

“Does Australian Screen & TV reflect our country’s culture in the 21st century?”

Comments on the 2008 Screen Australia Draft guidelines covering development support, production financing and Indigenous programs

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With the initiation of its work to nurture, support and assist in funding future works in Australian Film, TV and other new formats, Screen Australia is at an important crossroads as to which direction it will guide the entertainment industry in the development and the presentation of the national identity of Australia in the 21st century. It can longer be denied that Australia’s future is integrally tied with Asia. Whether the United States is still the world’s most powerful and influential power will continue to be debated, but the emergence of China, India and other Asian countries onto the world stage in recent decades can no longer be ignored.

Australia has gone through the turbulent eras of isolation, the White Australia Policy, multiculturalism, aboriginal reconciliation and is still a society struggling with its identity. What are its values that set it apart from other cultures and countries? On the other hand, what are those Aussie attributes that unite it with every other culture on this planet? With the increasing changes in the Australian population make-up during the last century, this country is no longer the exclusive arena of Anglo-Saxons.

In our entertainment industry, however, the “Australian” world being presented to national and international audiences is often still “mono-cultural” and very conservative, to say the least. The main reason for this is very possibly the fact that all major decision makers, producers, directors and writers in the industry are Caucasian. The possibility of non-white decision makers and artistic practitioners having a serious impact on the products produced is currently non-existent.

Is Australia going to continue on this road of producing work that propagate the “myth” that Australia is still the way people of the last generations remember it or is it going to move forward? It is very sad to note in the Sun-Herald article entitled “Duds rule box office” (2 November 2008 by Christine Sams) that four of this year’s critically acclaimed Australian films (*The Black Balloon*, *Unfinished Sky*, *The Jammed* and *The Square*) did not make even half the money that a mediocre American picture (*Step Brothers*) did at the Australian box office. Most locally made films didn’t even make back more than the budget spent to make the films. Even more ironically, that seems to be an accepted fact within the industry and the funding organisations. There needs to be a serious re-evaluation of the companies and people who have been regularly receiving government funding for their projects, which obviously not many people even in Australia want to pay money to see. New visionary directors, new captivating stories, and new exciting actors are desperately needed to resuscitate the industry.

At this vital stage of national change and evolution, Screen Australia must take the lead to ensure an opening of opportunities for more producers, directors, writers and actors. This may start with the following initiatives:

1. That funding application requirements and their assessment criteria are set up so that proposed projects, which include key decision makers and artists from varied cultural backgrounds, “will be viewed favourably.” One of the currently proposed assessment criteria is “a successful track record of the producer, writer and director.” This must be re-examined to see if the producer is getting funding only because he knows how to tick all the right boxes on the application form and is just producing product that some critics like, but is attracting minimal business at the box office.
2. That in the funding for project-by-project programs, the category of “Casting” should include the following:
 - A. That the casting briefs and audition scripts be made available to all talent agents (registered with the Dept of Fair Trading and with the MEAA) in the city where the casting is being held. This will allow the possibility that more of the 95% of Australian Actors who are out of work will have a chance to be submitted by their agents for consideration for various roles in a project. This will begin to break the hold that the under 5% of actors and their agents have on all the major roles in Australian projects. In the current situation, many agents do not get the briefs for the principal, main or even supporting characters in a major Australian project. They only get the minor or featured extra characters left over – the “scraps” after all the major roles have been decided.
 - B. That an “open casting” call be held for the major roles in a film and TV project. This call is open to financial MEAA members who were not seen by appointment by the casting director. This will be for a specified number of hours (minimum 4) on a first come first serve basis at a central location in the city where the main casting is held. The call should be advertised on the MEAA and Screen Australia websites at least one week before the audition date. Each actor who makes it into the allotted audition time will have the opportunity to rehearse the audition scene at least once with the casting director and then have his audition put down on tape. Screen Australia must stipulate that funds for such a casting session must be a part of the budget of any project submitted for its consideration.

3. That free professional workshops and master classes be held for

- A. Non-Anglo background Producers, Directors, Writers to gain in-depth practical knowledge of how Australian film and TV industry runs and how to become a part of it – how to put together projects that are creative and satisfy the needs of the funding bodies, etc.
- B. Non-Anglo background Actors to gain more professional training on how to survive and excel in the industry. In the acting arena, for example, many currently in the industry complain that there are not enough or there are NO really good Asian or Aboriginal actors, and that is why there are no good roles for them. What a bunch of nonsense! It may take a bit more effort to find them, but the very good Asian or Aboriginal actors are out there. And if there aren't enough good actors from these cultural backgrounds, what is the industry doing to help develop more of them?

In the overview section of “Screen Australia’s Production Financing Programs,” there are repeated pronouncements that it “aims to invest in a range of audience-engaging and culturally relevant programs,” and that it “will value excellence, audience engagement and Australian cultural content across all platforms.” What is Australia’s cultural make-up for the 21st century? What place will Australian film, TV and other media have in shaping that and in representing that to our own people and to the world?

Screen Australia must take the lead in not only making it easier for the established creative artists of old to produce new work, but also more importantly initiative and carry through processes which assist new artists from different cultural backgrounds to tell their versions of Australian stories. This will not happen by osmosis or by natural evolution; it necessitates progressive action on the part of governmental funding bodies such as Screen Australia. If we are trying to achieve a more diverse crop of films and TV projects which potentially will reach out to more audiences, then we need to invest in that process and make it happen.

My suggestions are only very beginning, but practical steps in the process. This, however, is urgently the time to begin, or else, we’ll have to wait until Screen Australia becomes so entrenched in its bureaucratic ways that it would have to be abolished and a “Screen Australia 2” would have to be formed. By that time, all the other major players in the entertainment industry would have moved off-shore to China, India or the Americas, and the only Australian programming on TV would probably be the evening news.

Cc: Mr. Nathan Rees, NSW Premier and Minister for the Arts
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The Hon. Peter Garrett AM MP, Federal Minister for the Arts
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