Our findings indicate that levels of depression among the study population were not only elevated compared to previous research with actors pre-COVID-19 (Maxwell et al., 2015) but also when compared to the general Australian population during COVID-19 (Rossell et al., 2021). Further, significant gender differences were identified, with women reporting poorer life satisfaction and overall psychological wellbeing than men, along with age-related differences in levels of anxiety for the youngest (18-24 years) and oldest (65+ years) participants compared to those in the 55-64 years age bracket. These findings are in line with literature suggesting that certain groups (including women and young people) are at greater risk for negative mental health outcomes associated with COVID-19 (McGorry, 2020; Rossell et al., 2021; Spiro et al., 2021). Our findings support previous research suggesting that older performing artists who are more established in their careers have experienced better psychological wellbeing outcomes than younger performing arts professionals (Cohen & Ginsborg, 2021; Spiro et al., 2021). Although it was encouraging to see that almost half of our

participants had accessed some form of mental health support during COVID-19, the growing demand on a sector already stretched to capacity presents serious concerns.

Phase 2: Interviews

Participant Profile

Participants who completed the online survey and were based in WA were invited to take part in group or individual interviews, with 25 individuals agreeing to participate. Of the participant group, 52% identified as women, 40% identified as men, 4% identified as gender diverse. Distribution across age groups was relatively equal across the 18-24 years (20%), 25-34 years (28%), 35-44 years (16%), 45-54 years (24%) age groups, with a smaller representation in the 65-years+ age group (8%). There were no representatives from the 55-64 years age group. Participants were predominantly born in Australia (64%), located in the metropolitan area (76%), and spoke English as their primary language (80%). Participants were asked to select which performing arts genres they engaged with both actively (i.e., creating art) and passively (i.e., viewing or consuming art) and were able to select multiple genres as relevant. Figure 11 demonstrates the spread of arts engagement for this participant group.
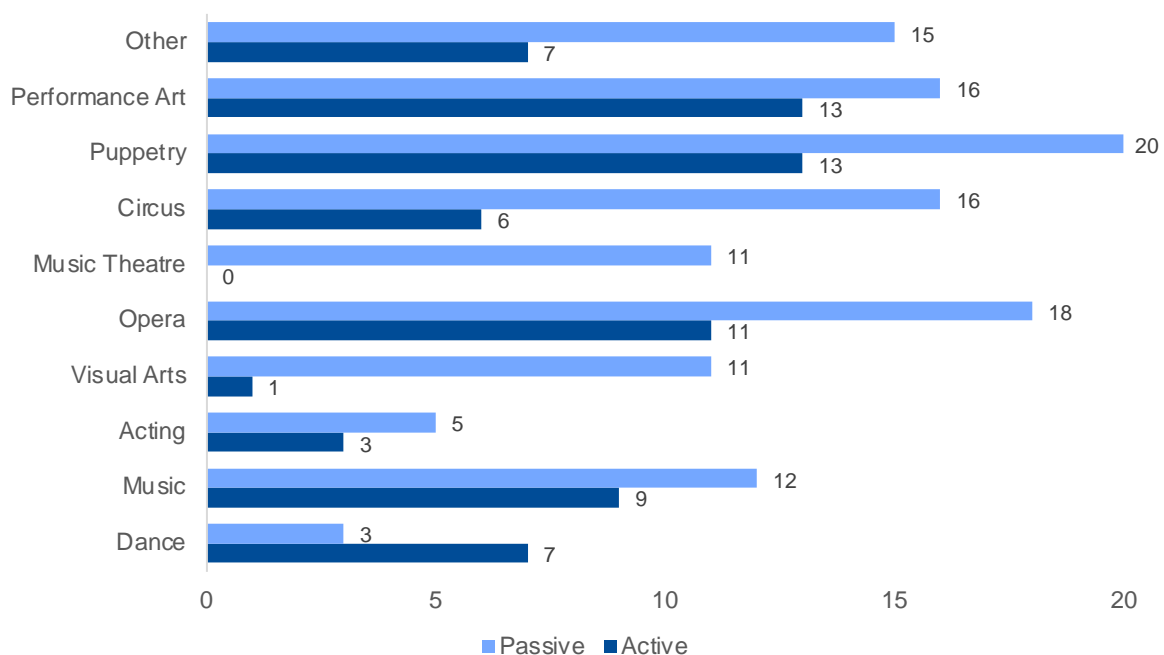
Figure 11. Performing arts genres that participants actively and passively engage with.

Thematic analysis identified four overarching dimensions, and 14 sub-themes, representing the experiences of participants in relation to COVID-19 and the performing arts sector (See Appendix 3). The overarching dimensions of Impact, Coping, Adaptations, and Arts Ecology are presented below.

Impact

A Double-Edged Sword

The initial response to COVID-19 for a lot of participants was one of naivety and denial. The virus was assumed to be something that affected the rest of the world, and participants continued to travel and work nationally and internationally. One participant noted that "*at first it was kind of like an international phenomenon to me as an outsider. I felt like I was just listening to it on the news and thinking 'Oh, that's wild', like, over the bridge, you know?*" *(Participant 2).* As the reality of COVID-19 hit, the uncertainty set in, and the precarity continues still, and a major factor for performing artists struggling to maintain their careers in an environment where the ground is constantly shifting beneath them. COVID-19 created problems for scheduling and planning work, including ongoing uncertainty about when subsequent lockdowns would occur or threatened to occur. Participant 20 explained that in the independent sector, *"I think my biggest challenge was just the uncertainty of the situation. And [it] continues to be the biggest challenge."* The uncertainty that accompanies working in the performing arts sector during COVID-19 may put vulnerable individuals at greater risk for reduced mental wellbeing. Research indicates that uncertainty can exacerbate difficulties for those already struggling with mental health issues and may result in the use of maladaptive coping strategies (Rettie & Daniels, 2021).

COVID-19 had a dichotomous impact on work for performing artists, with some artists losing all their work overnight while others saw their workloads increase exponentially. For those who lost work and income, it was immediate and shocking. Participants spoke of the impact of lockdown on their ability to work their primary and secondary jobs. The financial implications for people who experienced immediate shut down of their work— the shutting down of live performance, face-to-face teaching, and all in-person activities— were of major concern.

> *"Financially for me, when everything just literally stopped, it was 'How am I going to survive if I can't teach?'" (Participant 8)*

Participants spoke of uncertainty around how they were going to afford to live, and this was of particular concern to international participants who spoke of uncertainty around their ability to stay in the country, maintain work and study commitments, and the effects of isolation from family and friends. Some performing artists were forced to relocate within Australia and return to WA before the borders closed because they could no longer afford to support themselves without assistance from their families.

By contrast, some participants experienced a massive increase in workload, related to either the transition of work to the online space, or possessing skills that were currently in high demand (e.g., technical skills that assisted with online modes of working). Some participants noted that it was easier to get funding and they were able to dedicate time to personal projects such as recording albums. Others, particularly in the education sector, had to quickly record material for online learning platforms

and transfer entire face-to-face learning modules to online delivery. Participants noted that COVID-19 changed landscape of work expectations, particularly for women:

> *"Because there's a new acceptance of not physically being present on campus….you can be doing school drop off and be doing a lecture on your phone…We already knew we had the skills to do that, but institutions and organisations were entirely resistant to it." (Participant 19)*

Although this was a positive change, allowing for an active demonstration that work could be done remotely and still be effective, it also presented challenges as some participants felt there was an increased pressure to continue to work through illness because they could do their work without being physically present at their organisation.

> *"This technology…it gives you lots of other avenues and options…and yes, it was fantastic but it was also kind of… On the flip side now for example, I was lecturing, a sessional lecturer, and I had a session where I was sick, I couldn't go in – 'Oh, that's okay, you can do it online'. But I'm sick! There was still this expectation that because I can do it by Zoom and I'm not in the room, I'm not going to give you my germs, then that's okay." (Participant 1)*

For those individuals juggling increased demands of work, home-schooling, and family obligations, it was a very difficult and busy time. Evidence suggests that work, financial, and social disruptions may have a greater impact on mental health than exposure to COVID-19 (Dawel et al, 2020; Rossel et al., 2020). Participant 1 described the challenges associated with the expectation to pick up the additional workload at home because her work in the performing arts was lower paid and less secure than her partner.

> *"The most overwhelming thing was juggling home schooling with work, with life, and my husband is our main breadwinner, my work is sessional, and so therefore I felt I had to take on more of that responsibility, I was more available….it was just the breadth of everything that I had to do….and I'd go into automatic pilot, and that's great, it gets you through, but long term it has a cost. And feeling resentful towards my partner because he goes and sits in his office, and that's fine, you do your work, don't disturb, Daddy's working. But then I'd then have to go and keep two kids home schooling and then also go and do my work in my office and I'm teaching online, and yeah, that was tricky… the amount of things going in my brain at one time." (Participant 1)*

These considerations are important within the WA context, because even though exposure to the COVID-19 virus has been much lower than other Australian states (Fisher et al., 2020), financial,

work, and social disruption have been widespread and will have an ongoing impact on mental health and psychological wellbeing.

Time for a break

Although COVID-19 has undeniably had a negative impact on the performing arts industry, one benefit that came from COVID-19 is that it forced artists to take a break. Several participants noted this was the first time they had taken a break or taken leave from their work in years. A positive outcome of enforced rest was that when participants returned to practice, they felt more creative. Participant 8 noted:

> *"That was a good thing about COVID…that I was actually able to rest my body…[and]…when I knew we were coming out of it, I actually had more creativity." (Participant 8)*

Inadequate rest and recovery have been linked to negative outcomes such as increased injury risk, overtraining, and burnout (Blevins et al., 2020). The enforced break that COVID-19 provided enabled some participants to recognise burnout within themselves, or patterns of behaviour that reinforced burnout cycles as a way of working.

Changes to ways of working also related to how artists prioritised their work. Reduced opportunities and time away from practice meant that artists chose to focus on work that they found fulfilling, rather than accepting anything and everything that they were offered.

> *"I really don't want to be doing some of those things because they're taking away from the times when I could be working on my own actual artistic output." (Participant 11)*

Whereas previously there was more pressure to say yes to work, the impact of COVID-19 helped some artists to recognise where their priorities for their artistic practice lay. Participants noted having more time because they were not engaged in back-to-back performances and shows. No longer having to travel for gigs meant that they could explore new ways of engaging with their art form, and some branched into areas of performing arts they wouldn't usually participate in. The exploration of new areas, such as producing, writing, and developing technical skills, or simply engaging in performing arts because it was fun, provided individuals with a focus on the process of arts participation rather than specific outcomes.

> *"It was interesting that…[elite musicians] would invest that time because that didn't result in a concert, well some of it did eventually, but a lot of it was just, let's get in a room and remind ourselves what we do. And I think it was really important that they could do that, and really lucky, and I think the musicians knew that they*

were lucky in comparison to like, Melbourne or something, and others who had had real problems with keeping their jobs." (Participant 4)

Engagement with the arts has been demonstrated to provide benefits to mental health and psychological wellbeing (Davies et al, 2014; Davies et al, 2016) and participants in this study appeared to benefit from their own continued creative practice. Participant 19 observed:

"It's not that I wasn't stressed but I sort of had outlets…creative outlets….and those outlets were sort of my way of feeling really present and being really okay, and being able to notice all the small things and the excitement and the great things that were still happening." (Participant 19)

Participants also referred to the importance of having time to develop projects to a higher quality than what had been previously possible. Usually, productions are constrained by strict timelines, scheduling, and promotion concerns, and have to be performed whenever they are scheduled, regardless of how prepared performers are. Participants spoke of the benefit of having additional time to work on projects and get them to a higher standard through the development and preparation phase, so that when they reached the rehearsal period they had already worked through issues and had had difficult conversations.

"I certainly noticed some of the work I've been working on wouldn't be where it is now, or wouldn't have gotten to where it is, had we been going into production last year…What is important got changed last year, in a really good way. Like, safety is important, people are important, you know? Time for people to take a break is important, mental health is important, hard conversations are important. But we had the time to have them, instead of 'we can't have that conversation because the show's going on in 2 weeks and we've got to rehearse the scene'. It's like, well, let's stop and let's talk about this. It was really beneficial for a lot of works that I was involved in" (Participant 22)

Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that these positive aspects of COVID-19 were only realised due to the financial support of the Australian Government. With financial concerns alleviated through Government funding schemes such as JobKeeper and JobSeeker, performing artists could spend time focusing on the process behind their practice rather than having to abandon it completely and secure funding to survive by other means.

What About Me?

At a personal level, COVID-19 had a huge impact on participants' mental health and sense of identity. Participants spoke about both positive and negative aspects of COVID-19 on their mental health.

> *"The best and the worst came up for me. Like, my resilience, my ability to problem solve…but the worst also came up of you know, 'You're a fraud, you don't really have anything of value', because there's no confirmation that you have anything of worth because suddenly your business is failing." (Participant 12)*

On the negative side, participants struggled with stress, anxiety, depression, and fatigue related to the impact of COVID-19. Participants spoke of worry and anxiety around the precarity of the industry and the ability to return to pre-pandemic conditions, not only for themselves as artists but also as managers and employers who were responsible for performing artists under their care. As the uncertainty continued, the stress of rescheduling and cancellations of performances (particularly following the second lockdown in Perth in February 2021) led to increased feelings of fatigue and exhaustion as there was no end in sight. The sustained impact of COVID-19 is an ongoing issue with massive implications for mental health both now and in the future. Participants expressed concern about high levels of anxiety across the board and how this would play out in the future:

> *"I think there's probably a fairly pent-up feeling of anxiety, we're building anxiety and we're not getting rid of it…and I've got a bad feeling that this is going to be compounded in the next 12 months." (Participant 24).*

Of particular concern and importance were reports from some participants around industry colleagues dying by suicide or experiencing suicidal ideation themselves.

