



## RESPONSE TO SCREEN AUSTRALIA

Marketing Support & Promotion, and Research & Statistics

Australian Directors Guild (ADG) FEBRUARY 18th 2008.

### **OVERVIEW:**

Once again the ADG welcomes the opportunity to comment on Stage two of the industry consultation for Screen Australia programs. Our response is two-pronged, a) broadly in relation to marketing support for filmmakers and promotion of specific Australian projects as well as the Research and Statistics programs/functions previously run by AFC and b) in relation to the direct funding relationship, which the ADG has had for over ten years with the AFC, most recently through the ICD, in order to make a significant contribution to screen culture and professional development in Australia.

We are concerned that the review papers do not raise any policy objectives regarding the programs that were previously part of the AFC. The programs listed in this review have all been developed over many years of research and industry consultation; and as such have shown to be valuable to filmmakers and industry stakeholders such as our organisation. Our initial concern is that many of these programs do not have a direct or apparent return to film/screen/organisations as revenue streams, and in a review process that is mainly looking for results-based programs with clear financial considerations, could be considered outside of core objectives and be overlooked.

We would like to stress that many of these programs under review have afforded vital steps in supporting filmmakers in their careers and their work. Any changes to these programs would have to be carefully considered in light of changes or gains made in other programs of industry assistance.

There are no indications in the review paper of the on-going cost and financing of the marketing support programs, so what is the policy here? Is the portion of the pie allocated to Marketing Support & Promotion, and Research & Statistics going to change?

It's possible that in a leaner Screen Australia there will not be the resources to run these support programs, and we would like an indication on how SA imagines to continue the work done by these programs. Is it through out-sourcing them?

We are concerned that with major staff cutbacks at SA could come reduced attention to necessary detail - certainly in the short term whilst the agency is still under major review. One example could be that with fewer positions and job vacancies there is a drop in marketing, publicity and festivals expertise within the staff of Screen Australia, which could impact on decisions being made.

In the Ministers SOE, he states as a priority that the review process '*examine the balance between support for development, production, marketing and distribution*'. Given the ambitious scope of the stage one consultation and guidelines, we wonder how this stage of marketing and distribution will be financed and implemented by Screen Australia?

The Minister has stated:

*Above all I expect that Screen Australia will be innovative in its approach to funding priorities. It may be that less funding needs to go into production but a stronger emphasis is placed on development at the front end, and, marketing, distribution and exhibition at the back end; and my direct observation is that this is indeed the case.*

If effective and innovative marketing and distribution support is vital to build a commercially sustainable screen production industry that engages with Australian audiences, then we expect the rigour and energy that was invested in stage one of the review will need to be invested here.

One such example could be from August last year when the Minister stated:

*Screen Australia also needs to examine its role in the marketing and distribution arrangements for Australian films. Here we ask: what is the best way to support producers in the selling of their products, both domestically and overseas? One suggestion is that Screen Australia could use its considerable muscle and financial clout to help leverage better deals with distributors and/or exhibitors by co-investing, either selectively or across the board, with commercial distributors and exhibitors. An alternative suggestion worthy of consideration is the concept of repayable distribution loans to a small number of distributors who agree to simultaneous release of an Australian film. This is a model employed with some success in Europe.*

If these models were being considered in August, why aren't they being presented for scrutiny here? We also wonder how these models will sit with the current program guidelines? We don't want to be accused of wanting our cake and eating it too, but clearly the overall balance of ALL the guidelines, including the Terms of Trade, are crucial in evaluating Screen Australia's ability to assist and build the resilience of the screen production industry.

With that in mind, and appreciative of the demands to put together a holistic program that supports industry across so many levels, we have made some brief comments on the current programs. We urge Screen Australia to be open and communicative over the coming months when drafting the guidelines for marketing support and promotion programs; as well as the Research and statistics operations.

## **RESPONSES TO THE MARKETING SUPPORT PROGRAMS:**

We take note that the various structures that support SA's programs are not being reviewed here. However we would applaud all efforts to streamline legal procedures between filmmakers and SA, and in particular legal procedures with and between filmmakers, Screen Australia and other government agencies. We would also like to note that while we support moves to direct money towards programs rather than administration, we would caution against false economies. In this the counsel of previous Managers/executives of the Marketing division could be invaluable.

### **Marketing workshops**

#### **Skills development workshops and networking events for film practitioners**

As written broadly here, this is an area the ADG strongly supports and has expertise to offer - to address the evolving needs of independent filmmakers in skills development and to ensure that workshops adequately target the areas of deficiency in knowledge and experience.

### **Domestic pitching markets**

#### **Events such as MeetMarket at the Australian International Documentary Conference**

We presume this is an area that will grow, as the need to know and understand pitching grows. For what it's worth, we understand that current policy at AFTRS does not support the practice of contests or training in pitching - so there is clearly a question mark here about consistency of federal approaches that requires some research into the effectiveness or otherwise of these programs.

