

# Strategic Plan 2020-2023



**women\*scircus**

[www.womenscircus.org.au](http://www.womenscircus.org.au)

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\*Women's Circus was founded with feminism and a collective focus on women's empowerment and liberation but also understands that concepts of what it means to be a woman and how people choose to self-identify can be in flux. Our membership includes any person/member who identifies as, or has lived as a woman, or identifies as trans or non-binary.

We acknowledge the Kulin nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which the Women's Circus meets, trains and creates. We pay our respects to local Elders and to the Elders, past, present and emerging, of all communities and cultures across Victoria.

# Executive Summary

Since 1991 Women's Circus has been offering and honing a unique circus and training performance program that is underpinned by values of empathy and imagination; supported risk and inclusion.

The organisation successfully delivers high quality programs and opportunities that support the personal and professional development of hundreds of women, trans and non-binary people annually while continuing to improve our systems and grow our stakeholder base. Women's Circus is bold, dynamic and confident, leading the way in intersectional feminist community arts cultural development practice to redress gender equality in society. We know that Women's Circus changes lives and is deeply valued by members, stakeholders and the broader creative community.

Women's Circus is in a strong strategic position, with a rich history, leadership capability, systems and processes, a satisfied and growing membership base and an appetite for innovation and exploration.

Over the next five years, Women's Circus will transition into a consolidation phase, building organisational resilience in preparation for future growth in impact and opportunity. We want to reach and engage more communities in the future and ensure sustained benefit from the powerful ripple effect of our work. Our roadmap includes the following horizons:

**1. Strengthening and Conditioning (12 months).** The focus in this period will be to implement and embed recently developed initiatives, systems and policies and deepen engagement with members and partners. We will strengthen our foundational processes and define our social impact and artistic offering.

**2. The Forward Roll (2-3 years).** The focus in this period is to leverage our partnerships and membership base to build economies of scale and expand program offerings in new contexts. We will build leadership capacity across the organisation in readiness for testing new initiatives.

**3. Showtime (4-5 years).** We will actively scope, map and pilot new long-term strategic initiatives to support program innovation, scalability and business sustainability. We will cement and accelerate our position as leaders in intersectional feminist cultural development practice to readdress gender equity. Our social impact continues to gestate and grow in places and contexts locally, nationally and internationally.



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# STRATEGIC GOALS 2020-2023

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This strategic plan outlines the plan for Horizons 1 & 2 and is guided by the following strategic goals:

- Place equity at the heart of our work
- Be creative collaborators and activists for change
- Foster a community that has the capacity to make change
- Lead in intersectional feminist community arts and cultural development practice
- Grow new income streams to strengthen our business model

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# OUR PURPOSE

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A just and equal society where women, trans and non-binary people are connected, confident and contributing to the community.

Our mission is twofold: 1) provide opportunities to develop self-confidence, skills and creativity in a safe and supportive environment using circus, training and performance; and, 2) redress gender imbalance and representation in the creative industries and broader community.

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# VALUES

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Women's Circus has developed a model of inclusive and accessible practice that celebrates the creative and physical potential of all that come through our training, community and artistic programs. We operate in accordance with six key values and beliefs that define all aspects of our operational and artistic approach.

***Empathy and Imagination:*** As a feminist organisation, we position empathy as one of the most powerful forces for social change. Imagination allows us to offer a vision of what this change might be.

***Risk:*** Taking risks – both physical and creative – in a safe and supportive space can expand an individual's and a community's belief in what is possible.

***Inclusion:*** We strive to create inclusive projects so that those who face barriers – of gender, age, experience, access, cultural background, finances, mental health, physical health, sexual identity – have the chance to participate in training, development and creative opportunities.

# About Us



Women's Circus is a not for profit feminist arts organisation based in the Drill Hall in West Footscray, offering a year round program of community, circus and performance training. Our programs celebrate the physical and imaginative potential of the human body and nurtures self-awareness and self-esteem.

Since 1991, Women's Circus has welcomed thousands of members to our organisation. These dedicated community members are the foundation of Women's Circus and provide a diverse creative landscape and stimulus for the work we make. They are the organisation's biggest advocates and are nurtured to become part of our professional team of circus artists, performers, trainers, directors and staff.