> *"I was trying so hard, and I was like, I just don't think I can do this anymore. I think I definitely, when I was a teenager, had little angsty moments or whatever, but this was the first time that I felt like, I felt suicidal. And I was like 'I just don't want to, I can't…I've been working so hard'. I thought I was doing all the right things… I've worked so hard to do this and it's still not good enough." (Participant 12)*

The performing arts industry has been identified as a community at risk for mental health issues, with suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts indicated to be higher than among the general population (Van den Eynde, et al., 2016). Participants in this study expressed concern about the prevalence of mental health issues within the performing arts community and identified mental health support as a priority area for action.

> *"I felt like that was always going to be the problem, that's actually the pandemic that we, in our community in Perth, are facing. It's mental health in the arts industry." (Participant 22)*

Participants acknowledged their resilience in the face of COVID-19 and some indicated that their experience during the current COVID-19 lockdowns gave them confidence that they could deal with

subsequent lockdowns if they occurred. Some participants attributed this resilience to their performing arts careers, where they are accustomed to developing creative and innovative solutions with limited funding and resources:

> *"We were still able to deliver projects and programs online or in smaller groups, or just, we found the ways around it because we're used to doing that. And working off the smell of an oily rag, you know, and being fairly resilient. So yes, we couldn't plan too far ahead, but there did seem to be some short-term opportunities that we capitalised on." (Participant 13)*

Another participant acknowledged the mental health benefits of participating in the performing arts and that those benefits outweighed the costs associated with the challenges that COVID-19 had brought.

> *"I've never really felt I was supported in the first place. I've always kind of… banged my way through and made my own stuff…but that has made me know how to self-produce and that is what I will keep doing. So COVID or no, I'm going to keep doing that anyway. And yeah, it is expensive to my mental health at times, but to not do it is even more costly." (Participant 19)*

Participants spoke about gratitude for the relative experience that people in WA had during COVID-19 compared to other places around the world.

> *"It can't be overstated enough how fortunate, even with the challenges that we've faced and I guess one of them that we didn't say before is the reduction in the capacity of venues, you know, that's still not back to full, but a relatively minor thing compared to not being able to do anything." (Participant 11)*

However, this was also linked to a sense of 'survivor guilt' in that performing artists based in WA were able to continue to engage with their art forms in a way that colleagues in the other parts of Australia and overseas were not able to do. Participants were reluctant to promote their work on social media because they know that friends and colleagues in other places were unable to leave their homes. Survivor guilt was also discussed in terms of comparisons to others within the workforce. For those artists who retained their jobs/work, knowing that their colleagues and friends were out of work was a cause of distress.

> *"For me it wasn't so much about my own situation but seeing other people's situations and not being able to do anything about it and fearing that that would soon be where I was as well." (Participant 7)*

For some participants, the stress they experienced was not so much in relation to their own situations but for friends and colleagues who they knew were suffering more than they were. Concern for others is a theme that has emerged in research conducted with performing artists in the UK (Cohen & Ginsberg, 2012; Spiro et al., 2021) and may be indicative of the collective and collaborative nature of working in the performing arts.

For many performing artists, sense of identity is strongly associated with their work as an artist. This presented problems for some participants, who felt the inability to engage and perform within their art form then meant that they had limited value as a person. It caused them to question their worth, not only at a personal level, but at a societal level. For some, the separation between profession and person was difficult to navigate, as these identities can be highly intertwined for those in the performing arts (Robb et al., 2018).

> *"Because my profession is something I want to do personally, it's hard for me to separate those two things because I love what I want to do and professionally removing that from my life, that work is no longer there, I felt that absence within me. And it's like, oh now I'm just at a checkout again…it was depressing, it was numbing. I struggled with mental illness before the pandemic and then when it all happened it's just, I've lost another part of me." (Participant 16)*

Performing artists make significant personal, professional, and financial investments to become highly skilled at their art form, and participants discussed the perception that they should retrain or find work elsewhere (e.g., the UK Government 'Rethink. Reskill. Reboot.' campaign) as being insulting and demotivating. Participants often held multiple jobs in other industries, alongside their performing arts work, and while some of them were able to continue working in these jobs during COVID-19, they did so at a cost to personal fulfilment and mental health. Further, participants acknowledged that as a short-term solution, working in a 'back-up' job was manageable, but as COVID-19 extended, this had a negative impact on mental health and identity.

> *"I think the delays kept coming with 'You're coming back, it will be in a month…now we've delayed it again, it will be in three months' and I was like 'Well, okay, what am I going to do for three months?' Because I can occupy a month with my mental space and my capacity, but this unknown and uncertainty definitely changed my demeanour, which I think as a naturally empathetic person, it became very difficult for me to sort of carry this almost existential crisis of 'I can't do the thing I'm meant to do, and the back-up thing I'm trained to do, nobody will give me the option to do. There's no opportunities, we're in a space where I can't create, I can't do the thing I love, I can't do the thing I'm trained to do.'"*
> *(Participant 23)*

Participants noted that career stage may have influenced the impact of the pandemic on performing artists, and artists who were established in their careers expressed concern for younger and emerging performing artists who may have been training for a very uncertain future. One participant noted that, as a mature artist with an established career, *"having experience in the industry, you kind of know that it will be okay. I think young kids probably don't know that" (Participant 9).* Likewise, participants in earlier stages of their careers spoke about feeling compelled to accept any opportunities that came their way: *"you don't feel like you can say no to any of them, you know? You don't feel like you can kind of make your own choices about things." (Participant 11).*

Similar patterns were observed amongst UK performing artists, who were found to have lower levels of wellbeing if they were younger (i.e., in earlier, more volatile stages of their careers; Spiro et al., 2021). COVID-19 introduced another challenge where artists were forced to think about their artistic priorities because there were fewer opportunities available, and they wanted to ensure they were spending their time on worthwhile and artistically fulfilling pursuits.

> *"I guess the other side of it for me personally is knowing what to prioritize. You know, I guess there is a constant opportunity-cost battle with being a gigging musician anyway, so I suppose it makes you take it for granted less that you're going to have all the opportunities that you want. So really, just going 'is that an opportunity that I want to take, or is that going to get in the way of me doing the thing that I really want to do, which perhaps now we have less opportunities to do?' So I think that's helped refocus in some ways, that some of those other things just aren't that important." (Participant 11)*

However, participants also acknowledged the cultural norm that had been introduced throughout their training that artists should take all opportunities presented to them in order to establish themselves within the industry, and its importance when they were in the early stages of their careers.

> *"I'm still at quite an early stage in my career so every show that I get is so important. And then to have a whole year of that just ripped away is like crushing, because that's a year I'll never get back, to add to my portfolio, to my connections, and networks." (Participant 16)*

Coping

Government and Financial Support

Participants acknowledged the essential support provided by Government with schemes such as JobKeeper, which enabled some artists to continue to work and create, even within the pressure of a pandemic and lockdowns. However, there were also discussions around the uneven distribution of funding across the industry and how some people who needed support could not access it due to the complexities of the JobKeeper scheme and difficulties in proving loss of income. Differences in

JobKeeper eligibility between funded organisations and artists or independent artists were also a cause for concern, with independent artists finding it harder to access the support they needed. Some participants were forced to take jobs outside of their industry, sometimes when those jobs involved personal risk or discomfort.

> *"As soon as I went there, even for an interview, I just was like 'This is a bad place, I shouldn't come here'. I just had a bad feeling about it. I just couldn't deal with it, but I also felt like I couldn't quit because I couldn't get Centrelink, I couldn't get JobKeeper, because there are other things that make me ineligible." (Participant 18)*

Participants further noted that some of their colleagues were reluctant to apply for JobKeeper even if they were eligible, due to the perception that they weren't doing too badly or feeling guilty about taking handouts.

> *"I must have convinced 40 people to take JobKeeper, because they thought 'Oh, I'm guilty, I don't know… I'm not really bad off…'" (Participant 21)*

Many participants noted that the high quality of work that came out of the WA performing arts community, and the ability to mobilise quickly post-lockdown when performances were able to recommence, were only possible due to the financial support from the government during COVID-19. Providing a living wage to artists could be beneficial to helping them continue to work and produce artistic outputs for their communities.

> *"It would be interesting to do it again while we don't have lockdown, to see what we could actually do with that same kind of funding underneath us, and with something, with the audiences and people who could actually come and do it, and collaborate in person." (Participant 21)*

Participants also discussed the demand for artistic content globally during COVID-19, with increased public appetite for films, music, books, and other artistic outputs to help navigate lockdown and isolation. Research has demonstrated the benefits of the arts for social, emotional, physical, and psychological wellbeing (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020; Clift, 2012; Davies et al., 2014; Davies et al., 2016) and participants spoke of the importance of ongoing government support and funding to facilitate the creation of high-quality performing arts content that can contribute to public health.

Looking ahead, participants expressed concern that the financial impact had not yet been completely felt. For example, the ongoing interruption to touring productions will have a flow-on effect for artists who are usually contracted to perform on these shows. Thus, although it may appear as though the economy had returned to 'normal' in WA, artists were concerned that they may be forgotten about.

While many performing artists were supported during the initial stages of COVID-19 through government funding, there is an ongoing cost that they will have to shoulder and the financial support from the government has stopped.

> *"My gig fees have now dropped…during last year it was okay. But now I think fees have been impacted because those [local amateur] companies aren't used to paying the award, and they're not used to PAYG [ATO] and paying extra super and all the little details that go into a big touring production… So my concern now is getting those jobs and what impact that's going to have going forward. Because it's going to be years before those big shows come back. Especially the longer Broadway and West End stay shutdown, then that's going to impact when things get here… I think we'll have flow on for a lot of years." (Participant 9)*

Psychological Support: How Bad is Bad Enough?

The mental health impact of COVID-19 is undeniable; however, for many participants, asking for and accessing psychological support proved challenging. This did not appear to be associated with lack of knowledge about where to access support, as all the participants were familiar with at least one organisation offering psychological support services (e.g., Beyond Blue, Lifeline, Support Act Wellbeing Helpline, etc). One participant acknowledged that not reaching out or asking for support was detrimental and something that they should probably try to do more of in the future:

> *"In a way I was my own support. I didn't really reach out to other people… that's actually made me think I should probably start doing that more, that I'm not a finite resource to support myself, and while [organisation] did give me some money to live on, I suffered a bit because I didn't reach out to people." (Participant 19)*

A common thread throughout discussions around mental health was the idea that things were not 'bad enough' to need professional support, and that people would often only seek help when things *"have actually reached a crisis point that had made them go 'Ok, I can't do this anymore, it has really gone beyond my own ability to manage it" (Participant 6)*. Participants also discussed the social stigma attached to seeking help for mental health issues and a need for people within the performing arts community to speak more openly about mental health issues, with one participant noting:

> *"There's still a stigma surrounding going and getting mental health help. I think a lot of it comes down to pride in a way and thinking 'Oh, if I got get help that means I'm broken'. On a personal level, that was a barrier for me when I needed to get some help, and I think there's not many people in positions of power that were willing to openly tell their stories about mental health" (Participant 5)*

For participants who did try to access mental health support, a major issue they faced was accessing psychological services. Participants described how psychological support services in WA were oversubscribed and that services were either fully booked or waitlisted, even for those people who had previous relationships with psychologists. Further, the process of online tele-health consultations and significant waiting times until available appointments meant that individuals trying to access support in moments of crisis were not able to speak to anyone until weeks after the event. When they were able to access mental health support, some felt the difficulties and needs of performing artists were not well understood by mental health practitioners unfamiliar with the working patterns and culture of the sector. Concern was expressed about the ongoing need for psychological support services in the years following COVID-19 as people begin to unpack the trauma that has been experienced.

