

SCREEN AUSTRALIA – RESPONSE TO GUIDELINES BY LOUISE SMITH

14 November 2008

As a producer who has just completed her first feature, I hope these comments will prove beneficial in getting the perspective of someone who feels that under the current guidelines, she's just done an amazing Indiana Jones type-roll, escaping away from a giant bolder that has just closed the path between emerging and experience producers... however, having just made it through alive, realizes her skirt got caught...

Here's the recently experienced perspective...

By now you would have read the submission by the "emerging" producer collective which outlines their key concerns to the new guidelines – in particular:

- taking away the short film funding
- not specifically replacing the Indivision Initiative
- and the definition of "experienced producer" precluding many filmmakers from applying even for development funding of their projects without attachment of an established producer.

I support many of these issues and would like to comment briefly on them from my own perspective.

RE: THE DEFINITION OF EXPERIENCED

"an experienced producer must have at least one credit as producer on a feature film that has been released on a minimum of 10 screens in one territory or exceptional credits in other genres such as a primetime broadcast miniseries of telemovie".

Consideration of other genres:

I am concerned there is no allowance for producing experience gained from other areas such as short films, music videos and TVCs. I personally have worked with commercial clients from all over the world including Japan, USA, UK, NZ, Singapore and India for over 13 years and having now just produced my first feature, that experience was the building block to my approach to the film.

Having spent years working to a brief, a common agenda for a client, ad agency and a director – I've become extremely skilled in handling the trickiest of creative and management situations as well as the practicalities of working to a budget, a schedule and a very definite on air date.

I feel that the pre, shoot & post on THE SQUARE went so well because of my years of day to day production experience. It's clear that producers need to work across many audio-visual mediums to survive in this country – and it would be detrimental to downgrade the experience that TVC and music videos give producers and directors. If it's a good enough experience platform for the likes of Ridley Scott, Spike Jones, Alex Proyas, Ray Lawrence, Andrew Dominic, Michele Bennett, Leah Churchill-Brown and Marian Macgowan then it should be good enough for everyone.

Defining experience by the producer credit on feature films

I believe that it was the combination of my success on my short films alongside my extensive experience in TVC production that I was able to secure a Co-Producer role with Marian Macgowan on THE RAGE IN PLACID LAKE.

The experience I had on "Rage" was unforgettable – I was involved from financing and I worked alongside Marian as she pulled the deals together. She let me sit in on all her financing and development meetings – she was extremely generous with her time, resources and her knowledge. Even if the film had never had been made, this was the most advanced learning curve for me since my first short film.

I am therefore a big believer in the experience / less experienced collaboration – but as long as it came from an organic place – and the key difference on this project was that it was still Marian's film and I still developed my films – all with the benefit of that experience. It worked well for both Marian and I because it was mutually beneficial – and it ultimately allowed me to go on and produce THE SQUARE entirely on my own. I financed it and produced THE SQUARE without a more experienced EP or Producer attached - however, most importantly, there were many people I called along the way for the expertise: Liz Watts, Tim White (who was one of my 'unofficial' mentors on my first short film), Robert Connolly, Bryce Menzies, Anni Browning and of course Marian Macgowan. All these people gave me different takes on various issues – I don't think that I could have picked one person to give me all the advice all of the time! Each call I made was specific to what I thought that individual could help me with. There are also some questions that just need multiple opinions.

While I think that Screen Australia should have an interest in who is in control of the productions they finance – I don't feel it should be a mandate for a 'first time feature producer' – I feel that this should be decided on a case by case basis.

I also don't feel that this should be enforced at a development stage. Screen Australia is currently encouraging the development of slates for experienced producers and if this is to filter down to the 'emerging' producers as well, they should have multiple projects on the go too – we all know the downfall of a director or producer after the success of their first film not having a follow up for many years. My concern is that in order to access some funds to survive development, that many collaborations will be formed in haste at an early stage and potentially be stifling to the creative future of the original team if they can't get out of the agreement as their own experience level grows.

Again, I've taken a very organic approach over the past 10 years of development and always get producers, directors or writers with more experience than me to read the scripts at various stages of development. There's an inherent market place evaluation that takes place through this, along with feedback from government agency reader reports and the responses from the various international contacts I have such as sales agents, financiers etc.

I feel the mentoring between less experienced and more experienced producers is alive and well in Australia and it would be a shame to define how this has to occur.

Consideration of the 10 screen release benchmark

One of the sessions at SPAA was called "Engaging with the International Market Place" and it focused on producers who were actively involved with producers or other companies based overseas – eg Goalpost Films & Warp Films.

I think this is a relevant point to bring up as we can't look at our Australian industry without taking into account, the clear trends and changes happening in the international arena.

