

## A RESPONSE TO SCREEN AUSTRALIA'S DRAFT GUIDELINES

Friday November 11 2008

We are writing in response to the Draft Program Guidelines of Screen Australia, the Commonwealth Government's new screen agency replacing the Australian Film Commission, Film Australia and the Film Finance Corporation.

While we read with great interest the feedback of interested parties, we would like to comment specifically on the absence of development and production funds for less experienced or cross-disciplinary practitioners seeking federal financing for screen based projects. The drafted guidelines, as they stand, threaten to create a vast gap between those practitioners that Screen Australia deem to be 'experienced' or 'highly experienced' - who will have access within these guidelines to numerous avenues of funding and support both through the development of business, slate and individual production finances - and those filmmakers who fall outside of these restrictive guidelines. While we applaud the long term financing of production companies which will see businesses developing and fostering projects, practitioners and sustainable businesses, the guidelines threaten to be a short term solution, moving the Australian film industry toward a business-oriented, commercially driven model, without the longer term investment in the creative development of the industry.

To state clearly:

Filmmaking is the business of creativity. It is short sighted to foster and develop the building of business models without providing long-term development of the creativity that gives cause to those businesses and this industry in the first place.

In particular, there are key oversights or omissions within these draft guidelines that threaten to create a significant gap between filmmakers currently positioned as 'experienced' or 'highly experienced' and those filmmakers with credits and achievements that fall outside of these eligibility requirements for both the *development* and *production* of feature, documentary and television projects. These producers and directors would include those with notable and quantifiable success as short filmmakers, those making a cross over from documentary to feature or from feature to documentary, those who have been exemplary in the world of advertising or music videos, or those filmmakers coming from a cross-disciplinary background.

The exclusion of practitioners who fall outside of these restrictions will serve only to cement in place those producers and directors who are, at this time, established and create an unbridgeable divide for less experienced producers and directors to move to a position where they will, in the future, be eligible for funds, not to mention to allow a natural generational change within the industry.

The proposed strict separation of applicants without consideration of more lateral assessments of experience, achievement or innovation is compounded by the absence of development and production of short films.

A clear oversight of this development approach is the possibility of creating, fostering and supporting *generational development*; that is, the fostering of teams of filmmakers with equivalent experience who will closely support, develop and nurture concurrent advances in the production of films. Instead, much of the emphasis will now be placed onto a very small group of qualified producers who would have overwhelming influence in creating careers through the support or not of less experienced individuals (provided their business model allowed room for such development), while also resisting the very practical temptation to invest their allocated funding solely into their own slates, business development, brands, and individual careers.

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The Australian film industry and, indeed, most major non-studio filmmaking industries have been, in part, invigorated, reinvented or inspired by the risks and energy of filmmakers whose only 'experience' is often exceptional short films or documentaries, remarkable scripts, or a grasp of the ways that new technologies can be used for cinematic storytelling, and, most of all, a stubborn and indefatigable desire to make film, whatever the cost. Now, the proposed minimal support made available through federal funding is no longer available to inexperienced, younger or cross-disciplinary filmmakers. Indeed, these changes are being proposed within a broader Australian culture that does not, it seems fair to say, actively encourage, value or promote long term creative or intellectual endeavour (in science and art as much as film) through philanthropic or direct investment that might provide a real alternative to this funding and, which, these guidelines seem to assume must be available to those filmmakers rendered ineligible by the draft guidelines.

As suggested by Richard Lowenstein in his comments dated Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> November, it takes little thought to consider the state of the contemporary Australian film industry and the experienced and highly experienced practitioners who primarily sustain it, had these restrictions been in place in any one of the recent decades.

These drafted guidelines have an enormous potential to adversely affect the creative growth of industry in the long term. It is our view that these new proposed guidelines must have a broader scope to ensure that our federal film agency can continue to foster and develop creative talent as much as it can consolidate and strengthen the commercial viability and sustainability of the industry. We suggest these should be in the following areas:

- Low Budget Independent Feature film financing, in which the AFC's IndiVision model is remodelled to ensure that it is able to support innovation, inventiveness and comparative inexperience without the commercial imperatives, market based modelling or marquee attachments that are halting genuine independent cinema in Australia. As national film cultures worldwide have shown, the absence of these restrictions by no means limits audiences, but, instead, youth, energy and innovation are likely to generate audiences within a national and international context. These low budget models would be necessarily modelled on innovation funds in which it is recognised that these funds are provided in addition to the mainstream funding proposed in the form of support of 'experienced' or 'highly experienced' practitioners, and long term investments in production company slates by Screen Australia.

- Comprehensive post-production funding for Independent filmmakers who have independently generated feature length films for festival, market or commercial distribution but are unable to reach the appropriate marketplace due to the prohibitive costs of releasing and marketing a film. These funds should particularly emphasise investment in the marketing and promotion of independently financed films.
- A reduction in the number of broadcast credits for documentary development. The current guidelines require three broadcast credits to be eligible for development funds. This emphasis on 'experience' as valued by broadcast credits means that many of the emerging documentary filmmakers who have created one or two successful films, are ineligible under the current guidelines. There are numerous documentary filmmakers without broadcast credits, including some of the undersigned, who, have received development funds for documentaries that have, through their access to story, innovation, or excellence, received numerous awards and had successful broadcast, festival and DVD releases. Under these draft guidelines, these teams and individuals would not have been eligible.
- Short film production and post production funding stream, in which funds are committed to the ongoing development of individual and team talent through the proven ground of short film production. It is important to note that there is, currently strong awareness and interest in the talent being demonstrated within Australian short film production. We are seeing short filmmakers represented at the highest levels – Cannes, Venice, Berlin, the Academy Awards, Sundance – and many of our new generation of filmmakers are directing their first films as a direct consequence of the interest and excitement generated by their short form storytelling. To halt the investment in such a strong and established conduit to feature filmmaking and to film experience seems short sighted and illogical to say the least. We can only wonder what would have happened to the careers of our finest filmmakers without the demonstration of their talent in a subsidised short film.

We look forward to the revision of the guidelines after the consultation period.

Regards,

Rhys Graham – dir: *Love This Time*, *Skin*, *Words from the City*, co-author *Short Site: Recent Australian Short Film*

Natasha Gadd – dir: *Muscle*, *Words from the City*

Philippa Campey – prod: *Clara*; *Words from the City*; *Bastardy*; *The Fibros and the Silvertails*

Glendyn Ivin – dir: *Crackerbag*, *The Last Ride*

Emma Crimmings – dir: *Man Made: The Story of Two Men & A Baby*, prod/dir: *Two Men & Two Babies*; *Not Quite Art*, co-author *Short Site: Recent Australian Short Film*

Polly Staniford – dir: *Little Wings*, prod: *Crossbow*, *Netherland Dwarf*

Vincent Giarusso – dir: *Mallboy*

Amiel Courtin-Wilson – dir: *Bastardy*, *Chasing Buddha*, *On the Other Ocean*, *Adolescent*

Amy Gebhardt – dir: *Walnut*, *Look Sharp*, *Pleasance*, *Heart*

Dustin Feneley – dir: *Snow*, *Eskimo Kiss*, *Hawker*