> *"But as a society, there has to be support now, set in place, so in three years when people are dealing with essentially post-traumatic stress disorder…it's going to be a really interesting scenario, and I think a lot of people, based purely on my own observations, are going to deny a lot of what happened as a way of coping, and it's going to come out one way or another, unhealthily." (Participant 23)*

Strategies: Survival Mode

For many participants, the pathway through COVID-19 was found by going into 'survival mode'. This related to individuals trying to navigate their way through uncertainty and reducing life down to *"just trying to stay afloat…[and]…surviving day to day" (Participant 2)*, and also to participants who were trying to keep businesses and organisations alive so that their employees had jobs to return to when the performing arts sector recovered. Others found that the best way to work through COVID-19 was to compartmentalise and reframe their experiences to increase their sense of control over the events that were impacting the sector. One participant commented:

> *"2020 was my tangent year, it was the year that I could explore the other opportunities in the past that maybe I cut off…that's the only way that I could really compartmentalise how desperately unhappy I've been in certain times in 2020." (Participant 23)*

Participation in the performing arts held different value to participants. For some, it proved too difficult to continue to engage with their art form because they were consumed with concerns about financial security and personal health and safety. They expressed a sense of helplessness in relation to the performing arts as there were so few opportunities to engage meaningfully with the arts during this time. Nonetheless, other participants found that their artistic practice helped them to endure the challenges of COVID-19 and participating in the arts provided a coping strategy for individuals who may already be vulnerable. One participant noted that the performing arts can provide therapeutic value not only for consumers, but for the artist themselves:

*"…art is therapy for the people we produce art for but it's also therapy for us…
supporting the arts is the best way of using people like ourselves, who are
vulnerable, it's the best way of harnessing what we can contribute." (Participant
19)*

Support from Within

Participants spoke about the generosity of the performing arts practitioners rallying around each other
to help with projects during COVID-19. One participant described the support they received from
others in the industry to help an artistic project transfer to a digital format:

*"These folks from the technical world and production world heard about what we
were doing and just descended upon this project, and that was like the most, one
of the most phenomenal, unforgettable expressions of human generosity that I've
ever experienced." (Participant 19)*

There was a strong sense of support experienced from both colleagues and industry connections, and
from performing arts organisations that provided mental health support and counselling services to
their employees. Participants also commented on the benefits they experienced from providing
support to their colleagues when they could see they were struggling. However, participants also
noted that the mental health toll of supporting and caring for others was significant, and that the
prevalence of serious mental health issues was much greater than they had previously observed
within the industry. Participant 6 commented that continually supporting others:

*"Took its toll as well on all of us, because it was such an interconnected support
system of everybody trying to help everybody else, but they're struggling as well.
So, it's like how can you take care of yourself, how can you make sure that you're
ok, when you're trying to make sure everyone else is ok? It was very, very
difficult." (Participant 6)*

Connections with People and Places

Outside the performing arts community, participants also acknowledged the benefits of connection
with others. They noticed that providing support for those who were less fortunate than themselves
provided a powerful sense of connection. Participants noticed that:

*"Being able to actually help meant I had something to concentrate on, meant I got
to do my technical thing, and meant I got to change people's expectations of what
tomorrow was." (Participant 21)*

Participants also valued the time they were able to spend with family and friends, which they usually
would not be able to enjoy. This included meeting new family members who had been born while the

artist was working overseas, and spending time with family members and celebrating holidays and special event when usually the artists would be providing entertainment to others. Further, the additional time spent at home allowed participants to enjoy new experiences, such as having a pet. Several participants spoke of rescue pets that had joined their families during COVID-19, and these pets served an important role in supporting psychological wellbeing. As one participant noted:

> *"My beautiful rescue dog…saved me day, after day, after day." (Participant 14)*

Places also provided important coping strategies and support systems for some participants, particularly nature or the outdoor environment. The ability to go to the beach or to spend time in the garden provided valuable respite from ongoing concerns related to COVID-19:

> *"I think nature and place and space, particularly as our world just all of a sudden… got tiny. That was really, really important to me." (Participant 1)*

This also related to a sense of community, especially during the more extreme periods when individuals were only allowed out for daily exercise. Participants spoke of the connection to community through seeing:

> *"Chalk drawings of rainbows and painted fences…And then complete strangers giving you your space and respecting that…but still giving you a smile, giving you a wave. I found that we had more 'good mornings' and 'good afternoons' on a walk than we would have in any other time, and I feel like that's continued on since." (Participant 20)*

Adaptations

A Virtual Reality

With the forced closure of the live performance industry, the participants were faced with a new challenge of adapting their practice and livelihoods during lockdown. For many, adapting to life in lockdown meant moving their work and practice online. Digital technologies, once avoided by some participants, were now essential aspects of everyday life and work. For some participants, this shift towards digital and internet-based work changed their relationship towards their practice, and the incorporation of digital means into artistic practice became a way to keep connected with colleagues, continue their artistic work, and preserve their mental health. Recommended as a cultural and creative sector recovery strategy by the OECD, the maintenance and development of digital infrastructure beyond COVID-19 can help performing arts workers share their work digitally, create new artwork, and engage with audiences in different ways (Travkina & Sacco, 2020). For Participant 7, working online helped them to collaborate and lead to the development of a successful live show.

> *"We sort of banded together online and I started doing weekly [playwright name]
> readings. So every Sunday we'd get together over Zoom and we'd read a
> [playwright] play, sometimes it would take us three or four weeks just to get
> through one, and we'd all take on multiple roles and we sort of had this outlet that
> was social… it was something to look forward to every week that meant that we
> were still thinking about theatre and still thinking about the arts…" (Participant 7)*

Although most participants were able to handle the transition to an online home-based workplace, some noticed an increased presence of performing artists posting work on social media. Social media, such as videos on TikTok or Facebook Live, have become an increasingly popular means of creative expression. These forms of media are particularly salient for young people, who are more open to accepting Tiktok videos, GIFs, and memes as legitimate artworks (Australia Council for the Arts, 2020). To keep pace with others, some participants felt pressure to post their own work online or maintain their artistic presence online. For some participants, disconnecting from social media and 24/7 news cycles was a strategy to preserve their wellbeing.

> *"I kind of just cut [artistic persona] for a while, and I just did the basics… I didn't
> put any pressure on myself to create anything. I know there were lots of people
> going, 'oh it's online content' and like 'we'll do online shows' and 'we'll do online
> everything'… And I really felt the pressure from people to do that… I think I did
> one or two posts [redacted] but that was it… I feel like me stepping back for that
> time meant I was so hungry to do it when I came back." (Participant 12)*

Lastly, some industry workers were unable to transition their work to digital or online means. As cultural and creative workers are reliant on highly specialised skillsets and in-person networks (Travkina & Sacco, 2020), it is not surprising that a proportion found it difficult to transition to a new means of work. For example, some industry support workers, such as production workers and technical operators, were not able to work from home or online at all; consequently, they could face serious economic and mental health consequences. The implications of this statement from a technician were particularly alarming, as they were indicative of an individual who found this transition impossible, and a work culture well-established before COVID-19 in which extremely poor mental health is acknowledged as the norm.

> *"So as a technician… I watched the only hire company down here close up shop,
> attempt to kill himself and do a bunch of other stupid shit because he didn't know
> what to do with himself anymore. And um, which as a technician we kind of get
> used to that, it comes and goes." (Participant 21)*

Keeping Ahead of the Game

For performing arts workers who were able to continue their practice in lockdown, the period presented an opportunity to develop their skills. In an economic context, creative skills are understood to encompass the production of original, non-uniform, and novel outputs and solutions (Department of Communications and the Arts & Bureau of Communications and Arts Research, 2019). In WA, artistic organisations recognised the importance of up-skilling, and changed their focus during lockdown from managing the live-event sector to the provision of skills workshops for performing arts workers (see Phase 3: Case Studies). The development of these skillsets is beneficial to an individual's artistic practice, and expands their capacities for future job opportunities. Further, skill or knowledge development is recognised as health determinant of arts engagement, contributing to positive health outcomes (Davies et al., 2014). For performing artists, who often find themselves time-poor and balancing multiple roles, lockdown presented an opportunity to working on their skills, reaping the benefits of increased future employability and a sense of wellbeing.

> "I sat in on lots of webinars and discussions that I would never usually have the time to, or you know prioritise against other tasks. And so it [2020] was a big year for professional development, I like to think. You know, I learnt a lot and I've met many more people, and I want to keep that going." (Participant 19)

Although up-skilling was useful for participants in stable situations, those in more dire financial straits considered using the time to learn different skills to find work in a new industry. For many participants, the sudden pandemic lockdowns highlighted the precarity of the sector, and they sought additional skills to obtain more consistent forms of work.

> "I'm often looking at courses I can do and things I can up-skill, because the [art form] world is all a bit [gestures down]… and then I think 'No, I love it too much, I can't get out, I love it.' And then I think 'No throw the towel in', 'No you love it!'. So it's this constant battle of hanging in there." (Participant 8)

When participants returned to working face-to face they found that some skills, such as working with others, had to be re-built again. As the performing arts are highly social and interconnected, requiring a high level of expertise and technical skill, it took the workers some time to regain their "match fitness" and re-attune to each other. For technical operators, such as Participant 19 (quoted below), the period of reflection caused by lockdown, coupled with the shift in skills when work returned, put many off returning to work in the same field. As performing arts technicial operators work hard physical jobs for long hours, they can develop harmful lifestyles to accommodate, such as surviving on little sleep and self-medicating to compensate (Van den Eynde, Fisher, & Sonn, 2016). Prompted by COVID-19, performing artists, support workers, and technical operators have felt conflicted about staying within their occupation, a dilemma that becomes particularly salient in periods without work (Robb, Due, & Venning, 2018). Many now seek healthier lifestyles, increased workplace satisfaction,

and more secure financial standing, which could potentially cause an exodus of workers from the cultural and creative sectors.

> *"Most of the people I used to do the production work, or, the technical work, the lifting boxes, putting things up, moving curtains, all that kind of stuff, um, we all stopped doing that, and we suddenly had a big rest, and we are not in game shape anymore, because we aren't playing the game every day or every week, and there's a whole bunch of people who are just like, you know what, I'm out. And they've walked. People who have been doing it for years, decades."*
> *(Participant 19)*

In the grand scheme, the OECD warns that the downsizing of the cultural and creative sectors due to COVID will impact a region's social and economic fabric, and its wellbeing, vibrancy, and diversity (Travkina & Sacco, 2020). A challenge for societies beyond COVID-19 will be to address the workplace factors that lead to adverse health outcomes in the performing arts, to retain as many workers as possible, and boost the regrowth of the cultural and creative industries.

Returning to "Real Life"

After lockdown, there was a delay in return to work for the participants when artistic venues were not permitted to reopen, termed a 'buffer' period by one participant. The cancellation of performances and closure of venues took a mental toll on some participants, who had been working towards a program for months or years. Many expressed their frustration at the volatility of the sector, and the delay in returning to work.

> *"I mean we only had a month or five weeks of lockdown, but the venues didn't open up for another two months after that, so yeah, there was a three month period of doing no gigs, and then obviously, it didn't kind of fire up immediately either… And then recently as well, you know, even that one week lockdown… wiped out two and a half weeks of gigs, just from one week of lockdown."*
> *(Participant 11)*

When they were able to return to work, the participants recognised an increased appetite for local performing arts. As audiences were able to enjoy live events once again, the participants noted strong levels of engagement, illustrating the importance placed on live entertainment events by the community (Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, 2020). Event programmers, such as the Perth Festival, also noted that they were more inclined to program local acts, as state and international borders were unstable or shut down completely, and programming smaller and more local was seen as a positive step for the arts in WA (see Phase 3: Case Studies). This strategy of "glocalism," or balancing the needs of local and global markets, is anticipated to be a key component in maintaining the local arts and tourism economies once Australian state and

international borders reopen (Rentschler & Lee, 2020). As Rentschler and Lee (2020) suggest, promoting local performing arts can be a unique selling point for economies beyond COVID-19, and will produce socio-cultural, community, health, and educational benefits amongst performers, support workers, and audiences. This is supported by the following participant:

> *"I think it's kind of been proven that we don't need to go international and nationally to put on good artistic things… audiences have come back really strong for local talent. And I think more support for that going forward once the borders do open up and the international and national shows can come again, it would be great to not just revert back to the way it was, but still promote the local productions, local artists, because we've shown we can do it here, and the audiences haven't turned away from it." (Participant 9)*

Value of the Arts

Industry: Rethinking sustainability

In conversation with the participants, it was widely acknowledged that COVID-19 revealed and exacerbated existing systemic issues in the sector, such as unstable patterns of work, and an industry culture that often worked to the detriment of individual health. The participants noted a "scarcity mentality" underlying the industry, in which limited work and resources available to those in the sector caused high amounts of competition between workers. One effect of this mindset was that those within the industry were less open towards one another, which could lead to individuals closing themselves off from others for fear of losing work opportunities. Conversely, many participants felt more pressure to take all work they were offered, as the continued threat of lockdowns highlighted that there was no guarantee of work in the future. As echoed by the occupational literature, such patterns of work can lead to higher rates of isolation, burnout and psychological distress amongst performing artists, support workers, and operators (Van den Eynde et al., 2016; Willis, et al., 2019). This was acknowledged by one participant, who noted that in this highly challenging environment, *"there's kind of a fight for my bit of the pie...and it takes up an enormous amount of energy" (Participant 25).* This is reinforced in the following response:

> *"One of the things that I think exacerbates the mental health problems… is the model whereby freelance musicians are sort of turned into "yes" people. So, you're sort of trained from the beginning that you need to take every opportunity that comes up, one—because of the exposure to other musicians and to venues and things like that, so the building of your networks, and then two—obviously because in some ways we perceive the industry, I mean rightly so, to be very precarious, and so you kind of need to take all the work you can." (Participant 11)*

While some participants were inclined to take all work opportunities in response to job anxiety, the forced break initiated by COVID-19 caused others to re-evaluate their working practices and prioritise

their mental health over taking excessive amounts of work. Performing arts workers' over-commitment to their occupation and art form can have detrimental effects on their mental health, as they view their work as an essential component of their wellbeing. This can lead to consequences such as a sense of personal failure in periods without work, and exhaustion when they have work (and tend to overwork; Robb et al., 2018). Participant 22 saw the limited work opportunities as a potential positive outcome of COVID-19, as it allowed them to achieve a better work-life balance and develop a healthier work practice.

> *"I used to push myself really hard and burn out, and then um, obviously I had a big rest during COVID and I think it kind of broke the cycle, so now I just don't enjoy doing that anymore, and I, I think I actually have more sustainable like, work practices now— maybe that's also because I'm not as flooded with opportunities as I used to be so it's not so tempting to take on everything at once." (Participant 22)*

Coupled with the artists' identification with their work, the ephemeral nature of the gig economy exacerbated the isolation felt by participants during COVID. Since creative careers are often gig or project-based, and workers often operate as sole traders, those in the industry tend to have more have transient relationships with one another, leading to higher doubt or insecurity regarding these relationships (Robb et al., 2018; Willis et al., 2019). The lack of ongoing working relationships can further isolate those in the field, as they are often not engaged long enough to build security in their relationships, and do not build the same support networks that benefit those in more traditional working arrangements. The absence of these support networks, and the culture of high competition within the industry, led some participants to find it difficult to share mental health concerns during COVID-19. However, some participants found ways to reach out to artistic support networks through their involvement in various groups, such as community arts or volunteer organisations.

