

## **Comment on Screen Australia draft program guidelines from James Ricketson**

Richard Lowenstein has presented the case for the support of short dramas well. My experience and that of most of my contemporaries – filmmakers starting out in the 1970s - mirrors Richard's. My first drama, LIMBO, made in 1972 would not receive funding today. I had no experience in film, had not written a screenplay and had only one paragraph to present to assessors. I intended to work with non-acting old men and shoot the film in an old men's home. Dick Mason (God bless him), had faith in my abilities and I received \$300 to make a fifteen minute film which got me into the first year of the Australian Film and Television School – along with Phil Noyce, Gill Armstrong, Chris Noonan, Graham Shirley and others. Without LIMBO God only knows if I would be a filmmaker today. I suspect that Phil, Gill, Chris, Graham and so many others of us who started their careers in the early 70's would have similar stories to tell. (There were, at the time, no books on screenwriting, no master classes, no screenwriting 'gurus', no AURORA, no SPARK – a point worth bearing in mind as the perennial question arises: "Where are the good screenplays?"")

Whatever I have achieved as a filmmaker I owe to the opportunities I was given, as a young man, to make a series of short films to learn my craft, make my mistakes – from 15 minutes, to 25 minutes, to 50 minutes, to a \$30,000 feature (THIRD PERSON PLURAL), to a \$750,000 feature (CANDY REGENTAG), to a \$2 million feature – BLACKFELLAS. In accordance with the proposed Screen Australia guidelines BLACKFELLAS would not, could not be made on 2009. During three years of script development (much of it self-funded) no producer wanted to touch the project with a barge pole. I persevered regardless and eventually had a screenplay which attracted the attention (and conditional promise of investment) from the AFC and a similar commitment from the ABC. It was only at this point that any producer would take the project seriously and that a producer came on board. For three years I had been the de facto producer. I get no credit for this – and nor do I want one. I was doing what most filmmakers do – running with a story that I felt passionate about, refusing to take 'no' for an answer, determined to get the film made through sheer will. Had I not done so, had I been required to have a producer at the outset, BLACKFELLAS would not have been made.

I am now a cameraman and sound recordist and have my own edit suite but I could not afford to make any of the short films I made as a young man today even if I were producer, director, writer, sound recordist and editor – unless, that is, I asked actors to work for nothing and shot guerilla style, with no insurance, in public places, with no safety officer for scenes which posed some danger to my actors - shot inside cars, on the back of motor bikes, under water, at the edges of cliffs, fight scenes and scenes involving weapons. I would not be able to make the short films (my apprenticeship, if you like) without which I would not have had the requisite skills required to make BLACKFELLAS. Why is it that the word 'apprentice' is so rarely used in our industry? From whence comes the notion that filmmakers can leap from one or two successful shorts or one Tropfest film to a feature?

Necessity being the mother of invention I found it necessary, in my documentary work, in 1994, to become a cinematographer and sound recordist. The past few years I have produced, directed, shot and sound recorded one 13 part series (BACKPACKING AUSTRALIA) and one 10 part series (VIVA). I produced both series (each for a budget of around \$500,000) not

because I particularly wanted to or couldn't find a producer but because the budget could not afford a producer. Had the budget for either series exceeded \$500,000 they would not have been made. This is a reality that all independent filmmakers will be familiar with. If I had been forced by anybody (including Screen Australia) to have a producer, he or she would have had to share my wage with me. Given that my wage for both series was around what I would have earned stacking shelves at Franklins this would not have been a particularly attractive proposition for any experienced producer. Other filmmakers in my position, confronted with the brute realities of our trade, have also had to add 'producer' to their list of skills and, like me, have discovered that producing is not rocket science – at least not for modestly budgeted films and series. I suspect that it will become more and more the case that successful filmmakers (those that will survive) will have to wear many hats – including that of producer.

Hard though it is for producers to accept (as it has been for cameramen this past decade) they are, under some circumstances, expendable.

Are screenwriters similarly expendable? The evidence suggests not. What is a screenwriter but a modern day storyteller? Men and women who have, since time immemorial, been engaged in the creation of entertaining narratives which place the members of the tribe in a time and a place, connecting past, present and perhaps even intimating the future. Their stories have provided the glue which binds members of a society together, provided them with a shared set of values, given meaning to their lives. The stories of the Bible, the Koran, of Hindu mythology, of the Aboriginal Dreamtime (and of course in literature, drama and cinema from Socrates to Shakespeare to Scorsese) are not products to be bought and sold and be subject to producer offsets and yet we all recognize the importance of these stories in our lives and the ways in which the stories these artists weave have shaped our history, our culture, our moral values and those of the cultures with whom we share this planet.

For the most part this past five years, we have, as an industry, produced a product that neither Australian nor international audiences wish to consume. Were the film industry any other kind of industry it would have been allowed to die a graceful (or perhaps less than graceful) death years ago. It could still happen if we do not justify our existence either as a viable industry (bums on seats) or as an important contributor to Australian culture. That successive governments have continued to prop up this highly inefficient industry stems from an awareness that a culture telling its own stories to itself is somehow important to the health of a nation. Without storytellers there can be neither an industry nor a film culture and at the very least our scriptwriting and directing storytellers must all be accorded equal respect to that given to producers.