In particular, I'd like to make note of a couple of comments from few articles released earlier this year:

Welcome to the New World of Distribution. Many filmmakers are emigrating from the Old World, where they have little chance of succeeding. They are attracted by unprecedented opportunities and the freedom to shape their own destiny. Life in the New World requires them to work harder, be more tenacious, and take more risks. There are daunting challenges and no guarantees of success. But this hasn't stopped more and more intrepid filmmakers from exploring uncharted territory and staking claims.

Before the discovery of the New World, the Old World of Distribution reigned supreme. It is a hierarchical realm where filmmakers must petition the powers that be to grant them distribution. Independents who are able to make overall deals are required to give distributors total control of the marketing and distribution of their films. The terms of these deals have gotten worse and few filmmakers end up satisfied.

WELCOME TO THE NEW WORLD OF DISTRIBUTION

by Peter Broderick

(First appeared in indieWIRE, September 16 & 17, 2008)

Of the 5,000 films submitted to Sundance each year — generally with budgets under \$10 million — maybe 100 of them got a U.S. theatrical release three years ago. And it used to be that 20 of those would make money. Now maybe five do. That's one-tenth of 1%. Put another way, if you decide to make a movie budgeted under \$10 million on your own tomorrow, you have a 99.9% chance of failure

FIRST PERSON

Film Department's Mark Gill: "Yes, The Sky Really Is Falling."

LA FILM FESTIVAL (June 22, 2008)

These provide a sobering reality check on the traditional release methods of films. Jonathan Dorfman commented at SPAA yesterday that he felt there were 3 types of films that would survive as "theatrical" experiences:

- 1) Family Films
- 2) Event Films
- 3) Very specific niche market films – usually targeted to older audiences

Plus he raised the question – even if you could target a 21 year old to want to see your movie, do they go to see it in the cinema or are they just as happy to watch it on their PSP?

This may mean that the 3rd type of film falls well into the traditional Australian film mould – but what about the other films we want to make. If the theatrical market isn't the only place for people to consume their film-fixes, why hold this up as a bench-mark of 'experience' for producers. Surely it would make more sense to asses on financial outcomes, numbers of people who saw the film (on all platforms) and not force producers and distributors into a raised exhibition release patterns just so as to tick a box for their next application. Also – does the release pattern of any film really quantify how much a producer might have learnt in financing and production?

RE: INDIVISION OR SIMILAR

I think the Indivision initiative – for all it's highs and lows – set out to try something new and different – and it was an exciting opportunity to make films at a different budget level and without the usual requirements of upfront market commitments (if funded via the traditional FFC models)

I think in the end, it strayed away from what it could have been – which could have been more like the Warp X initiatives in the UK or the Danish 'Dogme' films – and instead, fell back into the conservative story telling mould. However – the exciting thing was that the AFC tried and it did create some great films over that period.

I would love to see an allowance for an exciting and new initiative to fill its place.

RE: SHORT FILM FUNDING

I have produced 3 short films:

- TULIP (1997) – with the assistance of the NSW FTO YFF
- STATIC (1998) – totally privately funded
- ROUNDABOUT (2002) – shot with private funding and post produced with assistance from the then AFC.

I feel it's interesting to note, that the two films with government funding went on to win awards here and abroad, and TULIP, although made 10 years ago now, is still being screened. The totally privately funded film did not reach such a wide festival audience, but did however launch the director's career and he now directs high end TVC campaigns out of the US.

Both have merit for their approaches and their outcomes – but I am certain that the privately funded one would not have existed without the various applications that we had put together (although unsuccessfully) via the AFC. It taught us how to budget properly and how to pitch the film and while it didn't fall into the AFC "yes" pile, it made us better filmmakers because of it. Even a non-funded outcome was a positive one for us in this case.

RE: ENTERPRISE v's PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

I feel that the ideas behind these two options could be quite interesting – and could really empower producers – giving them back the control as to what they develop and when.

However I also wonder if the decision makers, in coming up with the caps (and the yet to be determined sliding scale) have looked into how much it actually costs producers to run production companies. Through the SBVP applications of late, they would have a great resource for this.

I wonder also if this is where my 'skirt will get caught' – despite just making it to the experienced side of the wall, will I be considered so 'low' on the experience food chain that the enterprise allocation for my level will not cover the development needs of running a viable production company. I'm keen to hear more about the enterprise funding decisions will be made and the key performance indicators of success.

RE: TRAVEL GRANTS

It is mentioned that these will not be available for producers who access the enterprise program, but will these still be available for producers who go for development project by project? I'm assuming this will be covered in the marketing guidelines yet to be released.

Thanks,

Louise Smith
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