> *"I think I'm pretty proactive in seeking help but I know that there's a lot of shame around it for artists where they feel like maybe it's supposed to be this way, like you're supposed to be this tortured artist or that's how you feel your art, and I've been really fortunate to be surrounded by communities like [theatre company] and [festival] people who actually made it kind of their ethos to be like you have to take care of yourself as a way to contribute to this company or this theatre work, you can't just be slacking and giving too much and blaming it on the pandemic." (Participant 2)*

Gig economy: Safety Nets

In terms of their economic situation, the participants noted the precarious and casualised nature of the industry had led many to hold multiple jobs, related or unrelated to their artistic practice. Those who did not hold a steady occupation found it difficult to survive during lockdown, often relying on partners,

family, friends, and networks for support. Overall, participants viewed that they were overlooked by government support throughout pandemic lockdowns, particularly the JobKeeper scheme, which did not account for the casual and gig workers that comprise the performing arts industry. These views resonated with findings from larger industry movements such as I Lost My Gig, which tallied the economic losses in the live performance sector due to COVID-19 at almost $94 million in July 2021 (I Lost My Gig Australia, 2020). Further, 99% of the 3000 workers surveyed by I Lost My Gig did not have income protection or insurance for cancellation of their work (I Lost My Gig Australia, 2020). Although some interview participants were able to recover economically from the loss of work due to lockdowns, or experienced increased work if they were in a high-demand industry (eg. media workers), this change took a mental toll on the participants, who were stressed, frustrated, and worried for their economic and work situation. A need for greater recognition and support for freelance or casual workers was widely acknowledged; this could be from government, industry, or communities and networks.

> *"[Lockdown] meant all of my artistic work was cancelled, so being an independent artist I had no safety net to fall on, I don't have a regular arts employer, I have a retail job and everything to pay rent but to be artistically expressing my work the way I want to, working with the people I care about, all of that was gone and it was taken so abruptly, and it was quite startling that something that none of us really cared about a couple of months ago then had impacted my entire career."*
> *(Participant 16)*

Looking to the future

In the longer term, the participants anticipated that the performing arts sector would be affected for years to come. Despite the personal difficulties they faced, no participant expressed a fear that the industry would not survive, and they were optimistic about the future of the arts. In the short term (i.e. within the next year), participants were concerned about the threat of additional lockdowns, the welfare of individuals working in the sector, and how live performing arts would adapt to life post-COVID-19. For example, although more local productions had been programmed due to border restrictions, one participant expressed concern that these productions had shorter run times (and hence, offered less secure work) as they were seen as riskier by venues and programmers. In the medium and long term, participants raised concerns of further cuts to arts and arts education, which would diminish access to the arts for younger people and future generations. They also emphasised the ongoing need for government support to accommodate the losses incurred by COVID-19. Despite the instability caused by COVID-19, the participants remained passionate about their work, seeing their artistic practice as a vital component of their wellbeing.

> *"Venues are still at 70%... there's a lot of arts industry that are really still going to suffer for a number of years, and really it's mostly independents."* (Participant 12)

Phase 2: Interviews Summary

The interviews with workers across the WA performing arts sector give more context and a deeper appreciation for the findings of the survey. These discussions indicated that several factors endemic to the industry have been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to performing artists' hardship and deterioration of mental health. COVID-19 lockdowns have had multiple impacts on workers, and these impacts were unique to their personal situations. For all workers, lockdown disruptions to the sector caused fatigue and some level of distress. Freelancers, who constituted over half our survey sample, slipped through the loopholes of JobKeeper and financial support schemes, which greatly affected their economic security and wellbeing. Our discussions with performing arts workers during COVID-19 mirror the media and personal narratives that have been shared of loss, productivity changes, and greater need for support during this time (Brunt & Nelligan 2020; Donoughue & Shneier 2021; Flore, et al., 2020; Marozzi 2021). Beyond lockdown, COVID-19 has exposed systemic issues within the performing arts sector, as well as the volatility of the sector itself. These systemic and cultural factors have further contributed to adverse mental health outcomes during COVID-19. The four major findings cover the impact of lockdowns on artists' engagement with their art form, surviving in a volatile sector, systemic and cultural factors that contributed to poorer mental health during COVID-19, and the unique position of the performing arts sector in WA.

In terms of artistic engagement, participants tended to report engaging with their art form either significantly more or less during lockdown. Those who increased their engaged with their art forms tended to be individuals who could conduct their work remotely (such as teaching online) or received support such as JobKeeper if their hours were reduced. Although they had a decrease in freelance work (such as gigs), those who could conduct their work online often reported increased workloads associated with transitioning to the online space; however, many were able to continue their artistic practice despite the increased workloads. For these individuals, lockdowns could be an opportunity to collaborate with others or work on projects that they had delayed. Some were also able to hone their skills or were inspired to incorporate online work into their artistic practice, helping them to transition to life post-lockdown.

A second, somewhat larger, proportion of participants reported limited or no artistic productivity during lockdowns, due to changes in work that affected their mental circumstances. There were three smaller groups in this situation: those who worked in essential non-artistic jobs, those who worked in essential artistic jobs or managed organisations or businesses, and those who were not able to work at all during lockdown. Those with a second job in a non-artistic essential area (e.g. working at a supermarket) were forced to take a break from their artistic work because of increased work hours at their second job. Although having a non-artistic second job is common in creative industries, these occupations were less fulfilling to participants, and primarily a means of maintaining economic security while they pursued their artistic goals. While these individuals were able to rely on non-artistic income to make up for their loss of artistic work, this came at a cost to their mental health, as they were uncertain about when they could return to their primary occupation in the performing arts sector.

Another subset of individuals worked within essential artistic roles (e.g. media workers) or were sole traders and managers within the sector. These individuals experienced a massive increase in workload to maintain their organisation or business or were in great demand from their employer. This exponential growth in work decreased their capability to pursue their artistic pursuits, and they experienced increased stress because of managing multiple responsibilities and demands. Finally, some did not have the option to continue a form of work, such as full-time students or those who obtained their entire income from freelance artistic work. Many were too distressed to continue creating, relying on savings, family, and community support to survive. Echoing findings that Australian workers experienced higher rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress if they were economically unstable or lost their jobs (Biddle et al., 2020), this group spent more of their mental energy on surviving and getting through the lockdown period and were unable to be as artistically productive. These findings reflect prior indications of poorer mental health outcomes and decreased productivity in performing arts workers during lockdown (Strong & Cannizzo, 2020). Despite their individual circumstances, there was a general agreement amongst all interview participants that a financial support system that catered towards freelance patterns of work would have been greatly beneficial to alleviate mental health symptoms exacerbated by financial stress. As many viewed the lack of financial support to be indicative of the government's attitude towards their work and contributions to society, they echoed the feelings of abandonment, disenfranchisement and disillusionment that have been shared throughout recent accounts from the sector (Boland, 2020).

Compounding the effects felt by individuals, interview participants also expressed concern for the performing arts sector in general, as lockdowns had exposed how an entire sector could be shut down overnight. Following lockdown, participants reported a slower return to their artistic work because the live performance sector was among the last to reopen. This continued economic stress following lockdown, combined with the uncertainty of the future of performing arts, had a severe impact upon the mental health of performing arts workers. Although cultural and creative workers are drawn to their occupation for reasons beyond economics, the ability to earn a living is "fundamental to individuality, sense of purpose, and autonomy in adults" (Fisher et al., 2020, p. 462). For performing artists, the sudden loss of their livelihood and the volatility of the sector has been particularly devastating because their artistic practice is highly engrained in their individual identities (Robb et al., 2018). Due to economic precarity, and concerns regarding the future of Australian live performance, some to retrain or leave the sector altogether (Donoughue & Shneier, 2021). The downsizing of the performing arts will come at a high price, as artistic skills are valuable for innovation in the economy, as well as to the health and wellbeing of communities (Davies et al., 2014; Department of Communications and the Arts & Bureau of Communications and Arts Research, 2019). Future support, opportunities, or incentives for the locals in the sector will help to ease the massive financial burdens experienced during COVID-19, revitalise the industry, and attract back those workers who have left. Beyond the lack of financial security exacerbated by COVID-19, certain cultural and systemic issues within the performing arts sector contributed to the mental distress of interview participants and made it difficult for them to access support beyond their immediate friends and

family. Working in the performing arts can be socially isolating, due to a culture of individualism, high competition, and fleeting work relationships. The advent of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns compounded these effects, as interview participants could find it difficult to reach out to others for support or were conscious about the stigma of accessing mental health services. Furthermore, those participants who did try to access mental health services could face other access barriers, such as high costs and inadequate understanding of the sector by healthcare professionals or support workers. Many were also unsure of who could access services such as Beyond Blue or Support Act; even though they suffered mental and financial distress, they did not feel that they qualified to use these services. Upon the sector reopening, many freelance participants felt obliged to take all work offered to them due to the economic stress and uncertainty about future job opportunities, as explained above. This was conceived of as symptom of a larger "show must go on" mentality within the industry, as workers' dedication to their art form and work came at the expense of their individual mental health. However, others reassessed their capacity to continue these patterns of work during their extended break from live performance, as they realised they had been suffering from burnout. This awareness of mental health support services, as well as issues that exacerbated by the sector, were indicative of a broader cultural change that is happening across the industry. The overwhelming response to this research, and participants' willingness to share their experiences, demonstrates their commitment to creating more sustainable and healthy work patterns. Future support systems can facilitate this change through understanding sector-specific concerns, reducing the cost of services, and encouraging individuals to seek support.

Finally, the interviews indicate that WA performing artists have been in a unique position during COVID-19, which has presented its own set of challenges. Due to its relative geographical isolation, highly controlled borders, and strict procedures to control coronavirus outbreaks, the threat of catching COVID-19 throughout 2020 and 2021 has been minimal in WA. Although the physical health risks of participants were lower compared to other performing artists in Australia, they faced a different set of difficulties and pressures during this time, which affected their mental health. Despite hardships and sector-wide shutdowns during the country's first lockdown, at the time of interview many participants considered themselves lucky to live in a place largely untouched by the disease. This caused some to downplay the ill-effects of their predicament, as they compared their situation with their colleagues in extended lockdowns in the Eastern States and overseas. Participants reported feeling a sense of survivor's guilt, as they returned to work in the last half of 2020 and into 2021. Their empathy could lead them to feel unable to complain, to downplay their achievements and return to work, or to feel a greater sense of pressure to be artistically productive, and increased hesitancy to access mental health services. Despite the relative absence of coronavirus in WA, pandemic-related changes occurred throughout the state, as working online, social distancing, and venue capacity restrictions were implemented. Although WA performing artists consider themselves fortunate, they too have felt the crisis of COVID-19 and cannot be overlooked in ongoing support measures.

Phase 3: Case Studies

Representatives from four performing-arts bodies operating in WA in 2021 were interviewed about their responses to COVID-19 and how they supported the mental health and wellbeing of themselves, their employees, their audiences, and the performing artists they collaborate with. The main themes covered dealing with the sudden change presented to the industry, finding strategies to adapt to the situation, maintaining morale, and ensuring the health of the sector following COVID-19. Thematic analysis identified four overarching dimensions, and 14 sub-themes, representing the experiences of participants in relation to COVID-19 and the performing arts sector (See Appendix 4). The overarching dimensions of shock to the system, creativity in crisis, pillars of support and the medium and long term are presented below.

A Shock to the System

March 2020 was arguably the most devastating month for the performing arts sector in Australia. By March 30, 2020, just a few weeks following the onset of COVID-19, 53% of Arts and Recreation businesses in Australia had stopped operating, compared to 90% of businesses overall (Browne, 2020, p. 13). The sudden loss of over half sector's businesses had a devastating impact on the industry, with many entertainment venues, cultural institutions and supporting businesses forced to officially close. While official numbers in Australia have yet to be tallied in 2021, on-going reports and interviews conducted for this research indicate that a significant number of arts bodies will not reopen, signalling an irretrievable loss to the industry and, more broadly, to the wellbeing of Australian society.

The performing-arts bodies interviewed for this research witnessed the devastation wrought by COVID-19 on the industry and, like their colleagues, were confronted with a sudden new reality during the pandemic. All were concerned about the new health fears and uncertainty following constantly evolving safety advice and restrictions. In the three weeks between the first Australian case of coronavirus and the nationwide lockdowns that stopped the entire sector, the arts bodies were faced with the decision of whether to proceed with events and programs that had been scheduled months or years in advance. Considerations included the best practices to reduce risk to audiences and workers, planning how to enforce event crowds in light of considering new audience restriction caps, and the social and financial implications of cancelling the program. For some events, the perceived risks of continuing with a program as nationwide coronavirus cases rose into the thousands were too great, and the events had to be cancelled.