### **International festival liaison**

#### **Hosting of key film festival selectors/directors who travel to Australia each year to meet industry members and view films for potential festival selection.**

The ADG also strongly supports this strategy, and indeed has been in the forefront of international liaison with both Festival directors and selection executives and advisors, and film directors. The ADG is in a strong position to provide useful partnerships with Screen Australia in these endeavors and we believe it is important that this support continues in order to increase the profile of the Australian brand overseas.

### **International festival/market presence**

#### **Coordinating stands and offices at international television markets, and film festivals and markets. Compilation and publication of information for filmmakers about key markets and festivals**

The compilation and publication of information regarding key markets and festivals is vital to the film community. Arguably, co-ordinating stands and offices could be out-sourced, but in previous years the presence of the AFC and govt agencies at key festivals and markets has been important. We would encourage further debate about this.

### **International networking initiatives**

**Facilitating the participation of Australians in international initiatives such as the Producers Network, Rotterdam Lab, co-production events.**

We strongly support this and believe it is crucial for on-going financial sustainability of the industry.

### **Filmmaker travel grants**

**Funding to enable practitioners to attend film festivals in which their work is screening, attend and compete in international pitching forums, and attend international markets with a view to financing films, television and digital media projects.**

It is critical that this support continues for filmmakers both to sell brand Australian overseas and to create further opportunities for the filmmakers to have financially sustainable careers. There may be an opportunity in the context of this review to critically evaluate previous priorities in resourcing these activities. The numbers, expertise and comfort of executives from the agencies traveling to international festivals and markets might be evaluated in relation to the support that is available to practicing creative industry professionals. We need a rationale that might regulate the tendency in the past for generous excess of the former and rigid and uncompromising thrift and exclusion on the other. International documentary, new media and cultural environments should be supported alongside market and 'a-list' feature drama occasions.

### **Support for production of marketing/screening materials**

**Festival Support for projects that have been accepted into key international festivals and are required to produce specific marketing and/or screening materials.**

We believe producing marketing and screening materials is a critical part of presenting and promoting filmmakers work. How support for this is administered can be further discussed. One concern for the ADG would be if support was only available to producers. It maybe of value for writers, directors and creative practitioners to producer/present marketing and screening materials for their work and/or future projects - of vital importance in building their sustainable, on-going careers, especially if they are also traveling internationally to represent the project/production.

**Alternate Distribution Support to completed projects that have attracted the interest of a distributor at post-production or completion and require marketing and/or screening materials to exploit a specific commercial opportunity.**

**Theatrical P&A Marketing Support (on a case-by-case basis) for completed drama and documentary projects that have a theatrical distributor attached, and are looking to enhance their proposed theatrical release.**

We would like to see this support continue, and especially in the case of low-budget productions it is a crucial program to enable these projects to reach an audience. Distributors of low-budget films tend to rely on the filmmakers to cover many of the costs which would often be paid for by mainstream distributors. Given the limited resources of independent filmmakers, this can restrict the

potential to maximise distribution reach in Australia. If the low-budget sector is going to get bigger, then Alternate Distribution Support is going to be even more important.

### **Regional Digital Screen Network**

#### **Stage One (concludes mid '09): Trial network of digital cinemas in regional Australia**

We believe that a network of digital cinemas is very important, and the way of the future in Australian theatrical distribution. Perhaps this network could be better promoted to those who create screen content, and enabled to encourage programming from outside SA. One suggestion we would propose is that the ADG could present the films from our annual Awards, and tour these with some of the filmmakers to regional areas, either in person or in a virtual world. Another program could see filmmakers present screenings on themes, cultural issues or simply films that have broad entertainment value. There is a rich and diverse back catalogue of Australian films within the NFSA, and with new technology, many of these gems can now reach into areas that have previously missed the opportunity to see Australian films on the big screen. It also affords filmmakers and the industry the occasion to broaden the feedback and audience response they receive - often perceived as "inner-city" and out of touch with the rest of Australia.

When talking about audiences for "Australia", Michael Bodey reported that: *the film attracted major audiences in regional Australia*, and in answer to the critical media reports, one regional cinema manager said: *"If the industry sees this as a failure, send us more failures,"*.

Clearly this is an area for discussion and the ADG would welcome the opportunity to have further dialogue on this initiative at a later stage.

### **SCHOOL SCREEN**

#### **(is not mentioned in the Stage 2 review document - has been moved to NFSA)**

This is an absolutely critical program, and along the lines of the ADG proposed "Australian films in Schools" initiative. Clearly something the ADG is well positioned to be involved in as partners with NFSA, and/or take on if outsourced. See notes re Digital Learning.

### **Embassy Roadshow**

#### **Programming Australian film festivals and screenings at Australian embassies and consulates overseas. (A program funded by the Australia International Cultural Council and delivered in partnership with DFAT.)**

ADG would support this as it provides excellent opportunities for filmmakers and promotes Brand Australia. The roadshows could be further developed and expanded to provide the opportunity for Australian filmmakers to present, discuss their work and network with peers in these territories, which could in turn lead to opportunities in co-productions.