*Women's Circus is more than just a business or a model for social change: it is a deeply interconnected and cohesive creative community.*

Members have voting rights at our Annual General Meeting and a minimum of two members are always present on our Board of Directors. Women's Circus welcomes any member who identifies as a woman, trans or gender diverse. We apply an expansive understanding of gender that acknowledges both the individual right to their own expression and identity and that this expression may change or be in flux.



# History



Women's Circus was established in 1991 as a project of Footscray Community Arts Centre. Founding Artistic Director, Donna Jackson, worked with survivors of violence and those with an interest in performance, theatre and circus. Original large-scale circus shows were produced annually, often set in disused factories, warehouses and brickworks. The works themselves shone a light on the inequities and injustices that faced women and their communities at the time. Women's Circus became famous for its bold displays of solidarity and community activism.

In 2003, Women's Circus became an independent company and relocated to the Drill Hall in West Footscray with support from Maribyrnong City Council. In 2019, Women's Circus is still proudly based in Melbourne's vibrant west and now works with people of all ages from diverse backgrounds and life experiences and with a range of community partners.

In 2016, Women's Circus developed and adopted a Trans and Gender Diverse Inclusion Policy, in consultation with members, the Board and community partners. It was time to address the question 'who do we include?' and acknowledge the rapidly changing landscape of gender and feminism. The process included referencing the processes and policies of other organisations including roller derbies, women's universities and feminist collectives. The final policy was endorsed by the Board in 2016 and rolled out across the organisation throughout 2017 and 2018. Today, Women's Circus proudly has members, staff and community participants who identify as trans, non-binary and gender diverse.

Since 1991, Women's Circus has made over 35 shows, performed to audiences of over 50,000 people, partnered on over 300 community projects, delivered 1000's of circus workshops, employed 100's of artists and trained 1000's in circus and performance using its model of feminism and community cultural development practice. Women's Circus is an influential feminist arts organisation and is considered a pioneer of social circus both nationally and internationally. We have made a significant contribution to the development of both the national and state circus sector and to the articulation of an Australian cultural identity.

# Our Unique Offering



Women's Circus is one of only a few explicitly feminist and women-led circus' in Australia. We are leading in the exploration of how intersectional feminism can inform community arts and cultural development practice.

Members join the circus, stay and flourish because they are offered more than circus and performance training. Women's Circus is a very special community that fosters trust, personal empowerment, support and creativity. For almost 30 years, Women's Circus has successfully employed a social circus model to provide benefits and impacts to at-risk, marginalised and disempowered communities.

Our data confirms that long-term participation in Women's Circus leads to self-reported increases in wellbeing both physical and mental.



# Artistic Rationale



Women's Circus boasts a vibrant artistic program made up of annual cabarets and a triennial large-scale show, supported by year-round specialist circus and performance training programs.

In order to sustain the bloodline of skilled professionals that hold our values and feminist approach to training and performance making, Women's Circus provides creative and employment pathways from member or volunteer to circus trainer or show director and more through structured and informal mentoring and supported residencies. Women's Circus is a training ground for female-led artmaking, spanning technical, administration, design, production, community facilitation and arts leadership roles.

Our artistic offering benefits members, audiences, community participants and the broader arts sector.



## Delivery Platforms

Women's Circus' artistic work is realised through our core delivery platforms:

### *Provision: Training Program*

A year-round circus and performance training program for all levels and abilities. Our training methodology celebrates the physical and imaginative potential of the body and nurtures self-awareness and self-esteem.

### *Creation: Creative & Community Projects*

Socially engaged arts projects that foster collaboration between community participants and professional artists. We produce small and large-scale circus-theatre shows and creative projects that increase social connectedness, improve physical and mental health and spark creativity.

### *Support: Artist & Sector Development*

Women's Circus strives to support the next generation of female, trans and non-binary artists and trainers through professional development programs including 'A Room of One's Own Residency Program' and 'Still I Rise'. Our focus is to engage under-represented communities in our membership and workforce to foster a diverse and inclusive arts landscape.

## Artistic Development Framework

Our framework is responsive and adaptable to the needs and aspirations of individuals while maintaining a rigour and transparency to ensure community is empowered with the capacity to move through and across the whole of the organisation. It aims to respond to organisational growth, the perceived needs of the circus arts sector and the desires and goals of our membership and community. It is designed to support the development of skilled and passionate trainers, artists and members who have a deep cultural understanding and language unique to Women's Circus.