> *"On the [pre-lockdown date] of March we were planning to hold [event] which was supposed to be a nice big event, and we were hoping to get upwards of 300 - 400 people. Then we found out about it via the news, like everybody else, social media and the like, and realised that when they started talking about if you want to hold an event contact the Health Department, so we did that and they recommended that we cancel the event… Our first and foremost concern was the health and wellbeing of our Elders who would've been in attendance, so we made the*

> *decision on the Friday before the Thursday that we scheduled it, to cancel the*
> *event." (Participant 3)*

Following the enforced lockdown, a mass cancellation, rescheduling, or modification of planned events was one of the first major trials put on the performing-arts bodies. The impacts for these organisations included increased workloads to negotiate changes to existing events, plan new schedules in despite the uncertainty of lockdown, or cancel those programs that could not be reworked. For some programs, web hosting on Zoom allowed events to proceed as scheduled; however, this was not desirable for many performing artists or arts bodies, given the live nature of the event and the relatively low projected audience turnout. Responding to the initial stages of COVID-19 put extra stress and pressure on existing staff through increasing their workloads. However, for all interviewees, it was clear that the impact of program modification and cancellation on third-party providers and artists was a larger concern. Given the precarious nature of performing-arts employment, the interviewees were aware that contract changes had large impacts on performing artists and service providers, who were often small businesses. This concern was particularly amplified when the JobKeeper scheme was initiated in April 2020, as many individuals were not eligible for payments.

> *"One of the big considerations that we needed to deal with was artists' contracts.*
> *Because artists have rights when their contract is cancelled, they need to still pay*
> *their rent and they need to exist, so they've lined a whole year's work and*
> *everybody cancelled their contract. They're freelancers, they're not able to get*
> *JobKeeper, so a very big consideration for us was our contracts and fairness."*
> *(Participant 4)*

One strategy, developed by Participant 4, was to consult with legal representatives for arts workers, to negotiate a new payment scheme to contracted artists in the case of event cancellation. This modified system involved payment of 40% of the performing artist's fee upon signing the job contract. In the event of a cancellation due to lockdowns or unforeseen events, the artist was entitled to keep the upfront payment; however, they were also given the option of moving their performance to another time and receiving their full fee. In this case, the contract clause was received positively, as all the artists who were offered the modified contracts chose to return and complete their performance in the next season. As unemployment and mental health concerns arose around the country during lockdown, maintaining reasonable payment rates could help ease financial stress and mental burden upon performing artists. The interviewees emphasised that the wellbeing of artists fed back into their work and communities; as Participant 4 put it, *"if you've got happy artists, you have happy audiences"*. A priority for all the bodies consulted was thus to ensure fairness in payments, which became particularly important in the absence of applicable government support.

Whilst arts bodies were working to minimise hardships for performing artists and contractors, they also had to ensure they could maintain their own working patterns and financial stability. While none of the organisations interviewed for this research had to endure staff layoffs, work arrangements for existing staff were modified.

> "We put all of our staff on 0.5 FTE in order to preserve cash. Our board's view was that we needed to go hard and go early rather than making lots and lots of incremental cuts that would've been more difficult to sell to the businesses."
> (Participant 3)

In addition to reducing working hours of staff, the uncertainty and stress due to COVID-19 caused staff at some of the arts bodies to leave their positions. Participant 3 acknowledged the hardship endured by their staff, who understood the reasoning behind their reduced hours. Fortunately, their staff were able to return to full-time roles after two months and were paid ex gratia payments once the organisation was in a better financial situation at the middle of the year. Additionally, two of the four organisations were able to claim JobKeeper payments for their staff, helping to maintain some financial stability in the organisation. The interviews highlighted the importance of JobKeeper in easing the anxiety surrounding potential job and income loss. They acknowledged that this was not a privilege afforded to some organisations and independent artists.

> "There's no JobKeeper, they need to have some sort of safety net for performing arts organisations that all of a sudden have to shut up shop… we're the first to close and we're the last to open, so that issue at a government level that they need to address." (Participant 3)

The initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic presented an enormous challenge to performing arts organisations, including changing operations to mitigate health risks, the modification or cancellation of existing programs, responsibility for artists' welfare, and financial crisis management. While the interviewees consulted here found ways to manage these challenges during 2020, they recalled the difficulties associated with cancellation of programs such as employee, production staff and artists' income, as well as negotiating the various regulations surrounding government support schemes such as JobKeeper.

Creativity in Crisis

Re-finding Purpose

After surviving the initial stages of lockdown, the future for artistic organisations operating in a pandemic was a cause of anxiety for the arts organisations consulted. Even after lockdown restrictions were lifted, restrictions remained, with venue capacity limits due to social distancing rules, extra hygiene measures, and audience anxiety surrounding return to venues. These restrictions had on-going financial implications for organisations and there was no known end in sight as the

coronavirus situation was constantly and unpredictably changing. The organisations interviewed were thus forced to reassess their purpose.

> *"We had to see what value we would continue to be as a service organisation serving a group of members who probably weren't creating work or presenting work during that period." (Participant 1)*

For some bodies, the early days of COVID-19 was seen as an "existential threat" (Participant 2), as they were no longer able to bring audiences and creators together or manage large in-person gatherings. For Participant 2, operations were able to resume after the initial period of lockdown, easing this threat. Participant 1, however, shifted focus to support artists through the provision of up-skilling workshops. At the forefront of these offerings was the mental health of their teams and performing artists. Participant 1 recruited specialist performing arts psychologists to provide a series of mental health seminars and resources to equip performing artists with strategies to cope with the multiple difficulties posed by the pandemic. Importantly, the programs run by Participant 1 were held in-person when it was safe to do so, as physical presence was a priority for the artists.

> *"The reason that we didn't go digital for [events] is that we had heard from our group of people across the performing arts sector across the state—metro and regional—that they actually wanted an event they could get together face to face as part of their recovery." (Participant 1)*

Holding an event where artists could interact and share their experiences provided an outlet and a network to continue the conversation. Participant 1 stated that the workshops helped performing arts workers to *"move on"*, rather than dwell in anxiety and stress. This grassroots approach responded to the needs of individuals working in the sector, accommodating the shifting needs of sector workers, and helping to renew the organisation's sense of purpose in the absence of live entertainment events and industry activity.

Take Two

With restriction measures standardised and formalised after the initial lockdown, the interviewees were tasked with modifying and reorganising planned events and programs that were still deliverable. This involved a great deal of rearrangement, as noted by Participant 3.

> *"Costing out the rescheduling project, if you like, was one element but we needed to make sure that it was actually viable, so we're talking about taking artists' companies and changing venue dates, there's a huge amount of complexity in that: we're talking about hundreds and hundreds of people with lives and schedules that are affected, that's before we can even look at the audience." (Participant 3)*

For rescheduled events and tours, new health restrictions such as social distancing, tracking audience numbers, checking in guests, keeping surfaces clean, and providing hand sanitiser were new considerations that had to be put in place. Participant 4 coped with these new requirements by appointing a specialised COVID-19 manager to handle health and safety arrangements at live events. To account for all phases of restrictions, Participant 4 conducted scenario modelling to account for possible outcomes due to restrictions (such as audience caps), and plan precautions accordingly. Designating these tasks to an expert allowed the Participant 4 to focus upon delivery of the event, while maintaining a duty of care to their audiences. For them, it was a worthwhile endeavour, as the post-lockdown event lifted audience spirits, noting that *"we got thanked about a million times"* *(Participant 4)*. The positive feedback from the community, despite new restrictions and health precautions, indicated that the audiences were excited to return to in-person events and found much value in live attendance, despite new health restrictions and crowd limits.

Financial impact

For arts organisations in Australia, the impact of COVID-19 was felt across all income sources, and the economic volatility and recession across all industries in 2020 has had a disproportionally large flow-on effect on the cultural and creative sectors. Before COVID-19, organisations relied on government and private sector contributions for over half of their income on average, with private sponsors comprising 25% and the government providing around 27% of total revenue (Creative Partnerships Australia 2018). Maintaining financial sustainability in a fluctuating situation was a major challenge for the interviewees consulted in this research. Organisations needed to reassess their financial situation, and account for all financial possibilities, including the potential withdrawal of major sponsors, as summarised by Participant 2.

> *"We assembled a business resilience team which included members of our board and a couple of members of our executive, and we went through a fairly structured process to assess the risk to the business. So the financial risk was significant in that all of the assumptions that we could typically rely on, in terms of income, we could no longer rely on" (Participant 2)*

The other major income stream to be affected by COVID-19 was audiences. Pre-pandemic, audiences contributed 40% of earned income through sales of tickets, merchandise, or other means (Creative Partnerships Australia, 2018). The impact of reduced audience capacity, new sanitisation measures, cancellations, and ongoing threat of future lockdowns upon box office revenue added to the ongoing financial stress for arts organisations. Surprisingly, Participant 4 did not find audiences hesitant to attend, despite new health measures enforced after the first lockdown of 2020, they were exceedingly grateful.

> *"At the time… we were worrying about if [audiences will] come back… I kept saying if you don't build it they won't come, so my focus is getting the [event] up,*

not about worrying if they come… Actually they did come, and it was a very strange year; usually when you run an event and you have 100,000 plus people you will get a certain number of complaints. I think we had one complaint in the whole festival, the feeling of gratitude was absolutely phenomenal." (Participant 4)

With the potential loss or downsizing of significant income streams, the organisations interviewed conducted financial modelling to account for all situations. Government support, such as the JobKeeper scheme, also helped to mitigate losses and prepare for potential future losses. Fortunately, the arts bodies interviewed for this research had well-established links with their funding bodies and were able to receive continued financial support. Although they were able to maintain their economic position and continue operations, they were aware that this was not representative of the sector. Other organisations, such as volunteer-run or small-scale community projects, were not able to access similar government support and had fewer formal ties with philanthropic income sources.

"What can the government do? I think the call at the moment, and I support it, is the business disruption for COVID-related lockdowns and restrictions. We've got our colleagues over in the Eastern States, over in Melbourne, [organisation], who were opening a play next week, now cannot! There are those issues, so the practical issues of support for companies that have spent many dollars and time, just to have their performance shut down at short notice." (Participant 3)

Pillars of Support

Maintaining morale

As mental health rose to the forefront of pandemic-induced illnesses, arts organisations shifted their focus to their health and wellbeing, and that of their employees, their audiences, and individuals throughout the performing arts sector. Throughout the initial panic of COVID-19 and later adaptation to the 'new normal', a major thread throughout the conversations with the interviewees was the mental health implications of these changes. As COVID-19 continued into the later months of 2020, and into 2021, it became clear that many of the arts bodies, venues, and businesses that were forced to close due to lockdowns would not be able to reopen again. Surrounded by the closure of other performing arts organisations, and the myriad of existential crises brought on by COVID-19, Participant 4 consciously chose to avoid the "knee-jerk" reaction to give up altogether:

> *"The strategy was to not cancel anything, to philosophically counsel ourselves and train ourselves to be okay with tension and uncertainty: to just be curious about the uncertainty, not to see it as something that is a reason to quit." (Participant 4)*

This approach helped the organisation to deal with each challenge as it came, such as avoiding immediate cancellation of live programs in the face of the lockdown crisis. Although initially criticised for this approach, Participant 4 negotiated with stakeholders to proceed with planning an event that might not happen, provisioning for health and safety restrictions and occupancy levels. Fortunately for Participant 4, the lockdown ended in time for the program to proceed. Working towards delivering this program also helped the organisation retain a sense of purpose and optimism in the face of mass cancellations and closures. This sense of common good helped retain the participants' sense of wellbeing, such as Participant 1, who saw their organisation as a support pillar for other individuals working in the sector. Being a smaller organisation, the personal relationships between colleagues were also important in maintaining morale within the organisation.

> *"As an organisation we kind of made sure we were all okay just by how close we all are and then turned our attention outward to the rest of the sector more than inwardly, so we made sure our wellbeing was okay by ensuring we had stuff to do that was valuable." (Participant 1)*

Supporting others

While personal and organisational morale involved reframing the situation and retaining a sense of purpose, supporting the wellbeing of employees, artists, and associated workers became a high priority for the interviewees. As mentioned previously, Participant 1 held a series of up-skilling workshops with a focus on mental health for performers, and Participant 4 ensured fair payment structures for performers limited by lockdowns. Within the organisations, the main strategies used by the interviewees included checking in directly with each employee (individually or in a group setting), being transparent about their financial position and organisational decisions, and offering means of distraction to employees (such as sending care packages). When forced to reduce employee hours, Participant 2's strategy of disclosure of the organisation's financial strategy to employees helped them understand the reasoning behind their reduced work. Once the organisation was in a more secure financial position, it was able to pay back the income from the reduced hours, and employees were given leave time to recover after hosting a major event.

> *"We made a decision in about July last year, when things were looking up, to make some ex-gratia payments to staff to go some way to compensating them for the lost income, we gave staff two weeks of time off in lieu at the end of the [event], to give them a bit of an opportunity to refresh and get their strength back." (Participant 2)*

Although they did not have direct associations with other performing arts organisations, communities, and workers, the participants recognised that supporting others was important to help maintain the cultural ecosystem. Having a high awareness of others' situations, as well as the organisations that continued to hang in the balance, prompted the participants to make efforts to help and support other organisations. For Participant 1, this could be done indirectly by not competing for additional government assistance.

> *"We chose not to compete with the sector in grant rounds for cancellations and things like that, we get a lot of government funding so we were kind of safe that way anyway so for the things that we were going to miss out on we tried our best not to compete so there was more to go around." (Participant 1)*

Other strategies to help the sector included sharing financial strategies and contingency plans with other organisations, communication with other groups enduring hardships, and contributing to other companies. For example, in response to regional venues that could not afford to quarantine an interstate act, Participant 4 paid for the amount to ensure that the venues did not have to cancel that event. Community awareness helped to retain a sense of closeness for the participants, fostering their own sense of community and goodwill.

