NORTHERN TERRITORY
of AUSTRALIA

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HANSARD EXTRACT

DARWIN FRINGE FESTIVAL 2026

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Dr RAHMAN (Fong Lim): Madam Speaker, last Wednesday it was my distinct privilege to represent the Minister for Major Events and Minister for Tourism and Hospitality in launching the program of the Darwin Fringe Festival, which does not get nearly as much attention as its bigger cousin, but I thought it deserved a shout-out with a bit of specificity. The Darwin Fringe Festival is no longer just a tiny attachment to the Bougainvillea Festival, which it was when I was a kid growing up here; it is now its own artistic and economy powerhouse, and it is worth highlighting the contribution it makes to our community and society.

It was a wonderful opportunity to get together with the guests, festival organisers, artists, venue owners and sponsors to launch the program. The program is so dense that it does not warrant me cherrypicking stuff out. The fact is there is theatre, spoken and written word, visual media art, workshops of all sorts, music and comedy performances. It is a fantastic program filled with 70% local performers. Think about what that means. We are providing people with a platform to express themselves, make a contribution to the community and push forward their own artistic endeavour.

The festival is in its 11th year; it is a celebration of creativity, character and lifestyle. It is an incredible platform for Territory talent, with now 70% of the program being Northern Territory artists. The festival started in the 1980s as a club-style program within the Bougainvillea Festival, and it has always been a bit cuckoo bananas and had a little more edge to it. It was a space for experimentation, collaboration and emerging creative voices. There was a fringe festival moment in the 2010s, and then it relaunched in 2015 as an open-access independent festival by Councillor Fraser Bell.

It is worth noting what open access means. It means people can be part of it independently without being auspiced. It started with just 20 events, but it has built to support accessible career-building opportunities for artists. They are important for us to have. The festival has grown dramatically, and that is something to keep an eye on. By 2019 we were talking about 180-plus performances and 100-plus shows.

The leadership has transitioned to Hannah Illingworth who, as many of you know, is running it now and does a bang-up job. She has been there for 10 years or so, picking it up from Tamara Howie before that. They successfully navigated difficult times through COVID for a festival that is forward-facing and interactive, and they became a strong, well-governed and mature setup. They were independently incorporated in 2022—previously they were auspiced by Browns Mart—and now they are supported by a fantastic volunteer board. I give a shout-out to all those people for their hard work and commitment to making the festival happen.

It is now the largest independent arts platform in the Top End; it is a 10-day festival. To put on 10 consecutive days of a festival is no small thing. Some of you may recall that last year I put on a fledgling three-day festival, and it was just a small thing. To look at something like this, which is 10-days—17 to 26 July—and the density of the programming, it is a major endeavour.

It is a 10-day festival 'with bite' is how they bill it. There is always something interesting to check out at the Darwin Fringe Festival. By the same token, you can check it out is because it is a low-cost event. People can attend these events and get something out of the arts for a relatively low cost. It creates accessible experiences across Darwin, and that open-access model allows everyone from first-time performers to established artists to get amongst it.

At the broadest level, we need to recognise that it showcases Territory stories, culture and talent. It activates venues as well; that is important. These things create a multi-flow effect in our economy. It supports hospitality and local businesses during a period when there are gaps in between the other festival programming. It drives visitation and contributes to the community visitor economy, and it encourages community participation and social connection. These are the kind of things that we need to facilitate more of if we want not only to spend but make money, which, as you know, is a constant refrain from me in this place.

The key message in all of this is that the Darwin Fringe Festival reflects the Territory's creative heartbeat. It supports emerging talent, which we need to do to provide people with outlets for productive activity. For some it also builds career pathways. It strengthens community and reinforces what we keep calling a unique Territory lifestyle.

The thing about the unique Territory lifestyle stuff is I cannot catch a fish, and I am a terrible shot. It is not all about hunting and fishing; there a ton of things it is about. I have nothing against any of those things; all I am saying is that I cannot hunt, and I am a terrible fisherman. This is a place that has always punched disproportionately above its weight class when it comes to what happens in the arts, and it is important to recognise that.