## Training Pathways

Women's Circus has a legacy of providing opportunities for the development of skilled circus trainers and teachers through articulated pathways including:

- Formal and informal mentorships that increases representation from diverse communities (i.e. Deaf circus trainer mentorship)
- Lead Trainers identify potential Assistant Trainers from participants in classes
- Train the Trainer program, an annual fee-based program of learning and hands on training in social circus pedagogy and circus training
- Community Circus Volunteer program supports members to gain skills and develop capacity to deliver community programs

## Community Pathways

Women's Circus connects the wider community to the power of circus through our Circus for Life program, Community Circus Volunteer program and the New Crew program. New Crew is a unique 6-month program, introducing participants to circus skills and the Women's Circus community. For many members, it is the first step on a longer circus journey.

Participation from diverse communities in New Crew occurs through:

- Fee paying enrolments including low cost options to ensure diverse communities can access program
- Scholarships for Circus for Life and community program participants
- Service referrals (i.e health referrals, disability referrals)
- NDIS funded participants

New Crew graduates stay connected to Women's Circus via:

- Specialist Training Program
- Internships and Labour Exchange
- Production and Community Circus Volunteering
- Performing in the large-scale show Membership in the Circus Solidarity Club as a donor



## Artistic Pathways

Our artist development programs seek to nurture new circus artists who can apply a community engaged and intersectional feminist lens to their practice and grow the presence of women, trans, non-binary and gender diverse artists and their work. We achieve this through the following programs:

- A Room of One's Own, free use of our space for artists
- Still I Rise, a production mentorship for presentation in Midsumma Festival
- Two High, a new 2-year program to support the development of emerging and established artists and directors

Members are supported to explore their creativity and gain skills and employment through:

- Stilt Walking Troupe and Act Development for festivals and event activation
- Annual Cabaret
- Triennial Large-scale show

## Stories We Tell

Women's Circus has a proven track-record of generating strong feminist practice and creative works that challenge and boldly reframe social, cultural and political constructs. Stories are told through imagery, music, design and the powerful display of strength and solidarity. Our works redress history by focusing on invisible, lost, untold and under-recognised voices and stories. Across all of our work, we will elevate and support the voices, artists and culture of Victoria's First Nations people.

## Creative Process and Product

The key drivers that underpin our creative work are inclusivity, empathy, imagination and supported risk. In the creative process we encourage, nurture and stimulate individual creativity as we collaboratively develop new works. Creating a safe and supportive learning environment is vital to enabling people to take individual and collective risks. The measure of the final artworks rests in the ownership of the work by the people who made it.

Our intention is to continue to create high-quality meaningful, socially and politically charged artistic works with community in a range of contexts. We want to create meaningful impact on audiences and shift socially conditioned perspectives, attitudes and/or behaviours.

*Art making is our declaration for a collective vision of a more just and equal society.*



# Internal Situation



Over the past four years, Women's Circus has seen a significant increase in member engagement across the organisation and a strengthened financial position.

Strong leadership in the organisation has supported a consolidation of effort and a more targeted approach to fundraising, marketing and cross-sector partnership development. There is an appetite among staff, members and the Board to leverage the organisation's history and corporate knowledge to increase opportunities and social impact.

We are able to understand, analyse and evaluate our internal situation through:

## Governance and Infrastructure

- Organisational processes that address change management, succession planning and knowledge sharing
- An annual cycle of Board and staff planning and review
- Documented organisational policies and procedures
- A skilled and committed core staff team
- A long-term venue partnership with Maribyrnong City Council
- A Board that represents governance, business, community and membership perspective
- Deep and regular partnerships in the west and throughout Victoria
- A training space equipped with specialised circus equipment and an annual maintenance plan
- CRM and IT infrastructure
- A partnership with Cultural Development Network and implementation of organisational evaluation framework (Whitebox program)
- Triennial strategic planning process