Support from others

On-going fears of insecurity and abandonment by financial sponsors and audiences were alleviated for the participants, who felt supported by their communities, government figures, and private stakeholders. Ticketholders for cancelled shows often chose to donate their refunds to the artists or arts bodies to show their support, and large funders adjusted their Key Performance Indicators or expectations to account for the impact of lockdowns on the arts bodies, ensuring that they receive on-going donor support. Throughout COVID-19, communities have shown their generosity and support for the performing arts, demonstrating the recognised importance of the arts in society.

> *"When we look at all of our various revenue sources from sponsorship to box office to government grants to philanthropy, all of them have seen a reduction this year with the exception of philanthropy, which has seen about a thirty-five percent increase. So our supporter base has remained very loyal, and we've worked very closely with them to ensure they understand the impact of COVID on the [event] and they've been very very supportive and understanding." (Participant 2)*

The Medium and Long-term

Post-COVID Fallout

Following the lockdowns of 2020, continuing financial uncertainty and the possibility of future lockdowns remained a challenge for the arts bodies in the new year. While the immediate impacts of COVID-19 were mitigated through government, private, and community support, the on-going effects

of COVID-19 continue to present problems to the organisations interviewed. At the time of interviews, roughly one year after lockdowns began, the arts bodies noted the delayed impacts from the previous year; for example, many programs and seasons scheduled to run in 2020 have been delayed for 2021. However, as the run of COVID-19 has been longer than anticipated, 2021 has proven just as volatile; further outbreaks and lockdowns compounded the initial losses and cancellations from 2020. The organisations that can proceed with their programs now face a doubled workload, as they are presenting two seasons' worth of work in one year. Participant 2 anticipated a two-year delay, with works to be shown in 2022; however, these still rest on the assumption that national or international travel will be possible in the coming year. In response, they have adapted by changing their organisational approach and planning strategies. They have accommodated by prioritising local acts in their programming, as they are less likely to be impeded by travel restrictions and preparing contingency plans for all events.

> *"There were lots of works that were put on the shelf that we're likely to see in 2022 actually, that just weren't able to either be created or weren't able to tour given the volatility of borders…Our assumptions for next year [2022] are that international borders will be shut and we'll be able to work from elsewhere in the country alongside local work." (Participant 2)*

The feasibility of delivering performing arts content outside of a live context, and catering to changing audience preferences, has further contributed to the feeling of uncertainty amongst performing arts bodies.

> *"We were still able to do things, but the industry is a face-to-face, personal industry, it's a community thing and it's people experiencing things with like-minded people, so that has actually been challenging for organisations that rely totally on box office for their organisation to survive." (Participant 3)*

These new difficulties, sustained over a period of over a year, impacted the wellbeing of individuals working in the arts bodies. Participant 3 termed this stress "post-COVID fallout", noting the increased workload across a sector that was fulfilling two years' worth of work in one. Although priorities had changed over time, the aftermath of pandemic lockdowns and on-going threat of future catastrophes remained factors to account for, as recognised by the WA cultural industry (Chamber of Arts and Culture Western Australia, 2020a).

> *"The lag and the fallout is ongoing so it's really important to keep listening because the challenges this year are different to the challenges last year but they are challenges just the same." (Participant 4)*

Broader Consequences

A delayed financial impact of COVID-19 was also seen in suppliers and providers to the arts bodies. Given that many third-party providers and businesses have been forced to shut down, the supply chains support performing arts events have diminished, increasing service costs for the organisations. For example, Participant 4 noted that the rural artist residencies that were delayed in 2020 now cost more than they did initially pre-pandemic, including flights, hiring and equipment suppliers. As the cost of goods and services rose substantially throughout 2020, the original budgeted figures for certain programs were no longer sufficient.

> *"I would say at the end of last year it was a positive impact, because we received JobKeeper and we received tax concessions. We came out of the year having not made a loss, we were fine, but there's a lag in impact, so this year it's really problematic… I would say the impacts of Covid are becoming apparent now as we roll into the year after: they weren't immediately apparent. We didn't really cancel anything, so we didn't have to give anything back, we just shifted money forward, but then the money that shifted forward won't pay to deliver what we didn't deliver [in 2020]." (Participant 4)*

One of the other major impacts upon finances was that, while emergency funding offset some of the initial losses in COVID-19, the bodies are no longer able to rely upon the provision of these funds. Like the individual workers who had JobKeeper subsidy diminished, the cushions of support offered throughout 2020 no longer exist; however, the economic problems caused by lockdowns and the ongoing costs of running the organisation continued to add up. Additionally, major funders who maintained their commitments throughout 2020 reassessed their positions in the new year, changing the makeup, structure, and amount of funding released. These changes will affect the organisations' income streams for years to come, as arts bodies will have to adapt to new financial arrangements and their post-COVID audience. As Participant 3 related:

> *"One issue that I've noticed in particular is the post-COVID economic fallout from various organisations like the Australia Council, because of what happened last year. It was also the year that they were making decisions about four-year funding for organisations. Of the organisations they funded they reduced the amount funded by 25 percent in the first year of their four-year funding to allow for transition funding for those organisations that were previously in receipt of funding, but lost their funding in this round." (Participant 3)*

Participants also noted that the loss of economic contributions has had a larger impact upon creative bodies beyond inner-metropolitan regions. Outer-metropolitan and regional arts bodies are more likely to be small-medium bodies operating on minimal financial margins, with smaller budgets and greater

proportions of volunteers (Browne, 2020). As such, the participants noted that the losses stemming from COVID-19 have had a larger impact upon these areas.

> *"[Regional area] had been a topic of some conversation about budget savings up at the [shire]… But COVID closed that facility and those staff were made redundant and it won't reopen again the near future, so COVID was the final nail in that facility's life." (Participant 1)*

Like their city counterparts, the outer-metropolitan and regional venues that were able to balance their budgets in 2020 now faced the task of scheduling all shows that had been booked for the previous year in addition to the events booked for 2021. Participant 1 noted that this led to an overload of work in the regions. Additionally, for programs such as artist residencies in regional areas, the cost of running has increased due to general fee increases in flights and accommodation in these areas. Post-lockdowns, the cost of continuing programs in non-metro areas has increased, which participants anticipate they will have account for in the years to come. For non-metropolitan areas, the increased fees and closure of venues has made it more difficult to run performing arts programs such as residencies.

Change and the Future

Despite dealing with these medium-term effects of COVID-19, the arts bodies identified outcomes that they hoped would create positive change within the sector in the long-term. For example, Participant 4 was impressed by the dedication of government bodies in supporting the revitalisation of the arts. The participants recalled direct communication with the arts governance bodies, such as having direct support tailoring COVID-safe plans that were suitable for arts events and conformed to government guidelines. For Participant 4, this support enabled them to produce an event that was safe and practical for the purposes of the artistic program. Within the sector, other performing arts organisations continued to be a source of support and the participants felt a greater sense of comradery with community, leaders, and similar organisations in the sector.

> *"I now feel a lot closer to the Department of Culture and the Arts [DLGSC], because it's been proven to me that they do have our backs when the chips are down and you're in trouble, you need your Department to step up for you and they really stepped up… I now feel like I work in a really cohesive and supportive sector, whereas I felt before I worked in a good sector, you know, sometimes you feel a bit misunderstood, whatever; I don't feel that way anymore." (Participant 4)*

When talking about the medium- and long-term future of the performing arts industry, one of the main concerns highlighted by the participants was the sustainability of the sector. As others have reported, COVID-19 exacerbated certain pre-existing practices within the sector that were already unbalanced and problematic, such as the "show must go on" culture and precariousness of working patterns. In

the face of mass closures and cancellations, the wellbeing of individuals participating in the sector, and those employed in related fields, and the on-going health of the industry, were of foremost concern to the participants. However, as characterised by Participant 3, the performing arts is a hardy sector and would be able to adapt to the challenges and changes posed by COVID-19.

> *"I just think that the arts sector is one of the most resilient sectors in the country. We're the first organisations to go to somebody's help and aid, fundraising and stuff like that like the experience with the bushfires over in the Eastern States last year, but I think independent artists are lost in the overall scheme of things, especially when it comes to the casual nature or temporary nature of those sorts of things as they fall through the cracks." (Participant 3)*

> *"I was very worried for our artists, I remain worried for our artists, because there still isn't really a system in place that can protect them. I also remain concerned for our production personnel and crew because they're the same boat as artists." (Participant 4)*

The impact of the performing arts on communities reinforced the strong sense of purpose that grounded the arts bodies. This work reinforced the sense of purpose in the arts bodies, as they witnessed audiences returning to in-person events following lockdown. After coming through the "existential crisis" posed by lockdowns, the arts bodies were reminded of their role in maintaining the mental health of the performing arts workers and communities they supported.

> *"I think the economic argument is a strong one, but… in terms of mental health the social value is well documented in terms of participation in the arts and cultural activities, so it makes for a healthier community which obviously is going to lead to better outcomes." (Participant 2)*

Phase 3: Case Study Summary

Caught amid an industry's overnight shutdown, a subsequent scramble to stay afloat, and surrounded by the decline of many arts organisations previously operating on fringes of financial sustainability, the last 18 months have been some of the toughest for companies and organisations operating within the performing arts.

The immediate impact for performing arts organisations was to reschedule events, recoup losses where possible, and preserve existing assets. The provision of JobKeeper and other emergency funds cushioned the organisations from the initial economic shock of COVID-19. However, it is in 2021 that the true burden of COVID-19 is becoming clear to the organisations consulted in this research. As COVID-19 progressed into weeks, and then months, the contribution of economic support schemes, such as Creative Economy Support Package and RISE fund, were critical for the

arts bodies interviewed, particularly when withdrawal of support from donors and audiences remained a possibility. These measures of support have been a major factor in helping WA performing arts avoid the widespread downsizing of cultural and creative sectors seen in other regions and countries (Travkina & Sacco, 2020). Emergency support was particularly important amidst the possibility of donor and audience withdrawal, as the after-effects of lockdowns and economic recession became apparent later in 2020. As these organisations have emphasised, donor and audience support remained high following lockdowns, indicating the value that the performing arts community in WA places on its cultural organisations.

Although performing arts bodies were able to access funding, and retained the support of sponsors and audiences, four main consequences from COVID-19 are becoming clear a year on. Firstly, as organisations were hesitant to cancel seasons in 2020, and opted to delay programs where possible, they are now tasked with scheduling up to two seasons' worth of programming in 2021. Further, as COVID-19 has persisted for much longer than anticipated in early 2020, further outbreaks and lockdowns continually threaten to shut the industry down overnight. Although arts organisations now build contingency plans into every event, the COVID-19 situation is still precarious, and presents the future possibility of destabilising organisations. This "catch-up" programming will continue to cause additional logistical work with further disruptions and shutdowns of the sector. These disruptions must be acknowledged, and assistance could be provided to the sector to recoup and recover from sudden sector interferences.

Secondly, the losses incurred by the performing arts organisations spanned beyond economic terms, and arguably disproportionally affected cultural and creative sectors. Although financial support has been undoubtedly helpful to the organisations, as many operate in non-traditional ways such as through alternative organisational structures, volunteer contributions, and networks, the true losses caused by COVID-19 are difficult to capture. For cultural and creative workers, target-training measures have been suggested as a means of providing support where purely economic aid is inadequate (Creative Partnerships Australia, 2018; Travkina & Sacco 2020). For organisations, this could encompass means such as digital infrastructure, development of COVID-safe plans designed specifically for cultural events or streamlined quarantine procedures and facilities for interstate or international performing artists. Contribution to community and culture remains one of the biggest motivators for Australian performing artists (Bartleet et al. 2020), and enabling organisations and artists to continue work will have positive effects of the wellbeing of the cultural and creative sector.

Thirdly, interviews with performing arts organisations support the OECD's claim that the medium-term will be the most impacted by COVID-19, as crisis payments come to an end, and economies recover from short-term upheaval, and donors and governments alter their funding structures for the upcoming years (Travkina & Sacco, 2020). As performing arts organisations are highly reliant upon government and private support, they will continue to be affected by these changes for years to come.

Continuing support for performing arts organisations will be paramount for the sector to fully recuperate from the effects of COVID-19.

Lastly, COVID-19 has highlighted the closeness and goodwill of the WA performing arts sector, and its supporters, audiences, and communities. Throughout the lockdowns, and despite the instability of their own situations, the performing arts bodies consulted for this research continued to prioritise the needs of workers and the wider sector, through repurposing themselves in the absence of live events, and developing their own support measures in response to sector needs. Such community awareness has helped retain a sense of closeness for the participants, a particularly important factor for creative industries in which sectors, organisations and individuals rely heavily upon one another. Further, support from audiences, donors, and direct support from government have been instrumental in maintaining morale and purpose in the organisations. Goodwill and support from beyond the sector have demonstrated the importance of the performing arts to society at large and will help the performing arts continue in the face of the challenges brought on by COVID-19.

As the performing arts sector continues to recover from COVID-19, it should be noted that organisations outside of the Perth metropolitan area will likely need different accommodations and support. The closure of performing arts organisations in outer-metropolitan and regional areas has arguably had a larger impact upon the communities in which they are situated, as they may be unique to their area, serve diverse sections of the population, and mitigate geographical barriers of access to the arts. For these areas, the decline of performing arts bodies, and access to the arts, have the greatest potential to impact upon the wellbeing of the community adversely. As three of the four organisations consulted for this research serve areas beyond the Perth metropolitan area, our findings support the notion that specialised accommodations will have to be made in revitalisation of regional cultural and creative sectors. Further investigation into non-metropolitan areas will help to develop targeted schema to best benefit these communities.