## **International Cultural Programs and Promotions**

### **Support for international cultural events with a focus on Australian film. Includes Australia International Cultural program collaborations plus events such as ‘G’day USA’**

As above. (ADG would support this as it provides excellent opportunities for filmmakers and promotes Brand Australia. The roadshows could be further developed and expanded to provide the opportunity for Australian filmmakers to present, discuss their work and network with peers in these territories, which could in turn lead to opportunities in co-productions.)

## **Sales (Domestic and International)**

### **Worldwide distribution service for National Interest Program and Making History Initiative titles as well as selected independently produced documentaries (international sales handled by ABC).**

Screen Australia here is talking about its own commissioned content, and questioning whether marketing support for this should develop in some sense as it has in the past with Film Australia marketing initiatives. Whereas, there is an opportunity, now that philosophical resistance to an agency involvement in this area has been overcome, to think much more expansively and strategically about what we might mean by ‘marketing’. There is an opportunity here to initiate substantive generational change in the local and international reception of Australian documentary film culture. If Screen Australia is committed to taking full advantage of the renewal and focus inherent in the new structures of industry support, this is one area where really useful, long term change could be made.

We recommend further consultation with the independent filmmaking community to fully assess the benefits and opportunities this service provides.

## **Promotion**

### **Promotion and publicity support for the domestic release of titles made under National Interest Program and Making History Initiative Library**

We refer to the same notes as above, and recommend further consultation with the independent filmmaking community to fully assess the benefits and opportunities this service provides.

### **Sales of film footage and stills from Screen Australia’s archives (archives of the predecessor agency Film Australia and titles commissioned since July 2008 by Screen Australia)**

We urge SA to hold further consultation regarding this, as we are concerned about any rights issues for filmmakers, in particular regarding the use of their previous work(s).

## **Digital Learning**

**The online gateway to educational resources from Screen Australia's archives comprising downloadable video clips accompanied by educational resource sheets, which can be searched via curriculum, topic or keyword.**

This has been an extremely successful program that is strongly supported by ADG, not only because it is entirely consistent with the ADG desire and projects seeking to encourage awareness of Australian film culture in educational environments, but also because it offers the opportunity to develop imaginative curatorial projects in new media forms imaginatively deploying the often radically undervalued heritage of Australian moving image culture, a resource that is still often shrouded in ignorance even, sadly, among our own film and television industries. What would be achieved by liquidating this, apart from encouraging another opportunity for American moving image resources to dominate our histories?

As this is a resource mainly for teachers, one wonders how it works with School Screen, now being managed by the NFSA? There is probably an argument that there is some duplication here? As with School Screen, the ADG could be actively involved in this program.

## **Industry and Cultural Development funding programs**

**Events & Activities Fund (includes festivals, awards, conferences, industry guild activities, publications and the Screen Resource Organisations\*); National Touring Fund; New Projects Fund; and Interactive Media Fund.**

***\*Screen Resource Organisations – existing arrangements continue until the end of 2009.***

***Specific consultations will take place with these organisations and other interested parties in early 2009 to determine arrangements post 2009.***

The relationship that ADG has had with the Australian Film Commission has been one of longevity, strength and success. Over the last ten years we have appreciated the funding relationship and it has enabled us to run numerous stand out events and programs as a result of on-going (albeit re-applied for each year) financial support from the AFC. Through ICD and other funding we have successfully run conferences, awards, national events, mentorship & script development initiatives as well as other programs that extends skills and understanding of directing and bring the independent industry as a whole together.

As an organization we have been invited by Screen Australia to apply to ICD for 09/10 under the existing guidelines. It is therefore difficult for us to know how to helpfully and relevantly respond here, not knowing what, if any changes are genuinely being proposed in the short or long term. The ADG would like to request further consultation in this regard.

## Research and Statistics

ADG has always been impressed by this area of the (previous) AFC, and have found the resource of data extremely useful. We have used these resources to inform and compare ourselves to other directors guilds around the world through the umbrella organization of English speaking directors' guilds around the world IAESDO.

Research and policy development (why have we replaced thinking, consulting, evaluation and advocacy, with counting?) is obviously crucial, and the AFC did widely acknowledged, excellent work. The new environment that has been established provides an opportunity to develop more imaginative strategies in addition to maintaining the essential data collection functions. The structure and functions of Research should be designed to align with other Screen Australia policy planning directed toward encouraging informed dialogue with 'stake holders' on one hand and independent policy development on the other. The danger of a 'super agency' is its monopoly; its work will be enhanced if it can facilitate informed critical dialogue. A well resourced and skilled research function can produce this, if it appropriately designed. In the new context there is an opportunity to address perennial problems that have constrained the industry's capacity to reflect on its own practice both creatively and in terms of market intelligence and context. Is it time to take up these kinds of opportunities?

ADG also informs SA on a regular basis about the opinions of their members and we would be well placed to provide on-going and expanded research data and analysis to SA about the industry in the future.