### Sector and Community Cultural Development

- Regular and transparent processes for member and community feedback
- Community partnership projects that provide circus and performance opportunities to under-represented community groups and individuals
- Articulated pathways and opportunities for individual and community development (i.e. mentorships, scholarships, subsidised programs)
- Proactively addressing the under representation of women, trans and gender diverse people in the arts across administration, performing, directing, production, leadership and technical areas
- Innovative and diverse performances, programs and projects in partnership with local, state and international collaborators
- The ability to attract, retain and develop artists of the highest calibre to work with and within the organisation
- Uniquely feminist, political performances, performed by our membership
- Representation in sector development initiatives and sector advocacy including Arts West and Theatre Network Australia
- A pool of skilled artists and trainers specialising in intersectional feminist community arts and cultural development practice, servicing the broader arts sector

### Funding and Income Streams

- Diverse income streams in 2019 distributed across: earned income (51%); show income (1%); philanthropic trusts and foundations (15%); sponsorship/donations (10%); and government funding (23%)
- Government funding remains less than 30% of annual turnover, highlighting our ability to generate alternative income sources
- Development of a suite of fee for service products based on market demand and streamlining of booking processes
- Certified as a social enterprise through Social Traders
- Development of a multi-tiered individual giving program, securing inaugural Circus Solidarity Club members





## Key Achievements in the Last 3 Years

- The Penelopiad (2016) SOLD OUT two-week season of large-scale show to commemorate our 25-year anniversary with 60 members and 12 professional artists
- Participation and presentation of new works in major festivals including Due West Festival, One Night in Footscray and Geelong After Dark
- Two sold out community Cabarets (MASK 2017 & PLACE 2018) that supported the development of 24 new circus acts by 20 members
- Launch of Towards Inclusive Circus initiative that included Groundwork in 2017, a year-long program supporting artists with physical disabilities and in 2018, a partnership with Weave Theatre and Melbourne Social Equity Institute exploring inclusive practice.
- Flagship 6-month intro to circus program 'New Crew', trained 135 new members in circus and performance skills
- Successful delivery of 'Learning the Ropes', a cultural exchange program between Women's Circus and Circus Kathmandu, Nepal's leading contemporary circus
- Membership growth of 40% (150 members to 227 members)
- Developed a Trans & Gender Diverse Inclusion Policy
- Launched a new website and brand
- Secured two ongoing philanthropic partners to support community programs including Circus for Life and Community Circus Volunteer Program

# External Situation



## Context for the Women's Circus

Women's Circus was founded as a discreet project to create a safe space for survivors of sexual and domestic violence and to showcase the inherent, resilience of survivors (The Westsider 2015). Today Women Circus stands as 'an extension of this long tradition of coalescing circus and theatre to make politically charged declarations about women's issues and the empowerment of women' (Measuring the social impacts of long-term participation in the Women's Circus report 2018).

Maribyrnong City Council view the Women's Circus as an important part of the arts ecology in the West. There are a number of themes in the current Arts and Culture Strategy 2018 – 2023 that Women's Circus deliver on, namely: Access all Areas; Celebrate Diversity; and Participation. There are also opportunities to explore ephemeral public live art works that support the Public Art Strategy 2019 – 2029. Women's Circus currently receives organisational funding from Creative Victoria (2017 - 2020) and supports the Creative Industries Strategy action areas of: Backing Creative Talent; Delivering Wider Economic and Social Impact; Increasing Participation and Access; and Strengthening the Creative Industries Ecosystem.

Contemporary circus and circus-infused physical theatre are amongst Australia's most innovative and sought-after cultural exports. Physical risk-taking and bold aesthetics, often matched with pressing social or political concerns, are part of Australia's cultural history and contemporary circus tradition. Circus as a tool for social change is increasingly recognised by local government and the education sector as effective in delivering on community development, curriculum and social justice goals. Women's Circus is one of only a handful of explicitly feminist and female-led contemporary circus companies in Australia (other examples include YUCK Circus and Vulcana). All are creating non-competitive spaces to explore physical and creative potential, while boldly, creatively and collaboratively redressing gender norms and assumptions.