Phase 4: Digital Stories

Storytelling, in the face of seemingly insurmountable world crises, is a way to share personal story with the wider community. Storytelling is often live – especially in the instance of Barefaced Stories, Australia's leading live storytelling event, and Perth's only regular storytelling night – but storytelling is increasingly becoming popular in digital form through story archives such as The Listening Project (UK) and Story Corp (USA), and podcasts more broadly are on the rise. This was hugely telling during the COVID-19 pandemic with global podcast usage up by 42% since COVID-19 was declared (Amburgey, 2020). Storytelling is not only about retelling a lived experience but about capturing it in perpetuity and sharing this with the broader community, to foster empathy and a sense of belonging.

In developing this research, we wanted to ensure 1) that there was a nuanced deep engagement with the lived experience of a select group of performing artists from WA, 2) that we would capture this experience in a medium representative of the performing arts sector, ie. short documentary films

capturing the creative act of storytelling, and 3) that these experiences would be disseminated as a valued research output, ensuring that what is 'left behind' is a permanent portal to this exceptional time during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Andrea Gibbs cofounded Barefaced Stories with fellow performer and Arts Worker Kerry O'Sullivan, in 2010. Since then, Gibbs has gone on to develop storytelling workshops across WA. Gibbs is skilled at encouraging individuals to discover, develop and deliver a personal story, holding a firm belief in the life-affirming possibilities of storytelling. Gibbs conducted in-person or phone pre-interviews in May and June. The pre-interview process is about planting a seed for how a story might emerge, allowing the participants to prepare for their interview and to get a sense of how a story might ebb and flow. From June to July, Gibbs and Fionn Mulholland, the filmmaker, conducted five filmed interviews of approximately 45 minutes in length. The locations were of the participants' choosing and included a rehearsal studio at the State Theatre Centre of WA, a home studio, and a dressing room.

The interview participants were: Zoe Atkinson, an award winning and nationally recognised theatre designer; Mace Francis, an award winning musician and music festival director; Natalie Allen, an award-winning contemporary dancer and choreographer; Joshua Pether, a performance artist and pharmacist and; Bonnie Davies, a performer, arts manager, producer and creative director of an events-based company, The Gelo Company.

The questions were based on the broader research questions outlined in the research rationale and methodology:

- When did you first realise COVID-19 would impact on your job?
- What was the worst part of the 2020 COVID-19 experience?
- How did you self care?
- What support did you get?
- How important was support?
- Were you talking to other arts workers?
- Has it permanently changed your work? For better or worse?
- Will COVID-19 stop you from making art?

The questions were deliberately open-ended to facilitate individual, personal and subjective responses.

While interviews are often an integral component of qualitative research, what set this project apart was that the interviews were both data collection and output, and that the storytelling process was part of the narrativising method of capturing the experiences of these people. While Gibbs' process is not dissimilar to an open-ended interview technique, the difference is the pre-interview preparation stage. The pre-interview was deliberately utilized as part of the methodology to allow the interviewee

to move beyond a consideration of fact and to begin to see the narrative at work in their experience that would come out more strongly later in the re-telling. The key insight would later be strengthened to extend and expand on the experience in the interview. We didn't just want information, we wanted a story, and we wanted the films to do justice to the story of COVID-19 from a representation of the performing arts that it impacted so hugely. With a professional filmmaker, we were able to capture ideal visuals, additional footage, such as clips from the Perth International Jazz Festival, and a high-quality finished output.

The five artists each had a different experience, yet shared patterns or themes emerged. They all lost income and job opportunities through deferred work or permanently lost. One had employees they had to let go (Bonnie Davies). Each learnt something about themselves (for example, Natalie Allen discovered that she wanted to work as a solo artist) or learnt something about best practice in making art (Zoe Atkinson learned about the need for longer development periods), a greater communication and connection with community (Joshua Pether reached out to family and friends) and the labour-intensive task and performance of navigating grant applications and other government-funding avenues (Mace Francis). The digital stories highlight the extent of financial instability caused by sector shutdown with Bonnie Davies asking *"What would you do if your income from your career stopped? Would you change your job? What would you do?"* Natalie Allen revealed she had passed a kidney stone from the stress of losing work. What the stories also illustrate is the impact on an already fragile arts ecology:

> *"You do get used and abused for your passion to do something, to say yes all the time to all these things whether it's for experience or less money or the value of what artists do. We just don't [you know] come out of a cardboard box. A lot of people have trained and researched [and] involved their entire life to their practice." (Natalie Allen)*

Theatre designer, Zoe Atkinson remarked on the disparity between organisations that had stronger support structures and freelance and sole traders, and the lack of genuine safety net for a sector that brings cultural capital as value to Australian society at large:

> *"Hearing stories about other artists, I really felt for independent musicians and other artists who didn't have company structures to fall back on. I thought about all the people whose gigs had gone up in smoke, and who didn't have the cover for that. That was a really low moment I think, for Australia as a country … How is it possible we are not making sure there is an umbrella for people who keep culture alive?" (Zoe Atkinson)*

There was a sense of value when the sector did start to open up in 2020, and the personal sense of achievement in adapting to change as well as the self-discovery that COVID-19 instigated. Natalie

Allen has found a renewed sense of autonomy in her arts practice and Zoe Atkinson reflected on possible new pathways for project development for arts organisations:

> *"COVID allowed time for a creative development that benefitted so much from that extra time. Why don't we do this as normal practice? It should be one of those golden things that we learned out of COVID" (Zoe Atkinson)*

Phase 4: Digital Stories Summary

The key findings from the content of the films were that the sector shut down caused extensive financial instability for artists. The loss of work and income has taken a significant emotional and psychological toll on artists. Processes for applying for the necessary grant income and of applying COVID-19 safe rules and regulations were complex. Additionally, work-place practices changed significantly in response to COVID-19. Some individuals changed their ways of practicing their art form and the ways they chose to live their lives because of the pandemic. Ultimately individuals demonstrated and recognized their adaptability and resilience.

Employing the skills of a storytelling expert and filmmaker provided a unique creative arts methodology and output for this research. The storytelling approach allowed the research access to nuanced qualitative information that makes an important contribution to understanding the impact of COVID-19. Narrative qualitative research is most often captured as short excerpts from interviews in written reports or theses, and the film or the voice recording remains purely as data. In this instance, not only is the story captured as film but also the published output is an artwork. This method pushes further what is possible as both research methodology and, indeed, nontraditional research.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This research into the impact of COVID-19 on the performing arts in WA highlights the manifold impacts of the loss of artistic activity upon the wellbeing of the performing arts community. The research into the broader economic and community benefits of the arts, which include community wellbeing, wealth and development, indicates that the stress and anxiety caused by COVID-19 on the sector has not diminished the value that the performing arts can provide to the community.

The following conclusions and recommendations aim to address the purpose of this research, which is to inform Government policy and arts industry stakeholders in environment of disruption because of COVID-19

Major Findings

Impact of COVID-19 on performing arts

Finding 1: Loss of Work

Lockdowns had multiple impacts on workers, and these impacts were unique to their personal situations, affecting their creative output. Artists faced loss of work in the performing arts due to the lockdowns. Some shut down their businesses, faced reduced hours, and decreased work in the industry, while others became unemployed. With lost work came lost income, either through reduced pay or loss of entire earnings from working as an artist. Due to workplace restructures and changing restrictions, there were less performances and less audiences. Artists were forced to work at home, which changed the way they practiced their performance, teaching and training. For some, this resulted in increased workload to adapt to online delivery. Some artists moved to working outside of the performing arts to sustain themselves.

> *Recommendation 1:* Financial support systems for casual or freelance workers would have drastically helped improve mental health and wellbeing of workers. At the point of writing a new philanthropic arts fund, ARTS Impact WA, has been launched to provide an additional funding stream for WA creative arts sector. Future monetary support, opportunities or incentives for the sector will help attract back those workers who have left the industry.

Finding 2: Personal impact

The implications of COVID-19 on performing artists' ability to engage with their practice affected their mental wellbeing. Along with financial stress and uncertainty, increased working at home resulted in

decreased opportunity or capacity to engage in their artistic practice. Women and emerging independent artists were most affected. Women faced the challenge of increased care responsibilities during lockdown. Younger artists faced anxiety about the future of their careers. Some, however, were able to continue their artistic work; these individuals were most likely those in better economic, psychological positions, who used the time in lockdown to create new work.

Certain pre-existing systemic issues in the performing arts sector have been exacerbated by COVID-19, resulting in a great deal of mental distress for many individuals. Some individuals faced barriers in accessing existing mental health resources. However, artists' willingness to talk openly and participate in this research indicate a broader cultural shift and awareness of industry-specific factors that contribute to individual mental health and wellbeing.

> *Recommendation 2: Support systems need to encourage the cultural change that is occurring in the sector. Schemes such as the Arts Wellbeing Collective and Support Act are already facilitating this change. Support specific to the WA situation would help improve the sustainability of the sector. Our survey indicated that many participants had sought mental health support from GPs and psychologists prior to and during COVID-19; however, these services could be difficult to access due to financial difficulties and lack of sector-specific knowledge. Given the precarity and lack of financial support for many of the participants during COVID-19, access to a low-cost or free mental health service that caters specifically to performing artists would be a highly beneficial formal intervention for those who need mental health support.*

Finding 3: Geographical isolation

WA has been in a unique position throughout COVID-19, due to its geographical isolation, controlled borders, and strict procedures to control COVID. This has led arts workers to consider themselves comparatively "lucky"; however, they faced different set of pressures.

> *Recommendation 3. Work on strategy of "glocalism" in medium and long terms, to boost employment for local performing arts, help mental health, and as a future strategy to build on WA's unique cultural offerings, which will attract audiences from across Australia and overseas.*

Finding 4: Value of the arts

The research indicates that the arts provide economic, health and wellbeing value to communities and the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on the arts and arts institutions resulted in poor results on all of these indicators. The losses incurred by the performing arts organisations spanned beyond economic

terms, and arguably disproportionally affected cultural and creative sectors. COVID-19 has exacerbated the precarity and volatility of the sector. As sector workers tend to engage in their work in a freelance or casual capacity, they have been highly affected by sudden shutdowns of the industry. Uncertainty for the future of the local performing arts has caused some artists to retrain or leave the sector, having flow on effects to organisations who employ them. The case studies highlight the disruptions to the sector caused by the lockdowns and the dependence upon support from all stakeholders, government, audiences, sponsors, and donors. It is only after 2020 that the true impact of COVID-19 is becoming clear, as the provision of JobKeeper and other emergency funds cushioned the organisations from initial economic shock of COVID-19. These impacts are anticipated to have the most effect upon the sector over the medium term (the next 1-4 years).

> *Recommendation 4. Ongoing support (beyond short-term emergency support) needs to be provided to performing arts organisations over the next 1-4 years for the sector to fully recuperate from the effects of COVID-19. Further, this support should span beyond economic terms, and could encompass means such as digital infrastructure, COVID-safe plans, or streamlined quarantine procedures and facilities for interstate or international performing artists. Organisations outside of the Perth metropolitan area will likely need different accommodations and support. Specialised accommodations will have to be made in revitalisation of regional cultural and creative sectors. The investigation into non-metropolitan areas will help to develop targeted schema to best benefit these communities.*

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread disruption to the performing arts sector in WA; however, as this research has found, performing arts bodies have been vital in supporting individuals within the sector and maintaining the industry. Agencies such as the OECD and the Australia Institute have recognised this sector as the most affected by the coronavirus crisis, with disruptions causing the closure of a significant number of performing arts bodies and forcing individuals to leave. Further, the performing arts bodies that have survived this initial shock are still feeling its effects and continue to be presented with the on-going ramifications of COVID-19. As COVID-19 has demonstrated, performing arts are vital the wellbeing and mental health of individuals, particularly in difficult situations such as lockdowns and during threats on public health. The performing arts will continue to be a means of alleviating the "mental health crisis" brought on by COVID-19. Continued sector-specific support for performing arts organisations and bodies will, therefore, be critical for societies to progress and flourish as society moves beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Timeline of performing arts and COVID-19 in Australia to May 2021

Information for this timeline was sourced from State and Federal Government announcements, the Australian Parliamentary House, and the World Health Organization (Campbell & Vines, 2021; Storen & Corrigan, 2020; World Health Organization, 2020)

2019
December
　　31: A pneumonia cluster is identified in Wuhan, China

2020
January
　　1: The World Health Organization assembles an emergency management team to investigate the outbreak
　　7: The illness is found to be a new strain of coronavirus infection (novel coronavirus, or nCoV)
　　22: The World Health Organization reports evidence of human-to-human transmission of novel coronavirus
　　25: A man who flew to Melbourne from Wuhan is the first individual diagnosed in Australia with novel coronavirus. Three further patients are diagnosed in Sydney a few hours later

February
　　11: The novel coronavirus disease is named COVID-19

March:
　　2: First case of community transmission reported in Australia
　　10: 100th case of coronavirus in Australia confirmed
　　11: WHO declares COVID-19 a pandemic
　　13: Commonwealth, State, and Territory governments announce a ban of non-essential public gatherings of more than 500 people, beginning on Monday March 16
　　17: A roundtable meeting is held by the Minister for Communications, Cyber Safety and the Arts with leading bodies in the cultural and creative industries to discuss the on-going effects of COVID-19 and arrangements for support
　　18: Indoor gatherings of more than 100 people are banned
　　19-24: TAS, NT, SA, WA, and QLD announce interstate border restrictions. Australia closes its borders to non-citizens and non-residents
　　22: Stage 1 social restrictions are announced. From March 23, non-essential venues are restricted from opening, marking the beginning of lockdown restrictions. Travel is not recommended unless essential
　　24: Further restrictions introduced for businesses, workplaces, and social gatherings, including social distancing measures (Stage 2). Individuals on the JobSeeker allowance who had to meet mutual obligations have those obligations paused
　　30: VIC introduces Stage 3 restrictions on leaving home, and gatherings of no more than two people

