

Comment on Stage 2 of Screen Australia's review of operations from Judith McCann

Dear Screen Australia

I trust that is submission from offshore is welcome given it is being made by an industry professional with a direct experience of both the Marketing Support and Promotion and the Research and Statistics services that have been operating under the former Australian Film Commission (AFC) and now are an integral part of the new Screen Australia.

My Credentials in Making this Submission

I have had the opportunity to observe, and indeed the benefit from, both divisions in varying degrees over the past 22 years. My first encounter was in 1987 as Deputy Director of Telefilm Canada when I met with the AFC senior executives and was introduced to the scope of the marketing and research being then undertaken.

In the intervening years, that professional engagement has involved:

- 1989-94 as head of the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC), the sharing of an elevator at Cannes with offices in the same building, regular joint meetings with co-producing partners-in-common executives or at SPAA conferences or those in New Zealand. Throughout this time, the marketing skills and research base were a source of constant admiration. Few others could either afford it or were able (from my lingering Canadian point of view) to generate national industry buy-in.
- 1994-1999 as head of the South Australian Film Corporation (SAFC), the direct benefit that flowed to South Australia – a then relatively minor player in the national profile – from both Marketing and Research was highly professional and collaborative.
- 1999-2004 as a Canada-based consultant I accessed Get The Picture and National Production Survey regularly working with Canadian filmmakers seeking introductions to Australian potential co-producers. Also in Cannes in 2001 I had direct experience working with an Australian filmmaker seeking market attachments.
- 2004 to current as head of Film New Zealand I have first-hand knowledge of the marketing and research capabilities, plus the added perspective of seeing the competitive advantage these deliver.

So on to more specific comments.

Marketing Support and Promotion

Based on my six years at the SAFC, the former AFC/now Screen Australia's support provided a critically-important entry-door for Australian films to generate profile internationally through festivals and 'home' for all Australians from first-timers to veterans at high-pressured markets/festivals such as Cannes.

Some examples from memory:

- Support for South Australian features in official selection at Cannes from two directed by Rolf de Heer in competition to the 'filmed in SA' Siam Sunset at Semaine de la Critique.
- The very fact that AFC was supporting 'Dance Me To My Song' in competition enabled me to persuade the South Australian Government to underwrite the costs associated with the film's disabled lead/writer Heather Rose and her carers to be there (not to mention the NZFC assisting Kiwi actress Rena Owen).
- Festival programmers were brought to Adelaide to screen productions and meet the filmmakers. Though not always successful in eliciting official selection, the AFC's support in ensuring the programmers were there lifted South Australia's profile as a centre for independent filmmaking with lasting impact.

More recently, I have from a New Zealand perspective observed with admiration how Australia has generated a most impressive collective promotion involving the federal agencies, state agencies and Ausfilm with a unified message and truly powerful presence. At Cannes, you do the best party (inspired, it seems to me, by how New Zealand used to do it!) and while the global recession may raise questions about it, the recession seems to have no impact on 'G'Day USA' as another (Kiwi-inspired) annual promotion.

I cannot comment on other specific programmes that are undertaken under the Marketing division. In Canada I did work for the Australian High Commission organising an Australian Film Festival during the Winterlude – focus on Australia of all things with ice sculptures of the Man from Snowy River – in Ottawa the national capital. Though that 2001 event was organised privately, I do know that the High Commission valued access to Australian films for other screenings.

It is crucial in my long experience that the national agency provides leadership, plus a supportive environment on the ground at international festivals and markets. And it is especially hard for filmmakers who have never been there before, so the value of market familiarisation cannot be dismissed.

Canada does it; New Zealand does it extremely well at Cannes with work spaces for producers (admittedly fewer than those attending from Australia – take the entire residence on La Croisette).

It's a global business, so keep up the team's skills, commitment and environment that market Australia (not the movie – others are doing that) to the world of screen!

Research and Statistics

What can I say except don't all of us who work in other countries wish we had this resource at our finger tips? It is historical, analytical and current! It gives Screen Australia the 'Wow' factor.

The research and statistical analysis that the AFC developed and now resides at Screen Australia is, I believe, a national treasure. It works in partnership with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to generate pertinent data that is a hugely valuable reference and performance measurement point for Government, industry and indeed Screen Australia itself.

Some personal comments from my professional experience:

- National Production Survey: I have first hand experience at the SAFC of the rigour with which this is conducted and cross-checked, especially on state expenditures by inter-state productions. The addition of PDV income has enriched this as a performance tracking and marketing tool. AND it is available within 6 months so the information is very current! (New Zealand's annual statistical survey is 18 months behind.) Each issue is one that I read – even here in New Zealand – attentively: it gives me a sense of how Australia is doing in comparison to New Zealand, especially in location attraction business, and it links me back into an industry in which I was involved and still care about.
- Get the Picture: keep this alive, well and vibrant. As a consultant, it proved to be a world class mine of information that was reliable and to an extremely high standard. Its robustness may be hampered by the absence of an annual ABS survey of the industry (which New Zealand now has) – this is something that if addressed would further enrich the Get The Picture's comprehensiveness.
- Research and stats team expertise is accessible and very efficient: again as a consultant I have had reason to seek further analysis or verification of conclusion reached in my own analysis, and on every occasion the team (i.e. Rosemary Curtis) responded promptly and with authority including when necessary having double-checked with the ABS. This level of service and authenticity is light years above what the most high-priced global consultants such as PwC can ever aspire to!!

Plus as now part of the national consolidated agency Screen Australia, this research and statistical service can be fast, efficient and pull no punches. The data speaks for itself, and so reinforces the value of having a central national/federal agency – it delivers both financial assistance to the industry and has the capacity to monitor performance and measure results within amazingly minimal time frames.

Conclusion

The Stage 2 Review: Terms of Reference document states that “a major objective will be to streamline organisational arrangements to ensure that moneys are spent on programs rather than administration”. However, it does not provide any financial information.

But as someone from offshore, those considerations are probably beyond my scope. I am not directly affected by these any longer.

However, as one who has experienced the strength of Australia's marketing directly and

now as a competitor in the case of locations driven production, and as one who access the statistical analysis to see how that Australia and now competitor is doing, it seems to me that these two divisions should be considered central administrative services for Screen Australia.

Finally, I note that “submissions may be published on Screen Australia’s website”. I am therefore sending this under my own name as this is not an official submission from Film New Zealand, but rather as a personal submission prompted by my professional involvement and experience with these two services.

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute and all the very best in sustaining the richness Screen Australia is inheriting.

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