I recognise the artists, producers, volunteers, festival leadership, the board and the venue and hospitality operators. There are so many of them to acknowledge that I do not want to do a shopping list, as I do not think it pays adequate service to the people who put in so much effort, particularly a lot of volunteer effort, to make the Fringe Festival happen. Fringe is more than a festival; it is a reflection of who we are as Territorians, and it plays an important role in restoring and strengthening our unique Territory lifestyle. That means different things to different people, but it is important to understand that the arts is a big part of our important Territory lifestyle.

Member for Nightcliff, you will soon learn that no speech that I give in this place happens without me talking about something economic; get used to it. The Fringe Festival pays payees out, which is something to recognise. I keep saying to the arts community at all the things I go to that the intrinsic worth of the arts is all well and good, but we need strategies in this space. Budget week is a great time to remember it, not just to figure out how to spend money, but how to make, save and stop the wastage of money institutionally. These are the things that matter.

Why am I championing the Fringe Festival in this regard? If it was just for the arts' sake, it would be a component of a smaller speech, but this is something that pays off big. Here are some facts and figures to put it in context. Since 2015 these guys presented 103 days of programming; 778 events; 1,382 individual performances and experiences; 3,229 creative engagements; sold, not given away, more than 40,000 tickets for paying punters; and paid about—get this—more than $1m to just independent performers. That is everyday people who are buskers or have only small-ticket gigs and may not be Missy Higgins quite yet getting the opportunity to ply their trade, be paid for it and create a return on investment in a multiplier effect for our local economy.

I will keep banging the drum for the fact that if we want to feed the people of the Northern Territory we need to catch more small fish, not just chase big white whales. I do not want to talk about the budget today; there will be plenty of days for that. The reality is that we chased too many white whales and, frankly, landed almost none of them for the best part of 25 years. We have to start catching those smaller fish. This is a pretty good-sized fish. This is not for catch and release; this is definitely for keeping.

The Fringe Festival currently pays out about 7% of the box office straight back to artists. The festival operates with only—this is the kicker—$100,000 worth of grant support. That is all it costs. It punches well above its weight class. What do tickets cost? How does it generate that? Tickets are in the $25 to $30 range which, frankly, these days you can barely watch a movie for.

This is something that pays off for us, big time. I know that the arts is not everyone's everything. The AFL is not everyone's everything, and we are not all necessarily hunters and shooters. However, it behoves everyone in this room to support a range of activities. It would be lovely to see more people at the Darwin Fringe Festival this year, showing their faces in and around some of the activity. It contributes more than $1m to the Territory economy every year. It is winning awards and formalising partnerships with the Italia fringe and other festivals.

I had the good fortune to be at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe many times. This is a festival that is comparable in many ways, and that is not an overstatement.

With that, I encourage all of you to get behind Darwin Fringe in its 11th year.

Mrs ZIO (Fannie Bay): Madam Speaker, I acknowledge the career of Mr William (Bill) Daw, who served as NT Director of the Australian Red Cross, and recognise his extraordinary contribution to communities across the Northern Territory, following his retirement on 24 April 2026.

I was honoured to be invited to attend his retirement party along with my colleagues, the Members for Port Darwin and Casuarina. There were lots of tears and tissues in the room that night. It was a beautiful party for Bill.

It is important to know that Bill has dedicated decades of years of service to strengthening the Territory's communities through his leadership, advocacy and community-led development. Throughout his career he has worked extensively alongside First Nations and multicultural communities across the Top End, empowering local leadership, supporting youth pathways, strengthening governance and building long-lasting partnerships across Katherine, the Tiwi Islands and Nauiyu.

What stands out most about Bill's career is not simply the positions he has held but the enormous amount of voluntary service he gave back to the Territory community. Over more than two decades Bill has served