April
　　8-9: Parliament passes a $130 billion JobKeeper package. The Australian Government allocates an additional $27 million for the arts sector, including $10 million towards Regional Arts Australia, $7 million towards the Indigenous Visual Arts Fund, and $10 million to the charity Support Act
　　27-28: JobKeeper extension for businesses significantly affected by COVID-19 announced. Government support for the economy totals $320 billion (16.4% of GDP).
　　May 28- 11: Restrictions begin to ease nationwide

May

    15: National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan is announced to provide an additional $48 million to the $500 million allocated to mental health and suicide prevention in January, 2020

    20: Regional support for cultural and creative tours announced through the Playing Australia Initiative ($1, 167, 654), Contemporary Music Touring Program ($335, 389), and Contemporary Touring Initiative ($257, 861). An additional $1.1 million is put towards the Visions of Australia Program for cultural exhibitions in regional Australia

June

    9: Mutual obligation requirements for job seekers recommence in Job Seeker program

    27: WA begins Phase 4 easing of restrictions, with gathering limits of one person per two square metres and 50% capacity in sports and entertainment venues

    30: Victoria reinstates tougher restrictions following an extended State of Emergency. Specific postcodes linked to clusters return to Stage 3 restrictions following a surge in cases

July

    7: Stage 3 restrictions introduced in metropolitan Melbourne

August

    2: VIC introduces Stage 4 restrictions in Melbourne, leading to the closure of schools and most childcare facilities, limiting daily exercise outings to one hour and two people, essential shopping outings to one person per household per day, and introducing an 8pm curfew and five kilometre travel radius

October

    26: Restrictions begin to ease in Vic, ending 112-day lockdown

November

    18: SA enters a three-day lockdown following a cluster of cases

    26: $250 million COVID-19 Creative Economy Support Package is announced, pledging funding to arts businesses, cultural organisations, and individuals

December

    20: NSW enters three-week lockdown in parts of Sydney following cluster of cases

2021

January

    8: QLD enters three-day lockdown in Brisbane following transmission of a case in hotel quarantine

    31: WA enters a five-day lockdown in Perth and adjacent regions following transmission of a case in hotel quarantine

February

    12: VIC enters five-day lockdown following transmission of cases in hotel quarantine

March

    29: QLD records 10 new COVID-19 cases, prompting a three-day lockdown in Greater Brisbane

May

    6: NSW restrictions tightened across Greater Sydney following transmission of two new cases. These restrictions were extended until May 17

    11: Federal Treasurer announces an additional $125.6 million financial support for live arts events and productions (RISE Fund), as well as $10 million to Support Act and $5 million to Playing Australia's national performing arts touring program. The Australia Council for the Arts allocation remains unchanged

    28: VIC begins a series of lockdowns in response to detection of the new Delta strain. Adjacent states, particularly NSW, are similarly forced to lock down in the following months of 2021.

Appendix 2: Phase 1. Higher-order themes categorised to four general dimensions

Descriptive codes	Higher-order themes	Dimensions
Loss of performing arts work	Lost work	Loss of work & income
Unemployment		
Redundancy/Stood down		
Stopped work due to health reasons/concerns		
Loss of other work		
Shut down business		
Loss of income	Lost income	
Reduced pay/income		
Reduced hours		
Other work decreased	Work changes	
Workload decreased		
Forced annual leave		
Work hours rescheduled		
Work restructure	Restructure & restrictions	Change to ways of working
Workplace restrictions		
Lower audience capacity		
Participation numbers reduced		
Work from home	Work from home/Online work	
Change to way of working		
Online work/teaching/performance/training		
Telehealth		
Other work opportunities online/WFH increased		
Moved to freelance work	Employment status	
Increased workload	Increased workload	
Other work increased		
Worked outside of performing arts	Work outside of sector	
Changed industries		
Less resources	Opportunities & resources	
Less opportunities		
Increased uncertainty/instability		
Increased competition for work		
Exhaustion	Psychological	Personal Impact
Lonely		
Time off training	Training	
Expected to retrain/upskill		
Forced relocation	Travel restrictions	
Cancelled international exchange		
Travel restrictions		

Appendix 3: Phase 2. NVivo The higher-order themes categorised to four general dimensions

Dimension	Higher Order Theme	Codes
Impact	Artistic practice	Artistic fulfilment, having a break, pressure
		Prioritising, refocus, self-actualisation
		Performance aspects
	Mental health	Anxiety, worry, control, depression, exhaustion, frustration, stress, survivor guilt, COVID fatigue, burnout
		Balance, fun, gratitude, lucky, hope, relief, resilience
	Denial	Naivety, realisation, underestimate COVID impact
		Reluctance to seek help
	Identity	Roles, identities,
		Career stage (early, mid, late)
	Threat	Stuck, Risk, trying to survive, uncertainty, insecurity, precarity, replaceability
		Community transmission, immunocompromised, social distancing, vaccine
		Conflict or polarised thinking
		Health and safety
	Awareness of others	Empathy, awareness of others
		Other countries, comparison to other places
		Social pressure, compulsion
	Restrictions	Isolation from family, relocation, travel
		Lockdowns, border closure, interruptions, lockdown 1, lockdown 2, pre- and post-pandemic comparisons, short lockdown, short notice, short term impact
		Extended impacts, future lockdowns, post-lockdown ongoing issues
	Workload	Loss of work, cancelled show, reschedule
		Increased workload, extended hours
Coping	Support	Financial – finance, compensation, JobKeeper, delayed
		Help-seeking behaviours
		Psychological support, resources
		Commitment to others, connection with others, friends and family
		Government
		Lack of support
		Organisation, organisational support, unions, colleagues
	Strategies	Coping strategies, mindfulness
		Supporting others, Pets
Adaptations	New ways of working	Change of focus, personal projects, rediscovery,
		Technology, recording, working from home, logistics, tech issues, Zoom
		Creativity, freedom
		Masks
		Increased accessibility
	Creativity	Making things work, flexibility
		Networks, collaboration, working with other artists
	Performances	Gigs, public performances, Festival, live performance
		Return to work, audience capacity restrictions, venues
	Return to work	Excited to return to work, in person, new ways of working, performing
		Hesitancy, lost rehearsal time, slow return, unconditioned, loss of technique

Value of the arts	Community/Public	Community, public, appetite for arts, public awareness and perception
		Audience, public reaction, positive
	Education	Education
	Industry	Industry culture and norms, systemic issues, sustainable practice
		Isolation, support
		Gig economy, artist as commodity
	Employment	Second job, alternate employment
		Employability, skills, transferrable skills, upskilling
		Freelance, opportunities, exposure, taking all work
		Strategies, time

Appendix 4: Phase 3. NVivo The higher-order themes categorised to four general dimensions

Dimension	Higher Order Theme	Codes
Impact (A Shock to the System)	Pandemic in Australia	Border closure, far away/not serious, historical event, lockdowns, masks, Phase 1-4 restrictions, pre-pandemic, quarantine
	Employment	Finding work, JobKeeper, JobSeeker, staffing, workload, Zoom
	Events, programs	Artists, audiences, cancelling, hazards/risk, launch/new event, modification, nearly cancelled event, planning, reschedule/reprogram, responsibility, risk
	Mental health	Fatigue, fear, grief, isolation, pressure, stress
Adaptations (Creativity in Crisis)	Re-finding purpose (Organisational strategy)	Challenges, cohesion, flexible, new normal, opportunities, pivot/shift focus, routine, value/purpose
	Industry (Take Two)	Audience responsibility, changes, closeness, leadership, other industries, other organisations, relationship with artists/audience, uncertainty
	Financial Impact	Budget, funding, generating income, income streams, saving money
Pillars of Support	Maintaining morale	Artists, communities/audiences, employees, family, organisation, new normal, other organisations, self, safe
	Supporting others	Being the support, creativity, distraction/humour, empathy, gratitude, needs of others
	Support from others	Flexible, loyalty, KPIs, stakeholders, support from others, support programs
The Medium and Long-term	Post-COVID fallout	2021, residencies, resilience, suppliers, tours
	Broader consequences	Extended impact, increased cost, positives, recovery
	Place	Metro, Outer-Metro, Regional, Remote
	Change and the future	longer-term effects, sustainability, working with Government

Summary of Findings

The main findings of the four stages of this research project are summarised here and are detailed in the full report.

Phase 1: Survey

- 92% of participants experienced changes to their work situation during COVID-19 that affected their income, ways of working, and psychological wellbeing
- Survey participants reported experiencing greater levels of psychological distress than has been reported in previous research on artists and show indications of impairment to psychological wellbeing
- Half of the participants met criteria for moderate, severe, or extremely severe levels of depression
- The levels of depression among the participants were not only elevated compared to previous research on artists, but also when compared to the general Australian population during COVID-19
- Women reported poorer life satisfaction and overall psychological wellbeing than men during COVID-19
- Young performing arts professionals had higher levels of anxiety than older and more established professionals during COVID-19
- While almost half of the participants accessed mental health support during COVID-19, several barriers to seeking help and support were identified, including financial constraints, the lack of availability of mental health support, stigma associated with getting help for mental health issues, and uncertainty about being able to access appropriate mental health support.

Phase 2: Focus groups and interviews

- For all workers, lockdown disruptions to the sector caused mental fatigue and some level of distress
- Freelance gig workers, who constituted over half our survey sample, slipped through the loopholes of JobKeeper and financial support schemes, which greatly affected their economic security and wellbeing
- There was a big loss in gigs, forcing artists to work in non-artistic jobs (such as supermarkets) to sustain themselves financially, resulting in less fulfilling work, which came at a cost to their mental health
- Beyond lockdown, the COVID-19 has exposed greater systemic issues within the performing arts sector, as well as the volatility of the sector itself

- These systemic and cultural factors have further contributed to adverse mental health outcomes for performing artists during COVID-19
- Some participants who could conduct their work remotely reported increased workloads associated with transitioning to the online space
- Alternatively, some participants found the lockdown an opportunity to collaborate online, focus on new projects and incorporate online work into their artistic practice
- Participants expressed anxiety about if and when they would be able to return to performing arts work
- Some turned to family for support as they were unable to support themselves leading to loss of self-esteem
- Many viewed the lack of financial support to be indicative of the government's attitude towards their work and contributions to society, echoing the feelings of abandonment, disenfranchisement and disillusionment that have been shared throughout the sector
- Participants also expressed concern for the performing arts sector in general, as lockdowns had exposed how an entire sector could be shut down overnight
- Following lockdown, participants reported a slower return to their artistic work because the live performance sector was among the last to reopen
- For performing artists, the sudden loss of their livelihood and volatility of the sector was particularly devastating because their artistic practice is highly engrained in their individual identities
- Participants expressed finding it difficult to reach out to others for support, or were conscious about the stigma of accessing mental health services
- Participants who did try to access mental health services faced other access barriers such as high costs and inadequate understanding of the sector by healthcare professionals or support workers.
- Many were unsure of who could access services such as Beyond Blue or Support Act; even though they suffered mental and financial distress, they did not feel that they were entitled to use these services.
- Upon sector reopening, participants felt obliged to take all work offered to them due to the economic stress and uncertainty about future job opportunities
- Despite hardships and sector-wide shutdowns during the country's first lockdown, at the time of interview many participants consulted considered themselves lucky to live in a place largely untouched by COVID-19. This caused some to downplay the ill-effects of their predicament, as they compared their situation with their colleagues in extended lockdowns in the Eastern States and overseas
- Participants reported feeling a sense of survivor's guilt, as they returned to work in the last half of 2020 and into 2021

Phase 3: Case studies

- The immediate impact for performing arts organisations was to reschedule events, recoup losses where possible, and preserve existing assets
- JobKeeper helped the arts organisations stay afloat
- Organisations tried to honour artists' contracts as much as possible
- One organisation put their staff on half-time
- Economic support, such as Creative Economy Support Package and RISE fund, has been critical for the arts bodies interviewed
- In 2021 the true burden of COVID-19 is becoming clear to some organisations
- Donor and audience support have remained high following lockdowns
- The performing arts community in WA values its cultural organisations
- Delaying programs resulted in scheduling up to two seasons' worth of programming in 2021 for some organisations
- Further outbreaks and lockdowns continually threaten to shut the industry down overnight
- The "catch-up" programming will continue to cause additional logistical work with further disruptions and shutdowns of the sector
- Workload stress for managers increased as they were required crisis manage
- COVID-19 highlighted the closeness and goodwill of the WA performing arts sector, and its supporters, audiences, and communities
- Support from audiences, donors, and direct support from government have been instrumental in maintaining morale and purpose for the organisations

Phase 4: Digital stories

- The extent of financial instability caused by sector shut down

- The emotional and psychological toll from the loss of work and income

- The complicated processes associated with applying for necessary grant income and adapting to the COVID-19 safe rules and regulations as restrictions lifted

- The changes to workplace practices in response to COVID-19

- The changes to individual artistic practice and to the way they were choosing to live their lives now

- The adaptability and resilience learnt during COVID-19