## The Funding Environment

Arts funding in Australia is in a constant state of flux with the consistent decrease in federal arts funding through the Australia Council for the Arts and a tightened focus on income diversification. The Australian arts sector is still recovering from the aftermath of the Brandis funding cuts in 2015, with the small-medium arts sector the most affected. This event catalysed a nation-wide protest and subsequent campaign #FreeTheArts, championed by Theatre Network Australia and resulting in the dismantling of the Catalyst Fund and a small portion of funds being returned to the Australia Council. Despite the precariousness of the national arts investment landscape, the Australian arts sector is slowly adapting, becoming more resilient, pro-active and entrepreneurial.

Competitor analysis confirms that small-medium arts organisations with comparable models are routinely operating with 30-80% government income, highly reliant on short-term funding cycles and the changing whims of government. In comparison, Women's Circus with currently 23% government income, is well-positioned for resilience to changing government funding landscapes thanks to strong earned income sources. But it is government funding that allows us to leverage investment in our organisational capacity. In view of this, Women's Circus continues to advocate for circus to be a category for funding, increased national funding for artists, artform development and the sustainability of the Australian arts sector.

## The Changing Political Landscape

Women's Circus has a role to play in the realisation of policy and reform that seeks to redress gender inequity in society. The Royal Commission into Family Violence has seen a growth in active participation by the broader community to build a shared understanding of, and commitment to reducing family violence. 'Australia Council's Arts Nation: Overview of Australian Arts', confirms that female artists earn half the median creative income of male artists, despite spending similar amounts of time on creative practice, one of the largest gender pay gaps across any industry. As the #MeToo movement forges ahead and the gender equity conversation increasingly plays out in the media, in boardrooms, workplaces, homes and school yards, intersectional feminism is reaching a new level of cultural relevance and vibrancy. Our continued participation in sector events, national conversations, academic research, focus and advocacy groups is our contribution to a cultural shift and contributing towards a more just and equal society.

## Uncharted Territory

There are market growth and product development opportunities for the Women's Circus in the growing health, wellbeing, workforce development and community planning sectors. The recent investment in workplace health and wellbeing initiatives such as The Art Centre's Arts Wellbeing Collective and VicHealth's gender equity through the arts scheme, creates a pipeline of new cross-sector partnership and program possibilities. In addition, embedding arts consultants in City Planning Departments within local government is a growing trend and a unique approach to civic engagement.

# Markets



Women's Circus has strengthened its position and brand within a competitive environment through the hiring of a dedicated Marketing & Communications Coordinator and the development of a marketing strategy. This has ensured the revitalisation and growth of the organisation's reputation; as demonstrated through a significant increase in training enrolments and retention of training members, sold-out public seasons, the delivery of vibrant community programs and deeply engaged staff, artists and members.

**Partners:** Women's Circus has secured and maintained partnerships across local and state government and businesses, the health and wellbeing sectors, philanthropic organisations and other community arts organisations.

**Audiences:** Audiences are predominately women, trans, non-binary and gender diverse people, western and north suburbs based between the ages of 20 – 45 years old who have a passion for social equity, the arts and alternative ways to engage in fitness and wellbeing. As a renowned organisation with a rich history of over a quarter century, past members and their extended networks have remained engaged as active audiences.

**Participants:** Women, trans, non-binary and gender diverse circus artists and performers from Melbourne and abroad, community participants, local residents, primary and secondary school students.

**Members:** Our membership is predominately women, trans, non-binary and gender diverse people, western and north suburbs based between the ages of 20 – 45 years old who have a passion for social equity, the arts and alternative ways to engage in fitness and wellbeing.

**Competitors:** Other circuses with training programs, gyms, women's focused fitness centres, after school programs and arts hubs.

**Our Brand:** As an intersectional feminist arts organisation, our brand focuses on people, their experiences and connectedness. Our communications reflect a persona that is inclusive, friendly, and non-competitive with a focus on circus and performing arts, gender equity and community engagement.



# Artistic Plan



Over the next three years, Women's Circus will support an artistic program that includes:

- An annual Cabaret supporting the development of new circus acts by members
- Creative projects and programs in partnership with independent artists, companies working in a variety of artforms
- Festival, gig and performance opportunities for our community artists (E.g. Stilt Walking Troupe, Roving Acts)
- Annual program of circus and performance master classes led by industry experts
- A large-scale show in the third year

Our inclusivity practices serve as the foundations for our artistic process and draws from the feminist principles of personal agency, active listening and compassion. Our approach and artistic offerings provide individual learning and development opportunities for members, trainers, staff and the community, enriching future generations of audiences and advocates. Our focus going forward is to expand professional development creative pathways, grow employment opportunities for our community and diversify artistic product to explore new circus languages and create new touring works.



