

21 March 2026

Statement regarding Rhoda Roberts AO



SBS is deeply saddened by the passing of Widjabul Wиейbal woman from the Bundjalung Nation, Aunty Rhoda Roberts AO.

Her family confirmed she passed away peacefully earlier today, on her beloved Bundjalung Country, following a period of illness after being diagnosed with cancer last year.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to her family. We also acknowledge the loss felt by her community, and the many people she connected with throughout her life and work.

Rhoda will be remembered as one of Australia's most influential arts and creative sector leaders. A pioneer and cultural authority, she helped reshape representation across the arts and media, carrying culture with her into every space she entered, and championing First Nations voices across the nation.

An award-winning producer, artistic director, journalist, broadcaster, actor, curator and advisor, Rhoda's career was characterised by landmark achievements across Australia's cultural



institutions and on the international stage. Her work included co-founding Australia's first national Aboriginal theatre company, the Aboriginal National Theatre Trust, and serving as Creative Director of *Awakening* for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games Opening Ceremony. She held many senior creative leadership roles, including Creative Director of Sydney's New Year's Eve celebrations, inaugural Head of First Nations Programming at the Sydney Opera House, co-founder and Artistic Director of the Dreaming Festival, co-founder of The Deadlys, and Creative Director of the Parrtjima Festival in Alice Springs. Among her accolades, in 2016 she was appointed an Officer of the Order of Australia for distinguished service to the performing arts and for advancing contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

At SBS, she has been a defining force over many decades. Joining as a young journalist, she made history in 1989 as co-host of *First in Line* with Michael Johnson, becoming the first Indigenous presenters on prime-time Australian television, and later hosting *Vox Populi*. She went on to play a key role in major SBS milestones, including leading coverage of NITV's launch as a free-to-air channel as part of SBS in 2012, and becoming SBS's inaugural Elder in Residence in 2021.

SBS Director, First Nations, Tanya Denning-Orman, said: "Rhoda, our fiercely proud Bundjalung woman, reminded us of the shoulders we stand on and the importance of the work we do. Stunning in so many ways, seeing her on prime-time TV inspired me, and many others. She did not just lead change, she galvanised a sector, nurturing and guiding the leaders who are carrying the flame of change forward, one lit in her by her family, her story, her ancestors. Her craft extended beyond screen and stage through her advocacy for First Nations leadership and her commitment to the next generation. Her spirit is held in Country, carried through land, story and community.

"To her family – including her children Sarah, Jack and Emily who she adored beyond words – thank you for sharing Rhoda with us, and so many others. To you Rhoda, we thank you, we miss you, and we will carry you with us in all that we do."

SBS Chair, Dr Nicholas Pappas AM, added: "Rhoda Roberts led with bold, visionary leadership, conviction and a deep sense of cultural stewardship that has left an enduring mark on Australia's creative and cultural life. Her contribution set a benchmark grounded in culture, integrity and purpose. She strengthened the connection between First Nations cultures and contemporary multicultural Australia and will always hold a special place within SBS. She expanded what is possible in Australian media, and her influence will continue to guide the SBS network, and the broader arts and media sector, for years to come."

SBS Acting Managing Director, Jane Palfreyman, added: "Rhoda was a true trailblazer and a leader of so many firsts in our industry, playing a transformative role in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation across Australia's cultural landscape. At SBS, her impact is deeply felt, most recently as our inaugural Elder in Residence, where she embedded culture into the fabric of our organisation. Immeasurably generous in sharing her knowledge, wisdom, and spirit, she will continue to guide how we work, lead and tell stories."



Read: A tribute to Rhoda Roberts AO.

Watch: SBS On Demand 'In Honour of Our Elder in Residence', a curated collection on SBS On Demand commemorating the extraordinary legacy and career of Widjabul Wиейbal woman from the Bundjalung nation, Aunty Rhoda Roberts, AO.

Media use approval

In consideration of Indigenous cultural protocols, media are permitted to use and reproduce Rhoda's name, voice and image. Media may refer to her as Rhoda Roberts AO, a Widjabul Wиейbal woman of the Bundjalung nation and SBS's inaugural Elder in Residence. The supplied image is approved for all media use. All video and audio content is also approved for media use.

** We acknowledge that Widjabul Wиейbal is also spelt Widjabul Wia-bal or Widjabul Wiyabal.*

ENDS

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SBS acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia.