

## **Anna McLeish – comments on Screen Australia’s draft SOI**

It's been encouraging to see a range of feedback over the past two weeks, during a period in our industry when a range of voices need to be heard and considered.

Although I agree with Glen Crawford that the agency has missed several feedback opportunities due to the narrow circulation and awareness of this request. Perhaps with future comment requests industry from all sectors - production, distribution, exhibition - can be reached more effectively through their various associations in addition to the agency's own circulation.

This kind of transition creates a rare opportunity to assess what isn't working and embrace models and approaches that can succeed in growing our industry in inspiring and varied ways, to ensure its commercial and creative sustainability.

That said I would like to offer the agency a word of caution in removing so much of the old guard that only new guard exists. A balance of both offers an environment whereby each can teach and learn from the other.

As an industry practitioner who has recently moved from the commercially driven world of Australian distribution and acquisitions to the creatively fuelled world of production, it has become increasingly apparent that these two worlds need to work alongside, not apart from, one another if we're to receive ongoing support from our most valuable customer: the audience. The new agency can play a critical role in this collaboration through its combined development, production and distribution support programs.

The more I talk directly with writers, our most vital starting point in the cycle of content creation and commercial input/output, the more it becomes apparent we are neglecting their relevance to the end result and an awareness of the audience in that end result. If more of our immensely talented writers were aware of the end result at the beginning of their creative process, imagine the contribution this informed approach would add to the development process, which would then spill over into the production, distribution and exhibition processes? Is it possible that this would result in more audience-friendly, entertaining and inherently Australian yet universal storytelling, of the kind we have experienced great success with in the past? And this doesn't necessarily mean big budget; our successes of the past have also demonstrated this. Low-budget productions are as commercially and creatively viable and vital as big-budget

productions, and until an agency such as Screen Australia demonstrates an understanding of this through flexible and varied production funding models, rather than one shoe fits all, we will be permanently hijacked by our inflexible system.

To this end, we are not investing enough in the development of projects, in order to ensure a critical mass of creativity is achieved, and out of that a commercially sustainable output from a pre-determined development-to-production ratio. And that pre-determined development-to-production ratio can and should be managed by production entities, while supported by agencies such as Screen Australia.

While I agree with a great deal of their feedback, I disagree strongly with the suggestion from Emile Sherman, Marian Magowan and Miranda Culley regarding not providing financial support to distributors for P&A budgets. Through my theatrical distribution background I have experienced first-hand the pressure a distributor is placed under to provide a substantial P&A budget for a local release. This must be weighed up against the distributor's financial commitment to an ongoing slate of foreign films, each with their own prohibitive release costs these days. While I agree with their point about more spend not necessarily equating to more success - they rightly point out the opposite is more than often the case - there is a point to be made concerning the role an agency such as Screen Australia can offer to the marketing of films in limited release, rather than solely Australian. After all, more often than not Australian films fall within this equation, for various reasons. I urge Screen Australia to review the successful P&A Fund the UK Film Council has been running for the past few years, whereby films in limited release, foreign or local, have the opportunity to receive P&A support, and in doing so have the opportunity to reach a wider audience. The UK has experienced significant success for a wide range of limited release films through this initiative, both UK films and foreign.

Alternatively, it may be worth considering an approach which many US producers are now adopting, in order to exert more ownership over the marketing of their films (some in partnership with a distributor and some working independently), which is to fund their P&A through their budget. This also enables them to receive first recouped dollar, further empowering them and enabling them to sustain their production output.

The Enterprise and Professional Development support programs being proposed by the agency offer an invaluable and integral backbone to the commercial viability and sustainability of our production

industry. I would urge the agency to consider a certain level of flexibility to these programs however, so that they can both reward established entities and pave the way for new, innovative entities to establish themselves and grow alongside those already demonstrating our industry's success.

Overall I remain extremely passionate and optimistic about our resilient - albeit at times battered and reactive - industry and its future. As Australians we have such an incredible amount to offer by way of telling our stories in a creative AND commercial way on the big or small screen. I'm inspired constantly by our exceptionally diverse and hungry talent pool from which films have the potential to emerge, for audiences in our own backyard as well as internationally.

We just need to ensure we take this opportunity of transition to enable this talent pool to get out and make films as the first and most important priority, rather than letting them down by a stalled system that prevents a medium which exists largely on the currency of ideas and getting things done.

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