

Comment on Screen Australia draft program guidelines from Ben Chessell

A lot has been said and written so far in response to the Screen Australia draft guidelines for comment. For example, there has been a good deal of response to the detailed proposals regarding development but less has been said about the less detailed proposals regarding production. Should we assume that the philosophy underlying the new development regime will also inform the new approach to production? I agree with a lot of what has been said and I will try to add to the growing body of opinion rather than merely repeat other people's comments.

I can understand why people in influential positions, appointed by a new national administration, would want to make changes to the way in which federal money is spent in development and production of Australian Film and TV. It can't be denied that Australian cinema is not popular with Australian audiences, that box office is decreasing, and when good films like 'The Square' and 'The Jammed' perform so poorly at the box office there is clearly a need for some new thinking.

What I don't understand, however, is the logic that leads those policy makers to want to bias support towards established film makers who must, in some way at least, be a part of the problem to which they are trying to respond. This seems counter intuitive. If you want to achieve change then surely ensuring access for a new generation of practitioners should be a priority, not emphasising and encouraging the access already available to established film makers. I think this is a bigger issue than who pays for short films to be produced and how they do it, its an ideological question.

It's a long told joke that in Australia you're an emerging film maker until you make a film and become a veteran of the industry. There's no doubt that these new proposals will make forging a career more difficult for emerging directors but I think they will make it even harder for emerging writers and producers.

The few development grants I have received in the last few years from both state and federal agencies for the writing of feature scripts have been instrumental in helping me to stay alive and not abandon film making. If making films in Australia is an endurance sport then these critical amounts of money have made the difference between my persisting and quitting and getting a real job. It's not just the money, but also the psychological factor, the external encouragement and validation, that make the difference for a lonely writer. At the time I received the grants one project had an emerging producer attached and the other no producer at all. As of the writing of this response one film has taken significant steps towards being financed and the other has been optioned by a major producer with a significant intended budget. Neither project had previous connections with experienced practitioners or attachments of any significance and both would have been ineligible for support under the proposed development system.

Emerging producers might be able to scrape together the money to get a great short made, working with a director they know perhaps, and win an award or get screened at a

festival. When that director takes their limelight and their feature script to the experienced producer with the slate development cash, what does the producer do?

It seems to me that the proposed guidelines have been formulated, no doubt with the best of intentions, based on an ideological framework rather than a practical approach. It might be better to consult with film makers to determine what the problems actually are than install yet another ideas-based reform of the film funding/financing landscape in Australia. In an industry that has five or ten year lead times on projects, it is difficult to cope with a regulatory regime that changes every two or three. Mel Coombs and others have suggested, in their writings on this site and elsewhere, what some of those practical problems are and even how they might be addressed. It is surely not realistic to assume that the state funding agencies will simply step in to fill any gaps left in the funding landscape by a new Screen Australia policy. Every development/funding regime is going to have strengths and weaknesses but I would suggest that a process of consulting, widely and deeply, with film makers before developing (or at least before finalising) the guidelines might provide a list of actual problems experienced by actual film makers and maybe even the beginnings of some solutions.

Ben Chessell