To make such a statement of the obvious would not be necessary were it not for Screen Australia's desire to encourage a producer-led renaissance in our industry by essentially outsourcing the development of storytelling to producers. Which producer-driven films have been made this past five years which Australian audiences want to see? Have they been any more successful than writers and directors who have, for years, slogged away at the project they feel passionately about and either engaged a producer late in the development process or gone on to produce themselves?

Of course we are all in this mess called the Australian film industry together – writers, directors, producers and film bureaucrats. There should be no 'us' and 'them'. The way out

of the mess is not through a hierarchical structure that makes writers the employees of producers but one in which all key creators of film (writers, directors and producers) are accorded equal respect and equal power by Screen Australia. Screenwriters and directors should be able to pursue their projects, at least through the early stages of script development, without the imprimatur of a producer.

Australia is not unique in the problems our film industry and film culture are confronted by but we are privileged, for as long as we are in receipt of government patronage, in being in a position to come up with a uniquely Australian solution to these problems. In order to do so we must confront some hard facts. The film industry as we know it is dead. Dead as a doornail. There is no point in trying to revive the corpse. Even if it were possible to breathe some life into film as we know it (and love it) this would provide a short term solution to our problems only. Another fact: The internet is alive and well and, despite the many problems it presents us with (protection of copyright, piracy), will, in the not too distant future, be the avenue down which most of our entertainments (including feature films) will travel to reach our audiences. This has been obvious for some time. Now is the time to recognize that low budget feature films developed for internet release should be treated as seriously by Screen Australia as 3, 4 and 5 million dollar feature films which we can almost guarantee will run, for the most part, for a few weeks at an Australian arthouse cinema.

In between the cinema release and the digital download lie DVD and Bluetooth – giving audiences the ability to watch their favourite shows (glimpses of which they have seen on the internet) ad-free on their home entertainment system.

An argument could be made that any and every presumption we make about the film industry we are all actively engaged in and feel passionate about must either be discarded or, at the very least, seriously questioned. We need a new paradigm, not the old one fiddled with at the edges.

Regardless of the marvels that affordable digital cameras, home edit systems and the plethora of platforms available to us to screen/broadcast our entertainments to a planetary audience, we will always be in need of good stories and good story-tellers. Any initiative on the part of Screen Australia to diminish the role of storytellers, to force them into roles that make them subservient to producers would, I believe, be a major mistake. Of course the best of producers are as skilled at choosing the most appropriate culture nourishing (and entertaining) stories as writers and directors. In an ideal world, which occurs from time to time, writers, directors, producers and script editors work harmoniously together in collaborative teams devoid of the kind of hierarchy that Screen Australia seems, perhaps inadvertently, to be encouraging with its new guidelines.

For the past 30 years a debate has quietly (and sometimes not so quietly) bubbled along in the background of Australian film: Are we really an industry or are we in the business of making an important contribution to Australian culture? Industries, by definition, generate profits for investors. Our 'industry' never has and perhaps it is time to stop using the word entirely. If nothing else this would force us to focus our attention on what it is we are doing and why.

If box-office success remains a primary objective in the eyes of the public and politicians and we fail as an industry to achieve enough such successes domestically and worldwide, what leg do we have to stand on? How do we justify our existence to the bean-counters in Canberra? To our fellow tax payers?

If we can each year point to a handful of films which speak in deep and mysterious (and often challenging) ways of what it is to be Australian at this point in time (in sync with the Zeitgeist), we will have a strong cultural argument to present in Canberra when, in the midst of some financial crisis (perhaps even the current one), it becomes apparent how many hospitals or schools could be built with the money spent on the Australian Film Industry.

Who is more likely to imagine stories of cultural significance – producers or writers? For the most part it will writers who do the initial and essential imagining and then directors and producers who look at what they have imagined and say, “Yes, this is important, this story must be told.”

At this critical turning point in our history we are in danger of putting into place a system whereby the most skilled storytellers in the country must go, cap in hand, to an experienced and successful producer (I’m dying to see a list of such producers, their credits, their box office returns!) and ask “Would you please consider my story as part of the package of projects you wish to develop with the \$500,000 Screen Australia has given your production company?” Will difficult, challenging, ground breaking and perhaps uncomfortable films come out of this process?

Will the best of our filmic storytellers, their fingers on the culture’s pulse (for this is an important part of the storyteller’s role), develop the stories they feel most passionate about or will they, mindful of their mortgage payments, school fees for their kids, the need to put food on the table, be tempted to use their skills to produce stories of the kind that producers funded by Screen Australia are looking for?

I believe that our story-tellers must, at least in the early stages of their imagining, be free of the concerns which producers, quite rightly, must have in the forefront of their minds. Forcing screenwriters and producers into bed too early, without appropriate foreplay, will, I fear, lead to much awkward groping in the dark and to unwanted and unloved films.

James Ricketson  
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