### Creative Mentorship Program– Two High

In 2021, we will implement a new creative mentorship program, *Two High*, supporting the professional development of an emerging artist across three years and offering ongoing employment to artists in two roles: Resident Artist and Creative Mentor.

The Resident Artist role is a two-year role and will be recruited from a pool of trainers and artists who already have organisational and cultural knowledge and a connection to the Women's Circus community. The Resident Artist will be supported to develop as a director, performance maker and artist through teaching, directing and performance opportunities across all of our training and creative projects and programs.

The Creative Mentor role will be a two-year role, targeted towards BIPOC (Black/Indigenous, Person of Colour) artists. This role will be actively involved in the development of the Resident Artist and will support the activation of Women's Circus creative projects and performances.

**YEAR 1:** Resident Artist and Creative Mentor is recruited to the role (from BIPOC community).

Creative Mentor and Resident Artist lead creative development sessions with membership, exploring themes and ideas for the large-scale show in Year 3. Resident Artist directs Cabaret with support of Creative Mentor and supports training and artist development programs.

**YEAR 2:** Resident Artist and Creative Mentor co-direct the large-scale show and supports training and artist development programs.

Post the 2-years of practice, the Resident Artist joins the ranks of artistic allies and future creative mentors, made up of experienced artists who have knowledge and passion for the work that we do.

This program supports our goals of equity and collaboration through the exchange of new cultural practice, provision ongoing and meaningful employment for artists and the sharing of knowledge and experience. Two High will value add to our current artistic development programs such as Still I Rise and A Room of One's Own and build a diverse pool of artistic allies for the future.





## As part of the next iteration of the 'Towards Inclusive Circus' project, Women's Circus will develop and implement an Inclusive Circus Ensemble.

This builds upon our evaluation and engagement in 2017 and 2018 and provides a platform to address issues of social inclusion and personal wellbeing through inclusive circus practice and explore how the principles of aesthetic access and disruption of norms can evolve the circus praxis and experience.

This professional ensemble will be led by 12 disabled and non-disabled artists who identify as women, trans, non-binary and gender diverse. The ensemble's enquiry will be grounded in exploring the intersections of oppression, identity and individual artistic expression to develop a unique circus language that explores embodiment, transformation and disruption.

Our long-term vision is to develop and present a body of ongoing, sustained professional performance and touring works for local, national and international audiences.

# Strategic Approach & Roadmap



Women's Circus is now in a strong strategic position and is ready to build on its history, strengths and assets.

The changing political landscape and shift in policy and reform, create an exciting platform for new cross-sector partnerships, market growth and artistic innovation. Our approach will be to work smarter, not harder; stabilising our foundations and embedding and refining the systems, programs and initiatives that we have developed.

Over the next five years, we envision three interconnected horizons that support phases of strengthening, preparation and activation.

## 1. Strengthening and Conditioning (12 months)

The focus in this period will be to implement and embed recently developed initiatives, systems and policies and deepen engagement with members and partners. We will strengthen our foundational processes and further define our social impact and artistic offering.

## 2. The Forward Roll (2-3 years)

The focus in this period is to leverage our partnerships and membership base to build economies of scale and expand program offerings in new contexts. We will build leadership capacity across the organisation in readiness for testing new initiatives.

## 3. Showtime (4-5 years)

We will actively scope, map and pilot new long-term strategic initiatives to support program innovation, scalability and business sustainability. We will cement and accelerate our position as leaders in an intersectional feminist cultural development practice to address gender inequity in our community. Our social impact continues to gestate and grow in places and contexts locally, nationally and internationally.

Strategic initiatives to support this plan include:

- an organisation re-structure to build leadership capacity and resource our full program offerings while allowing for new initiatives and partnerships
- trial of a new Creative Mentorship Program – Two High
- new partnerships and collaborations that support the delivery of our vision, mission and goals
- articulation of our value proposition and social impact
- deeper engagement with diverse/under-represented artists to strengthen our inclusive practice and the artistic integrity of our work