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Response from Sydney Film Festival to Screen Australia's Draft Program Guidelines 2008/09

The Sydney Film Festival welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the public consultation process being undertaken by Screen Australia.

Sydney Film Festival – a gateway to the best in film

Sydney Film Festival is Sydney and New South Wales' pre-eminent showcase for contemporary cinema from Australia and around the world. Established in 1954, Sydney Film Festival is a major cultural event on the city's social cultural calendar and one of the world's longest running film festivals. We have been extending our reach to audiences in regional centres with the Travelling Film Festival since 1974 with screenings and events in regional New South Wales, Queensland and the Northern Territory.

Audience engagement

The Sydney Film Festival plays an active role in connecting Australian films and the film industry with audiences and provides a context for the discovery, exposure, marketing and promotion of emerging and established filmmakers both locally and internationally. Like many of our peer organisations funded under Screen Australia's Industry and Cultural Development Program, audience and industry development are at the core of our business.

Given our commitment to both, we welcome that one of the priorities expressed in the Statement of Intent addresses 'the need for industry to connect with the audience' and acknowledge that this priority is subsequently captured in various funding criteria presented in the Draft Program Guidelines.

However, we are concerned that in formulating the Development and Production Financing guidelines separately from the Marketing and Promotions guidelines, the policy process embodies the split between content and audiences that the statements of Expectations and Intent otherwise seek to address and risks maintaining the perceived status quo (eg. that Australian films need to connect better and more widely with audiences). Also, this approach does not reflect the priority in the Statement of Expectations that Screen Australia 'review the balance between production, financing, marketing and distribution'. Without all parts of the puzzle, that balance cannot be ascertained. From where we sit, it is difficult to see during the stages of consultation and the gathering of responses if, for example, an appropriate level of consideration and funding is being provided for marketing and distribution. And while the production environment and outcomes may be improved by the new models, will the films be supported to make it in the marketplace?

The Draft Program Guidelines also appear to be counter to another significant priority in the Statement of Expectations: 'foster innovation both in content creation and in building sustainable screen business across the audiovisual sector to improve engagement with new technologies and audiences; to develop creative talent and create new business models'. The ever-expanding range of platforms and delivery modes via screens 3 (computer) and 4 (mobile devices) has significant current and future impacts not only on the ways in which content traditionally produced for screens 1 (cinema) and 2 (television) find audiences and revenue streams, but also on the additional content that needs to be produced to fully explore these platforms. We now live in an age where the way people communicate has been transformed (online social networks etc.) and the way moving image content is digested is constantly evolving. It is also, and significantly, an age when audiences are becoming content producers. These new

and exciting challenges must be tackled with a healthy regard for the fact that what was once a discernable and linear pathway ie. production through to exhibition, is now a complex and multifaceted landscape. In this respect, we would suggest that the 'released on 10 screens' qualifier belongs to an outmoded distribution/exhibition model.

Recommendation: SFF recommends that all future policy development consider the balance between production, financing, marketing and distribution simultaneously.

Emerging sector and short drama

Throughout the course of our 56 year history, Sydney Film Festival has played a vital role in establishing the profiles of some of Australia's greatest filmmakers, and many of our patrons – Gillian Armstrong, Cate Blanchett, Jane Campion, Nicole Kidman, Baz Luhrmann, Dr. George Miller, Phillip Noyce, Sam Neill, and Hugo Weaving – now lend us their support in recognition of the festival's impact on their early careers. Through both our screening programs and awards for Australian short films, we provide a powerful context in which emerging filmmakers encounter audiences for their work, often for the first time. In turn, the festival benefits from presenting the content they produce – lyrical, challenging, imaginative, entertaining, surprising, direct.

In our 2008 edition, Sydney Film Festival screened 10 Australian dramatic features and 10 TV-length or longer docos (excluding those nominated for the Dendy Awards for Australian Short Films). This represented:

- 10 Australian directors of dramatic features (6 directors had not previously directed feature-length films) and 10 Australian producers of dramatic features (4 producers had not previously produced feature-length films)
- 10 Australian directors of TV-length or longer documentaries (3 had not previously directed TV-length or longer docos) and 16 Australian documentary producers (11 were co-producers and all had previously produced at least one TV-length or longer docos)

It is worth noting that the two Australian features that participated in our inaugural Official Competition were both produced by first time feature-length producers and one was directed by a first time feature-length director. *Three Blind Mice* and *The Square* competed with international films by directors and producers with a wide range of experience levels, and *Three Blind Mice* received a commendation in this line-up from the high-level international jury who judged the inaugural Sydney Film Prize.

Australian films are given prominent position within the festival, and, consistent with recent national survey results from one of Screen Australia's predecessor organisations (Film Finance Corporation), Australian films proved very popular with audiences, with feature films *Men's Group* and *Son of a Lion*; documentaries *Salute*, *River of No Return*, *Glass: a portrait of Philip in twelve parts* and *Playing in the Shadows*, and short films *Wanja* and *My Rabbit Hoppy* amongst the top audience rated films at the festival.

The festival also presents an awards program for Australian short films. We are currently reviewing the structure of these Awards in light of changing audience patterns however we are committed to their continuation. These awards (and the attached prize money) have launched or aided the careers of many filmmakers and the winners of the Best Short Fiction and Best Short Animation qualify for Academy Award consideration. The awards recognize that short films provide a measurable development pathway to feature film production, and just as importantly, recognise that creatively the short is also a form unto itself, something that is recognized by specialized peer international festivals such as Clermont-Ferrand (France) and Oberhausen (Germany) as well as various A-List international festivals.

We note with interest that the Statement of Expectations commits Screen Australia 'to ensure any efficiency gains from the merger are reinvested into support for the industry, including support for documentary film makers and first-time filmmakers'. We consider that the proposed program as we understand it from the publicly available documents provides limited gateways for emerging filmmakers and no gateway for dramatic short film funding and that this is counter to the intent expressed in the Statement of Expectations.

Recommendation: SFF recommends that the views of the emerging sector and their responses to the draft guidelines be given due consideration, and that the short dramatic films be provided with a funding gateway.

Finally, we are concerned that the eligibility criteria defining experience levels for directors and writers posits Cannes, Venice, Berlin and Sundance as 'recognised film festivals'. Firstly it is puzzling that Australian film festivals – particularly Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Adelaide international festivals – are not considered substantial enough to qualify a filmmaker as experienced given that we are the festivals that connect their films to Australian audiences. Secondly it is puzzling that other international festivals such as Toronto, Pusan and Hong Kong are not considered in this list, given Toronto's powerful (informal) North American marketplace and the blossoming Asia-region opportunities in the screen sector.

Recommendation: SFF recommends that the recognised festivals are reviewed and that due consideration is given to the festivals that connect Australian films with Australian audiences.

We look forward to the final guidelines and to future updates and consultation on the Industry and Cultural Development Guidelines.

Virginia Gordon (President, Sydney Film Festival)
Clare Stewart (Festival Director, Sydney Film Festival)

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Statement of Expectations by the Minister for Environment, Heritage and the Arts for Screen Australia
[Screen Australia's] Statement of Intent 2008/09 in response to the Minister's Statement of Expectations
[Screen Australia's] Draft Program Guidelines 2008/09