

DRAFT GUIDELINES

COMMENT

November 14, 2008

My name is Aaran Creece and over the past three years I have been working with multiple Emmy Award-winning director/ animator, Dwayne Labbé, as we seek investment in a slate of live-action films created by Dwayne.

The problems I have with the recently published draft guidelines for the Australian film industry are as follows.

Today most, if not all, distributors and networks have a risk-adverse attitude. It's almost impossible to obtain any form of commitment from a distributor, particularly if you're a filmmaker without a track record or the support of one of our federal or state funding bodies. The market is flooded with content and distributors get to pick and choose what they want.

The Draft Guidelines refer to Market Place Attachments in this way:

Feature films eligible for the Producer Offset, i.e., with a Qualifying Australian Production Expenditure (QAPE) of at least \$1 million, need to have a guarantee of theatrical distribution in Australia in order to apply to Screen Australia for production funding.

Now the new producer is in limbo. The statement above suggests that you're on your own and Screen Australia has no intention of investing or supporting any multi-million-dollar project without someone else coming on board first. Why? Doesn't it have the courage to champion a film on its own?

Screen Australia seems unwilling to support or nurture content outside its cultural remit. It seems that SA sees itself as a *fund manager* and not a *leader* in the development and production of feature films, documentaries and television series. This obsession with market place attachment always puts the pressure back on the creator.

The guidelines also talk about features in this way:

In **features**, the assessment of the level of Screen Australia funding will be flexible, taking into account the Producer Offset, market attachment, the commercial, cultural, artistic and critical merit of the project and its ability to reach a wide audience or a specific targeted audience in Australia. All budget ranges are eligible, with special arrangements applying to low-budget films, which do not qualify for the Producer Offset.

Whatever film this describes I don't want to see it. The statement '*commercial, cultural, artistic and critical merit*' is probably an oxymoron. To suggest that all films comply with this set of rules will instantly place every Australian filmmaker at a disadvantage in the global marketplace.

Australia used to be the buzz word for new and ground-breaking cinema; now it's more like an anchor dragging films down as audiences the world over wise up to our colloquial stories that, frankly, bore them.

Look at the way in which cinema audiences the world over ran away from everything we made in recent times including *Razzle Dazzle*, *December Boys*, *Candy*, and *Macbeth* to name but a few global flops. There are many more. To use sporting vernacular, the scoreboard never lies.

SA must act in a more responsive way to market forces. In effect producers only get a couple of shots at funding during the two or three times a year the Board meets. Hollywood doesn't act this way. Imagine Evolution Entertainment or Lionsgate telling James Wan and Leigh Whannell that they would have to wait six months for the Board to meet before they could assess the '*commercial, cultural, artistic and critical merit*' of *SAW*. It wouldn't happen.

On that note, when they came up with the idea for *Saw* the FFC and AFC rejected it, as it's not an Australian story. This demonstrates the ridiculous nature of how we categorise what is an Australian Film. Surely if a film is made in Australia by Australians from an Australian idea, no matter what the content, it must be an Australian film?

For those filmmakers wishing to access the Producer Off-Set, their task is made that much harder due to the fact that an Australian film needs to be assessed for its content. If it doesn't fit the criteria for a Provisional Certificate then you miss out. This again limits what ideas we make and narrows our field of vision and ability to reach audiences anywhere! Above all it makes investors nervous about putting money into our industry because the filmmakers are forced to leap through a lot of hoops before we get our Provisional Certificate and before we can access the (up to) 40%.

SA seems so obsessed with films being Dinky-Di that many good commercial ideas will never see the light of day because they don't take place in Erskineville or St Kilda.

Solutions? There should be no funding rounds at all. If you have a good idea you should be able to go in at anytime and receive a decision within weeks, not months. There is an all-year-round open door policy, yet the focus is always on the next Board meeting; in other words, filmmaking by committee. I'm not in school anymore and I don't need a gold star for filling out a form, but each year you have to write an essay about your film before you submit it.

With regards to eligibility, many people work in a variety of roles to survive. However there seems to be a belief that you can only make a film by having drama credits alone. Why is it that the guidelines favour those individuals who have been working exclusively in drama or who make short films? Why is it that someone who has made a handful of short films is considered more qualified to make a feature film than someone like me with 21 years experience as a DOP, Director and Producer? I have numerous documentary and non-drama TV series credits but, as I have only made two short films, I barely qualify for the drama strand. Some of the programs I have produced have bigger budgets than the films I'm proposing to make, but because I haven't worked on *All Saints* or *Home & Away* I'm not considered qualified enough to be trusted with a drama budget and production.

The same can be said for my business partner, Dwayne Labbé, who has **28 years** experience working for Warner Bros., Disney and Hanna Barbara as a director, animator and storyboard artist. He doesn't qualify in the drama stakes either. No short films – just countless series and features. Why is there so much emphasis on making short films, when it proves nothing? Obviously having a track record is all well and good, as long as it's the *right* track record.

We must also move away from a culture that deems critical acclaim and awards at film festivals as an important marker for industry success. It's not! Critics don't pay for movies – they get in for free, and film festival success rarely translates into BO returns for our films.

It's just something else to hang on a wall. Do we need a pat on the back from our peers, or do we need to get Aussies excited about our stories again?

At no point do the SA guidelines talk about the needs and wants of the audience, who ultimately have turned up their noses at our movies in droves.

Has anyone asked the Australian public what they want to see? Instead SA is telling us what the audience wants to see, whether they like it or not. In case you haven't done so, go to a multiplex on Saturday night and just watch what the public are queuing for. Let me assure you it's not for Australian films.

But I know they *could* want to...

We must accept that Australian audiences are really part of a global, not local, demographic. Their tastes are broad and cultural identity isn't always high on the priority list. They just want to be entertained and don't always want to make a cultural connection with a film. Films are the one place where you can do things that aren't possible in real life.

Why can't we go there?

At present I can't see the new SA funding anything that I want to produce with Dwayne. As a government organisation it should be representative of what *all* Australians want to see, not just those who love arthouse or independent cinema. SA, therefore, doesn't serve me and others like me. I thought SA was set up for all of us? Instead it seems to serve the needs and the vision of a few, one voice as opposed to many. It fritters away taxpayers' money on films that rarely see the light of day in a truly commercial BO return driven environment.

I'm rather indignant, yet passionate, about this subject. I make no apologies for the blunt nature of my feelings about our industry and its future direction.

Finally, I would like to know who the author or authors of the guidelines are and what is their experience and expertise? The employees of SA responsible for film investment should be accountable for the success and/or failure of each film they approve. That way if someone approves a film that fails, then their judgement and ability should be drawn into question, and perhaps they should be removed from their position?

Alternatively, if the film they approve succeeds at the BO then they should be rewarded. This accountability model would make sure that those looking to hide behind the SA logo are accountable not just to the industry but also to the taxpayers who foot the bill.

Yours sincerely,

Aaran Creece
Producer

Speedmeatway and *Kill Car 9*, two great movies waiting to happen.
Redfern NSW