

Comment on Screen Australia draft program guidelines from Matthew J Schelle

To whom it may concern,

I have read over the draft Screen Australia guidelines and wish to offer the following comments/ideas for review:

- The Enterprise Program needs to be re-structured such that successful applicant businesses need to produce at a bare minimum a recuperative project within their three years of operation in order for any senior business member to be eligible to receive future Enterprise Program assistance. In this regards automatically all applicant businesses are in direct competition and in the nature of capitalism, underperforming operations will cease to be propped up by endless government support. The long term affect this would have is that projects could become wholly funded by private businesses once they are forced to learn to become commercially viable.
- In order to prevent established filmmakers from dominating the Project-by-Project Development stream, an emerging filmmaker round should be introduced whereby early-stage screenwriters/directors without existing mentorship can have their work assessed by industry professionals. Authors with works deemed ready for market should receive assistance both in monetary terms and by being paired with willing established producers. This will broaden the scope for new works and new ideas and protect emerging artisan's rights. Projects which would normally be shelved and forgotten due to lack of "previous credits" would finally see the light of day if indeed they are worthy stories. We are in this business to tell new stories, not simply to bask in the glory of stories we have already told.
- Concordantly, a better Mentorship Program to foster connections between professionals and emerging artists needs to be established, including open meet and greet events to improve industry relationships and to provide viable industry pathways. Lectures are fine for their purposes, but most business is conducted through one-on-one contact.
- An assessor fully independent of Screen Australia should review each feature project's commercial potential before funding is granted to better demonstrate a balance between screen art and screen business. Although a film shouldn't be restricted from release if its earnings potential is deemed low, its budget should be realistically based on the necessity to allow for both good storytelling and ensure a fiscally-viable return. Narrowly-appealing films should not be granted multi-million dollar budgets if they cannot find audiences, which is a problem currently engrained in the Australian funding system.
- A B-Film Development Strand designed to support filmmakers between the emerging and commercially viable stages needs to be established. This strand should be expressly designed to provide purely low-level funding for creative feature projects with ultra low-budgets that are immediately ready to shoot. Budgets of up to \$150,000 with a total strand allocation of \$1,500,000 annually would obviously result in 10 additional feature length productions being made, helping to develop skills across the board and enlarge the work-base. This is a

vital component in the film production hierarchy in overseas countries and is currently being propped up solely by private investment and is in danger of extinction in this country without support. Although B-Film can be seen as derision, this strand is not solely for Genre films, but for any creative low budget stories. To define it in another way, the total cost for this strand would actually be less than the losses incurred on the majority of Australian multi-million budget films recently released. If purely as an experiment this project was nurtured over the course of a decade, there is in all probability the chance that one film out of the one hundred financed in that time would recover the entire strands funding costs for that time. And conversely, an additional one hundred films would stimulate the industry a lot more than the current government allocation in this category of zero.

- The concept that a Government agency can rigidly define “Australia culture” is foolish. Any intellectual definition can instantaneously be met with a real-world counter-balance. Is the story of a Lebanese immigrant working in a Bankstown take-away shop the epitome of Australian culture? How about Baz Luhrmann’s upcoming cattle droving film? How about aliens destroying Parliament House? The idea that you can have a “quintessential Australian story that covers everything” is flawed because no singular story is ever going to cover all of our collective identities. But if each of those stories were put through that rigid test, is there anyone who wouldn’t immediately predict that the latter wouldn’t make the grade? And what is the end result of that rigidity? The main character who finds the aliens is changed to a lesbian handicapped Aboriginal woman: instant Australiana. The culture test is an example of our ongoing insecurity about who we are. If you apply it purely in broad strokes as a tool of measure, than you diminish the importance of purely good storytelling. We must better learn to manage the importance of telling Australian stories but not at the cost of butchering good ones. This is not exactly an issue which can be quickly addressed but one which needs readdressing.
- With digital TV content expanding, the Australian government needs to be looking at the establishment of a digital channel dedicated solely to Australian content, embracing all skill levels.
- With the deletion of the short film strand and definition of ‘established filmmakers’, the structure of government assistance in this country is clearly top heavy. The comment that State Funding offices will act as a counter-balance is flawed, because there’s clearly been no direct change to state government programs of assistance nor does it look likely that there will be. Unless something is adequately done to identify, foster and protect emerging filmmakers by creating clear and evident career pathways, then we should expect the stagnation to continue. I agree wholeheartedly with Richard Lowenstein’s comment and hope that this will adequately addressed.

Thank you kindly,

Matthew J Schelle